Research Article

The Effects of Casualisation on Mental Wellbeing and Risk Management in the Offshore Oil and Gas Industry

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Abstract: This qualitative study was conducted with the aim of identifying psychosocial hazards in Australian offshore oil and gas facilities. Twenty-nine offshore oil and gas workers were interviewed via video link. Results indicated that, apart from the presence of a high-risk work environment as a source of mental and physical strain, there are organisational-specific stressors that cause workers' significant distress. Research results from NVivo analysis revealed that casualisation of the workforce was a major psychosocial hazard for offshore oil and gas workers, which resulted in feelings of insecurity, vulnerability and disconnection from work teams. In addition, a lack of stable income, an absence of opportunities to plan for the future and unsettled living arrangements worsen an already precarious existence. Findings show that a culture of blame and fear persists in some organisations, along with a lack of accountability and fear of making mistakes. The process of hiring, firing and rehiring was found to be a common practice by organisations in order to avoid their duty under the Fair Work Act amendments to offer casual conversion to their employees. Findings can be used to help inform organisational policies and assist in the development of risk control measures to minimise psychosocial hazards for offshore workers.

Keywords: offshore oil and gas, psychosocial hazards, casualisation

1. Introduction

The offshore oil and gas environment is an inherently dangerous place to work, with some of the most hazardous working conditions in the world (Mearns & Flin, 1995; Nielsen et al., 2011). Hazards to safety include blowouts, transport accidents, diving accidents, damage to the installation structure, dropped objects, cuts and falls (Nielsen et al., 2011). The presence of natural and industry-specific stressors is only exacerbated by the casualisation of the workforce in the industry. Due to the uncertainty of their work, offshore workers can be affected by psychological stressors and poor mental health, impacting their ability to perform tasks safely. In this study, job uncertainty comes from casual work status. Casual workers (who may also be permanent or contractors) are supposed to be protected under new Australian laws introduced to ensure that they can request their work to become permanent if they satisfy certain criteria. One of these criteria is that workers must have a regular pattern of shifts for six months prior to the request for casual

conversion and have worked for the employer for at least 12 months (Fair Work Ombudsman, 2023; Stanford, 2021), which disqualified 40.9% of casual employees in Australia (Gilfillan, 2020). In the mining sector, 65.5% of casual employees had been with their organisation for less than 12 months. Their contract ends just before the 12-month period and recommences again after this date. This pre-condition to casual conversion has been misused by employers in order to deny workers permanent contracts. Moreover, the employer can still refuse a request for casual conversion on 'reasonable grounds' (Stanford, 2021, p. 7). Participant 12 (henceforward participants are referred to as P and then a number, for example, P12) had been refused permanency several days before the interview.

Casual work is common in Australia and is used widely in the offshore oil and gas industry. As well as casual workers, other workers, such as contractors, fixed-term workers and those who work for labour-hire companies, are still employed in significantly precarious employment (Markey & McIvor, 2018).

A lack of psychosocial support may result in offshore workers presenting a higher than usual risk, both to themselves and those around them (Australian Maritime Safety Authority, 2020). In 2021, in line with the findings in this study, the Australian Workers Union stated that working conditions for offshore workers have been subjected to over-casualisation. Further, terms of employment have been negatively impacted by contractors' attempts at winning work through directly cutting employee pay and using loopholes to obtain poor enterprise agreements in order to 'undercut their competition' (Australian Workers Union, 2021, p. 1). Job uncertainty is a major cause of stress for workers (Parker et al., 2017; Sutherland & Flin, 1989) and significantly associated with medium to high levels of psychological distress (James et al., 2018), financial stress (Choi et al., 2020) and acute depression (Sultana et al., 2022), particularly in males (Andrea et al., 2009), whereas permanent contracts have been shown to improve mental wellbeing (Sampson & Ellis, 2021).

Contractors are also vulnerable to job uncertainty (D'Antoine et al., 2022). Research demonstrates that workers with casual employment status fear the loss of their job (P4; Quinlan, 2014) and that job uncertainty leads to negative health and wellbeing outcomes for employees (De Witte et al., 2015). Precarious work status is part of a wider picture with respect to workplace bullying and harassment (Österman & Boström, 2022). Powerlessness at work has serious health consequences (Virtanen et al., 2011), often leaving workers at risk of disengaging from their role (Milliken et al., 2003). In contrast to their permanent co-workers, casual employees feel less appreciated and are much more at risk of being easily replaced by their organisation. Consequently, they are less likely to contribute to their work team (Zeytinoglu et al., 2004).

This study utilised an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) method as part of a qualitative approach. The aim of the study was to investigate psychosocial stressors for offshore oil and gas workers.

2. Materials and methods

This exploratory qualitative study was conducted via Microsoft Teams in Perth, Western Australia and analysed through qualitative data analysis software NVivo, which identified themes emerging from the interviews. Participants were recruited according to their employment position in offshore oil and gas facilities in Western Australia, affording them the necessary lived experience to inform the study (van Manen, 1990). The Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC; Ethics Approval number HRE2021-0512) granted approval for this study.

2.1 *Participants*

There were 29 participants in the study, all of whom were employees in the offshore oil and gas industry. Participants worked for a number of different company types and sizes and had various roles in offshore oil and gas facilities. Ages ranged from under 25 to 60+ years. Nineteen participants were permanent, and five were casual. Of these, eight participants were contractors. Employees can identify with more than one employment type. For example, P4 was a casual contractor. Three participants were female, and 26 participants were male. All participants worked 12-hour days, with no days off while offshore.

2.2 Procedure

All interviews were conducted over a video link and were recorded and transcribed. Interview questions were formed from focus group answers and a review of published literature. Questions were designed to be open-ended, enabling participants to narrate their own experiences (Creswell, 2014), as accurately and authentically as possible. The appendix documents the questions asked.

2.3 Analysis

The number of interviews to be conducted was not predetermined, and interviews were conducted with participants until data saturation was achieved. Because qualitative research aims to reveal meaning and experiences, once no new themes emerge, an acceptable sample has been reached. When considering the number of participants required for this, Morse (1994) suggests using at least six individuals, while Creswell (1998) recommends between five and 25 participants. Qualitative studies have traditionally contained a very small number of participants due to the richness of the data they provide, and the sample size is determined by data saturation and will differ across studies (Moser & Korstjens, 2018).

All interviews were recorded and transcribed. During the interviews, the researcher made notes. NVivo software was used to analyse the data. Analysing qualitative data through NVivo 12 software strengthens the validity and reliability of the analysis (O'Kane et al., 2021). NVivo software aids the researcher in the classification, categorisation and arrangement of data, which assists in analysing information and identifying emerging themes. Transcripts were coded and sub-coded as new themes emerged, revealing patterns in the text. Findings were compared with literature review results. A mind map was created for each participant's interview transcript, where further ideas and themes could emerge. Mind mapping is the process of taking notes in diagram form in order to identify a central theme that interconnects concepts, ideas and themes (The University of Adelaide, 2020). Mind maps aim to provide the researcher with a visual and participant-centred method of grounding the results within the theory (Wheeldon, 2018).

3. Results

Participants in this study stated that the casualisation of positions on offshore facilities was a major stressor. For employees who held casual work status, several factors overshadowed their working lives, adding uncertainty and instability to an already stressful and high-risk occupation. Participants who were casual stressed the difficulty of being unable to plan for holidays, special events and visiting family. Casual employees cannot commit to family plans or holidays as their future schedule is unknown. With changeable shifts and extended gaps between work, workers endure a sort of limbo (P20):

> 'Then in the old days you got off the ship you didn't really know if you were ever, if you were coming back again, or they're just gonna hire another casual. That's a very loose grey area, I mean, obviously if the captain thinks your performance isn't very good, you can guarantee you're not gonna be back. But I think that that needed to be addressed because there was a lot of people going you can't plan your life, I think that's the most stressful thing actually is that I can't plan my life, like next year, I've got no idea what's gonna happen next year because I'm casual' (P20).

Fly-in fly-out (FIFO) workers have reported feeling that others not employed in this type of work are unsympathetic to the unfavourable aspects of the lifestyle, with the opinion that high income precludes any complaints of the negative elements of the work. Furthermore, some participants in Gardner et al.'s (2018) study were unsympathetic towards fellow FIFO workers. Reflecting on Gardner et al.'s (2018) findings that there is a perception that it is the ideal lifestyle and that employees should not complain, P12 pointed out the drawbacks of being regularly absent for long periods of time and noted that it required mental toughness to work offshore:

> 'I think sometimes they think we're just living this glorious life and we're getting paid heaps of money. And it's like, well, hang on., I work. I'm away half of my life, you know, like no one would do that if the money wasn't good, there's no way you'd do it. But also just because the money's good, it doesn't make it like you, it's still, it's a mental game'... 'you gotta keep your mind right and you gotta, you know, yeah, that's the thing, you know, you're not living a life that everyone else's living. Yeah, you're here and you're gone. You're

here and you're gone. You're here and you gone. You can't have a dog. You can't have a cat. You can't, you know, it's hard on your relationship. There's so many things that they don't see, so that needs to be kind of acknowledged that it's not just an easy job. It's not, it can be a difficult lifestyle if your mental game's not there' (P12).

P11 explained how casual work status affected them financially:

'So you never know that you're gonna be working, like you could get flights, you get told you're going here, you're going there. But until you're, like, standing on the vessel, you don't really know for certain that you're gonna have that work. So I guess it's very insecure with your finances and I suppose that it's from the management to a degree, like it may not be the person on the other end of the phone that's doing that intentionally, but it's more broader management of organization that that happens' (P11).

P10 also emphasised the stress caused by the lack of a stable income and echoed the role of management in contributing towards uncertainty and insecurity:

'Yeah, I would say there can be uncertainty about when the next sort of work is coming. And sometimes the lack of clarity and communication from the management side of it, so that can be pretty stressful not knowing what, you know, if anything's locked in, if I'm gonna have enough money in the future and stuff like that' (P10).

It is also a concern to casual workers how they will support themselves if they are required to take time off work after events such as illness or injuries.

'I've only had time off due to injuries 'cause I've had a few injuries when I've been on leave. I have stacked the motorbike and you know, just some injuries that were just an accident. And I've been through a bit of a low point through all that stuff. And you know it was a bit of a struggle because you're not working and sometimes you've got no, you know, I had to redraw a lot of money in my mortgage at one stage' (P12).

Furthermore, there seemed to be a difference in the way casual and contractor staff are treated by their colleagues. When P4 realised that he/she was not being paid superannuation, seeking help from a colleague proved difficult:

'I found out I wasn't being paid super and a few other things and I went and spoke to *colleague*. I was like 'who do I speak to about this' and he was like 'I don't know mate, your union rep?' And so there is that very much… and that wasn't with malice, it was just like 'that's not my job mate'. And so there is very much that… yeah, I feel the whole vessel would be better if everybody was *company name*. Or everyone fell under that banner if it was *company name*'s job to look after all that sort of stuff. Then that would be inclusive. But at the moment it's not, so it's very much a… even though I'm core crew, I'm contractor core crew, so I'm not included in that banner, you know' (P4).

Some workers may hold casual status for over 10 years because there is *'a resistance and recalcitrance for casual conversion, getting bullied by the HR department or the line managers, where like the guy you were talking about as soon as you say something, boom you don't get the call back. There's that that goes on a fair bit'* (P13). In addition, workers fear consequences when speaking up about mental health, due to lingering stigma:

'I think people tend to assume that if they are having mental health problems, they may be deemed unfit to work offshore and might lose their jobs' (P29).

'In general, I think some of the younger ones don't want to be seen to be not right. And the other one is I think a lot of people who are casual are frightened about their job' (P24).

Furthermore, where safety concerns exist, it is typically down to people who are permanently employed to speak up:

'So that the casual guys, if they do it, they don't get the call back… and the threats from people who have the power to not reemploy people is one of the big issues' (P13).

When a safety concern is raised, particularly where the concern is not shared by the management, this may amplify stress levels and lead to bullying and intimidation, as it is not uncommon to find that those who raise safety concerns are consequently victimised (Henry et al., 2013). Further discord can occur from lingering rivalries across the organisation, manifesting as threats and coercion from managers and supervisors, pointing to power struggles between management and employees:

'Like sometimes the officers upstairs, you know, the chief maid or the captain can be really, like in any job, can be a real micromanager or really, kind of, most of the time a good crew all feel like you're all on the same level. You're all in the same boat. Yeah, you work together. But then other times there can be these

power trippers and there can be a real us and them thing and, you know' (P12).

Bullying between colleagues and peers was not a common finding. As other authors have reported, bullying and victimisation tended to come from management, making it difficult to deal with in a positive manner. However, a decisive approach seemed to be the most common method:

'As for bullying, I've witnessed that. Definitely. But it's always come from management-level down. It generally hasn't been bullying between us peers. If you get a supervisor that doesn't like someone underneath them and they can make their life hell, hold them back from promotion, or they just play games, it's not good'…'the only thing that you can do, and, you know, people do, do this, they would just start taking notes and with bullies all you have to do is confront them, and you know when you get some evidence behind you and then one day, just confront them and just say this is the last time, like no more because it's always a strong, big strong alpha male picking on the weakest one in the group' (P8).

Extending time between jobs is a common strategy for casual workers if they feel that they cannot return to that particular workplace, indicating that lack of permanent work status results in unfavourable effects that extend past job status. At times, a hostile workplace can result in workers using their accrued leave so that they are no longer exposed to that environment. When asked by their employer if they wanted to return to the workplace, P13 explained:

'I said, oh, look, I'm happy to have time off or move elsewhere. And they often do that just to sort of recuperate and, you know, cause it's, because I suppose they know if they go back there, they're just gonna be in a hostile work environment so they choose to go, going back to that place, unless they really need the money, I guess. But that's what a lot of people generally do is if they, if the work environment gets hostile and they get hostile enough for them to be uncomfortable, they'll try and seek work elsewhere' (P13).

The COVID-19 pandemic saw strict restrictions on travel introduced to parts of the country, particularly Western Australia. Travel constraints further worsened job security for casual workers and contractors, particularly for those living in other states, who found not only their jobs to be more precarious but also endured extended time away from their family and friends:

'Yeah so, I'm the only one of my family that lives in Western Australia. Not that big of a deal, but yeah with the closure of the border and then the casualisation of my job I was unable to return home, so it's been pretty tough. This is the first time I've seen some of my family for 4 years' (P4).

Access to permanent accommodation results in improved employee mental wellbeing, however, some workers mentioned that they are not assigned a permanent room when they are working offshore. Furthermore, in some facilities, employees must pack their belongings and move into a different room at the end of their shift:

'We've got lockers in your room and stuff like that. But at the end of your shift, we pack everything up into a bag and put it into storage in another room. And, so the next person can come in and use the cupboards and drawers. But it's not like you'll ever come back into exactly the same room where you've got all your stuff. Yeah, it's a bit of a transient lifestyle. You bring your bag in, unpack and at the end of your… yeah, you hitch your; you pack everything up again. Like a swagman' (P8).

Offshore casual workers remain unprotected, even with recent workplace law amendments. Although current workplace regulations state that once an employee has worked for an employer for over 12 months, they are eligible to be offered permanent employment (Fair Work Ombudsman, 2023), P12 had been with the same company for nine years and had retained casual work status, albeit 'permanent casual'. Although she had requested permanency from the company a few days before the interview, the company rejected the request based on the fact that the employee was working on a vessel at the time. A vessel that has not been contracted for over 12 months means that its employees are also not able to be given permanent work status:

I'm casual still, but I'm permanent casual, like I've been with the same company for nine years and I'd love to be permanent, but I actually asked for permanency again the other day because there's a bit of an upturn in the industry and with this takeover and all these boats on the coast now, but they rejected my request based on the fact that I was working on a vessel at the time, which is this now, which is gonna be finishing up its contract within 12 months. So that's how they kind of get around it. If you're on a vessel that's not on a contract for over 12 months, they say they can't give you permanent, which is a kind of a load of crap, because I know that with all the boats now, I'll just go to another boat with the same company if this one finishes the contract and doesn't get another one' (P12).

The recalcitrance for permanent conversion is worsened by organisational attempts at utilising ministerial powers through repealing the Migration Amendment (Offshore Resources Activity) Act 2013, which 'removed the requirement for foreign workers to hold a visa when they participate in, or support, offshore resource activities taken to be in the migration zone' (Parliament of Australia, 2014, p. 1):

> 'So yeah, from an employment perspective, if the government is trying to legislate employment law away so it's not applied, it's a stressful thing, you think OK well I've been working at sea for the better part of 15+ years, [inaudible] going to have to do some training, or where's the next lot of employment coming through, not only for myself but for a few thousand other people and part of... the other thing around whatever people's particular views on how the world should see or fit around that, but yeah, that created a large amount of stress and anxiety' (P13).

Being unable to attain permanency in their work is frustrating and stressful for workers, who feel like they are unable to speak up due to professional and social exclusion, loss of employment and being deliberately held back in the progression of their career. A conversion to permanency requires an employment period with the same organisation to be over 12 months of continuous service. However, many companies employ workers for just under 12 months, terminate their employment at the end of their swing and then reemploy them when they return. Thus, casual workers are not employed by the organisation when they are on shore leave, making it impossible for them to convert to permanent status, even if they have been employed by the same company for many years. When P20 returns home, she is no longer classified as employed by her organisation. Furthermore, she revealed the underhand process that occurs once casual workers are off the facility:

> 'A lot of the voting sometimes that goes on when it comes to EBA's and things, I'm a casual, not a permanent person and if you're not at work... when we sign off at the end of five weeks, we get paid out so technically we're not working for the company anymore, which means we can't vote and they very often will hold those votes when casuals are not employed which is really, really sneaky of them and makes me really angry actually because I've been working for the same company for 12 years... I've missed like I think in that 12 years maybe 7 shifts. So, if you add that up 7, 5... 35 weeks work in 12 years, but I'm not classified as somebody that can vote about my job. It's so annoying. It's really... it's tactics. It's all to do with tactics of big company yeah?' (P20).

Reviewing the Fair Work Amendment, KPMG (2022) reported concerns from the Electrical Trades Union of Australia (Department of Employment and Workplace Relations, 2022) that the casual conversion system can be readily avoided by employers, such as in cases where workers are employed through labour hire companies or are involved in short-term projects. The Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU; 2022) further stressed that there is no condition in the casual conversion mechanism that can curtail the practice of hiring, terminating and rehiring employees by organisations in order to sidestep the obligation to convert employees to permanent employment status.

Despite the terms laid out in Section 66L of the Australian Commonwealth Government Fair Work Act 2009 (Fair Work Act (Cth.) as amended in 2021), which states that an employer may not 'reduce or vary an employee's hours of work, or terminate their employment, in order to avoid any casual conversion' (p. 1), the obligations under the Act are clearly being navigated by organisations. Further concerns were raised by the CFMEU (2022) relating to this practice in the building and construction industry. Both the Electrical Trades Union and the CFMEU have independently suggested that any subsequent amendments to the casual conversion mechanism should seek to reinforce compliance with the Act's obligations to abstain from the use of termination of employment and rehiring to avoid compliance (KPMG, 2022).

Although casual work may suit some employees due to the flexibility offered (Cameron et al., 2001; Richardson et al., 2012), generally speaking, precarious work creates insecurity and uncertainty. The following statement from P12 sums up the difficulty casual employees face when attempting to establish some kind of stability in their working life:

> 'I'll probably just go to another boat so I'm still working for them, but that's how they get around it, and it is hard because it is an up and down industry. So I kind of get it why they want a lot of casuals, but it's still hard to run your life when you're only a casual employee for so long and even though you're working all the time, you just don't have that security. So, it plays on your mind, it used to play on my mind a lot more, especially when it was quiet. You know, you'd be stressing out if you're going back, you'd be waiting for the e-mail and you couldn't plan your life. And that was, it was difficult.'

A culture of blame pervaded the offshore work environment in Collinson's (1999) study on North Sea offshore facilities, where employees frequently failed to report accidents. P26's statement lends weight to these findings and strengthens the conclusion that a culture of blame remains in the offshore industry, particularly where facilities are undermanned (P4) or where there are contractors and subcontractors:

> *'Definitely what I see within the contractor space is that there is a blame culture. But for some of these momentum organizations such as the one I work for, we definitely try and step in and try and influence this sort of this culture that's trying to be set and to ensure that we're not trying to blame people, we're trying to actually find out the root cause and the answers behind why people make those decisions. Definitely looking into the more human factors sense. What I see out there is that yes, from the contractor stance, there is a blame culture, but the more mature organisations are trying to step in and try and change that'* (P26).

Corresponding with P4 and P12's experiences working offshore in Australia, Collinson's (1999) research revealed an 'us and them' culture (p. 588) on North Sea installations, where contractors generally performed the most hazardous tasks, placing them at greater risk of accident involvement. Terms and conditions were typically inferior compared to those in place for company employees, inequalities which remain evident today:

> *'The leaders in that space are very much company-centric. But also, too it's… I found with my last company, I thought it was more a vessel thing, but it's not, it's a* [company name] *thing, so it's very much 'I'll help you out if you're* [company name], *but if you're not, you've got no help mate'… 'I feel the whole vessel would be better if everybody was* [company name]. *Or everyone fell under that banner if it was* [company name]'s *job to look after all that sort of stuff. Then that would be inclusive. But at the moment it's not, so it's very much a… even though I'm core crew, I'm contractor core crew, so I'm not included in that banner, you know?'* (P4).

The most important thing managers can do is communicate openly and have clear expectations so that employees are aligned on what these expectations are. Being open and honest builds trust in both contractors and teams alike, helping to break down barriers between workers who are permanent members of a vessel or facility and those who are new or short-term employees (P27). Another way to build trust between managers and employees is to grant workers freedom and autonomy over their job roles:

> *'I think that one plays a big part in affecting mental health. When you go into a job and you know that you've got that autonomy and you've got the trust of your managers and supervisors. It does incentivise you to do better and achieve'* (P27).

Positive mental health and the absence of a blame culture where '*if you make a mistake, you get thrown under the bus*' (P27). P4 felt that the vessel they worked on had a culture of blame and revealed what they thought to be the root causes:

> *'...because you've got your finger in so many pies it's easy for you to be the one accountable for that and I'm all for accountability but this vessel seems to be a little more about blame, or that area, and that's because of understaffing… but I think too that comes from people worried about losing their job as well, there's a whole bunch of things; casualisation of everything, there's two factors there but also to when people have full time jobs sometimes it goes the other way as well you know, you just can't get them to do anything either. I mean I don't know what the solution to that is either but the solution's probably proper engagement and accountability, like allowing people to have ownership, which allows accountability without blame, you know, everything'* (P4).

In summary, permanency would provide job security and help to decrease concern about job status. Casual workers just want stability and continuity, which is summed up simply in the following statement:

> *'I would love to be permanent because that would take a weight off my shoulders, and I think that's just something that's always been hard with casual people'* (P12).

4. Discussion

The unfavourable aspects of precarious work are numerous and include working for multiple employers and on several facilities, irregular work, unconventional work schedules, hazardous working conditions and financial insecurity, which can all affect mental health adversely (Premji, 2018). Casual employment is frequently referred to as 'precarious'

(Richardson et al., 2012, p. 558), suggesting that workers endure unfair conditions, are disadvantaged by their work status, and are exposed to unscrupulous practices that further aim to erode employee rights.

A major stressor of casual work is inconsistent income, which causes ongoing uncertainty regarding finances and is a likely cause of long-term stress and anxiety around the management of finances (Quinlan, 2014). Moreover, participants expressed frustration that there was no possibility of permanency and were likely to continue their working lives in a state of anxiety and uncertainty, concerned that they may lose their jobs at any time (Zeytinoglu et al., 2004). This may lead to an acceptance of poor working conditions, which leads to costs for both employees and organisations (Sutherland & Cooper, 1996). A notable example of this is the poor accommodation arrangements for offshore employees: the ever-changing room after each shift, and the packing of belongings each day, adding further highly uncertain factors for those who have existing impermanence in the form of work status.

An association between job uncertainty and bullying was found by Baillien & De Witte (2009) and has been linked to unsafe behaviours (Probst & Brubaker, 2001; Størseth, 2006), whereas permanency has been associated with increased job security, safety satisfaction and income. Of significant concern is the finding by Parker et al. (2018) that the main source of bullying for FIFO workers comes from supervisors (40.54%). Employees require support from supervisors and management; however, FIFO workers report a lack of support during challenging times (Colquhoun et al., 2016). In order to effectively satisfy job roles, workers must receive encouragement and cooperation, which is less likely if interpersonal relationships have become strained or tense. In a collaborative work environment, exchanges of information are vital, yet speaking up about issues in the workplace can affect multiple aspects of workplace domains such as interpersonal cooperation and communication, interpersonal connectivity, team cohesion, group belonging and perceived credibility. Information flow may also be weaker for casual workers due to the link between work insecurity and work disorganisation (Quinlan, 2014). In the context of power relations, the discrepancy between supervisor and employee leverage has the potential to leave workers powerless when faced with managerial influences on promotions, work tasks, inclusion in team meetings and future offers of work from the company, all factors affecting the participants in this study. Respondents experienced exclusion from meetings and trips, being demoted and being discredited by their supervisor. Exclusion from such interpersonal interactions within the workplace may potentially compromise work performance in a manner that may be challenging to reverse (Milliken et al., 2003).

With respect to team functioning and safety, Landon et al. (2019) reported negative associations with isolated working environments and confined working areas. On an offshore facility, where working and living spaces are minimal, interpersonal stressors may affect attention and awareness levels. Poor focus and attention lapses are a risk to safety and the wellbeing of workers, leading to poor reactions in emergencies and stressful situations (Sutherland & Cooper, 1996).

Insecure work is listed as a workplace psychosocial hazard in the *Code of Practice* (Commission for Occupational Safety and Health [COSH], 2022), which includes casual employment, placing employees at risk of stress and experiencing perceptions of vulnerability (Colquhoun et al., 2016). In the offshore oil and gas industry, the common view among employees is that organisations are reluctant to make casual workers permanent. Undoubtedly, casual workers find themselves in a precarious position where they are hesitant to speak up about any issues, even if they have been with the same company for many years, due to fear of job loss. This is with good reason, as participants revealed the consequences when they raised issues, such as losing opportunities for further work and fear of losing their job if they spoke about mental health issues (P29).

Effects of job insecurity are felt in other domains of the workplace, such as interpersonal relationships (Leka et al., 2010) and performance levels (Wang et al., 2015), although performance levels were only adversely affected when organisational justice was low. Further investigation into perceptions of organisational justice would need to be conducted to determine if any relationship between job insecurity and performance levels exists in the offshore workplace, although some studies have shown that the effect of job insecurity on performance is moderated by work-related attitudes (Chirumbolo & Areni, 2005), supervisor support (Schreurs et al., 2012) and psychological capital (Darvishmotevali & Ali, 2020). Other authors have found it difficult to speak up in similar work contexts. Sampson et al.'s (2019) study of seafarers found participants to be openly apprehensive regarding speaking up about safety and what they felt was right. For organisations to manage risk effectively, all workers should feel able to discuss their concerns relating to safety or other issues present in the workplace in the same manner that permanent employees are able to.

Another concerning finding was the presence of blame culture, particularly when mistakes have been made.

Similarly, Collinson (1999) found both a tendency for blame to travel downwards, or vertically (Collinson, 1999), from manager to worker and to extend laterally, from operator to contractor. From a group socialisation viewpoint (Moreland & Levine, 1982, cited in Moreland & Levine, 2002), individuals who enter a group will see their commitment increase over time, at least until there is acceptance and approval by the group. Unfortunately, casual workers and contractors have short-term memberships in workplaces and the groups within them, so there can be diminished trust levels between permanent and temporary group members, as Moreland and Levine (2002) found in their study of new and marginal work group members, indicating a reluctance on the part of permanent employees to entrust temporary workers due to the short-term nature of their positions. Moreover, the dissimilarities between casual and permanent workers have been shown to reduce perceived similarities between the two, potentially promoting the establishment of ingroups and outgroups and reducing trust development between team members (Brewer, 1993).

As a lack of trust is linked to poor performance and poor interpersonal behaviours, workplace learning and open communication about safety are diminished, endangering the identification of existing organisational flaws and enhancing the likelihood of an accident. It can therefore be concluded that trust between workplace groups may safeguard against the development of blame culture within organisations (Conchie & Donald, 2006).

In this study, one casual worker (P10) had been involved in a near-miss accident, yet this was not reported to management, reflecting the findings of Underhill and Quinlan (2011), who reported that casual workers hesitated in reporting minor injuries, continuing to work until they were no longer able to do so. Furthermore, they had a higher rate of dismissal after injury than permanent workers. P10 went on to explain the effect of the near-miss on their mental health and that of his/her colleagues:

> *'I had a quite a big near miss, where it was quite close to me to potentially losing my life or having a serious injury. And sort of the full realization of it didn't set in for a few days. And I can tell it affected some of the team leaders around me since they were, probably should have seen it coming, so it was impactful for both me and them as it kind of set in?'* (P10).

Near-miss accidents are the result of everyday safety behaviours, perhaps the product of 'normal' unsafe actions (Perrow, 1999), which are generally influenced by work colleagues and sometimes supervisors. Consequently, Conchie and Donald (2006) argue that their findings that trust level in work colleagues is the most significant predictor of near-miss accident or event involvement suggest that a decrease in distrust of work colleagues, contractors and supervisors could reduce involvement in offshore accidents and incidents.

The reporting of hazards, including near-miss accidents, is crucial for organisational risk management, particularly in the identification of risks that can have catastrophic outcomes if not managed. Reporting near-misses affords organisations valuable insight into the root causes of accidents and the factors that may precede them, ultimately helping to prevent further accidents (NOPSEMA, 2020). Reporting allows for these incidents to be analysed, revealing trends and creating opportunities to improve workplace safety and promote positive attitudes about safety (Kongsvik et al., 2012). Discouraging the reporting of near-misses and accidents or dismissing incidents as unnecessary interruptions demonstrates disregard for a commitment to safety behaviours (Hopkins, 2006).

During the lockdown periods of 2020 and 2021 in the COVID-19 pandemic, casual workers were eight times more likely to lose their jobs than permanent employees. Half of the job losses during the first lockdowns in 2020 were those of casual workers and part-time employees. Casual workers accounted for 75% of all job losses in the lockdowns of the following year (Stanford, 2021). Job insecurity due to COVID-19 was found to reduce employee wellbeing through financial stress in Sarwar et al.'s (2021) study, where financial stress made job insecurity more distressing.

A lack of trust in casual workers by workers with ongoing employment and a lack of trust in management by casual workers were evident. Without mutual trust, there may also be low levels of open and honest communication, fearful workers, low levels of job satisfaction and high staff turnover. Even with amendments to the Fair Work Act and given that interviews took place after the amendments came into force, it is clear that casual workers in the offshore oil and gas industry remain unprotected (Commonwealth Consolidated Acts, 2009). The 2021 amendments to the Fair Work Act 2009 should have established a commitment by employers to extend permanency to casual workers who have worked for their employer for at least 12 months and have spent the previous 6 months working a pattern of stable shifts (Fair Work Ombudsman, 2023; Stanford, 2021). Unfortunately, this disqualifies 40.9% of casual employees in Australia (Gilfillan, 2020). In the mining sector, 65.5% of casual employees were reported to have been with their organisation for less than 12 months and can still be refused conversion to permanent employment on the basis of 'reasonable grounds'

(Stanford, 2021, p. 7), as evidenced in the telling of real-life experiences of offshore workers such as P12, who had been refused permanency several days before the interview.

5. Study limitations

Due to the small number of female participants, responses may not reflect a balanced picture of experiences for this population, however, obtaining a more balanced participant sex ratio is challenging when researching phenomena in traditionally male-dominated industries. While the sample size would generally be classified as small and data saturation was achieved, the nature and methodology of this study were intense and in-depth enough to warrant confidence that the results were representative of a specific population in a specific setting.

6. Conclusion

Although it is argued that job insecurity is in part a perception, there are substantial tangible factors within organisations that affect casual workers. This study revealed casualisation has resulted in poor mental health and wellbeing for offshore oil and gas employees, particularly during the uncertain events of the COVID-19 pandemic, when travel restrictions and quarantine protocols were in their infancy.

It was concluded that organisations should strive to promote safe behaviour through open communication and the flow of information, which also helps to build trust between managers and workers. Placing trust in employees through role autonomy also strengthens trust between managers and workers. This reciprocal trust relationship is vital for the pursuit of accountability in the absence of a blame culture. It is recommended that organisations cease the process of hiring, terminating, and rehiring as a means of avoiding the obligation to offer employees permanent employment. Improving the eligibility threshold for conversion and strengthening compliance measures may safeguard employees against this practice.

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Conflict of interest

There is no conflict of interest for this study.

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Appendix

Interview questions

Positioning statement: It has been identified that the offshore oil and gas working environment can be stressful for workers, particularly when considering mental health and wellbeing so it is necessary to investigate the psychosocial stressors which present themselves to employees in this environment and examine the personal, organisational and economic implications of poor mental health caused by these stressors. A work-related mental health hazard is defined as work demands that do not match the workers to their knowledge and abilities or the resources that they have available to do the work. The response can be cognitive, physical, behavioural or emotional. Work-related mental health hazards include, but are not limited to, physically and/or cognitively demanding work, aggression, bullying, interpersonal conflict, under-supervision, over-supervision, lack of constructive feedback, lack of support, lack of respect, work overload, lack of role clarity, poor organisational change management, unplanned work events (e.g., over-time, call-outs), awkward roster design (e.g., mid-swing rotations, working night shifts after traveling during the day), extreme weather conditions, suboptimal living and sleeping conditions (e.g., vibration, restricted living area, high levels of ambient noise, lack of privacy), poor organisational justice, fatigue, burnout, experiencing dangerous occurrences, exposure to trauma, and emergency management. Further, being physically or socially isolated from friends and family may be an additional burden (NOPSEMA, 2021; COSH, 2022; ISO, 2021).

The aim of this interview is to identify mental health hazards and possible solutions to these stressors and inform organisations and policy makers of best practices for preventing, identifying and improving poor mental health in the offshore working environment.

Demographic information

What is your role in the oil and gas industry?

Do you work for a large (more than 200 employees) or small company (less than 200 employees)?

What best defines your work status? You may agree to more than one
• Permanent
• Contractor
• Part of a service company
• Casual

Length of experience in the offshore oil and gas industry?
• Less than 5 years
• 6-10 years
• 11-15 years
• 16-20 years
• 21-25 years
• 26-30 years
• 30+ years

Which age group do you belong to?
• Under 25
• 26-30
• 31-35
• 36-40
• 41-45
• 46-50
• 51-55
• 56-60
• 60+

Exploratory questions

- What are your rostered hours of work and for how many days/weeks at a time are you at a time rostered to work offshore?
- How do you feel about this?
- Have you experienced any management or work organisation factors that have caused you stress? If yes, please explain how this affected your mental health.
- Have you had any time off work due to stress?
- Are there any environmental factors that have affected your mental health when working offshore? If yes, please explain.
- What do you perceive to be the main work-related mental health hazards?
- Have you experienced any psychosocial stressors? If yes, please explain.
- If you have experienced returning to work after an illness or injury, how were your mental health needs considered in your return-to-work plan?
- How does the workplace culture affect whether someone will seek help for stress or poor mental health?
- In what way have you found that the personality of managers affects employee mental health?
- In what way have you found that the personality of co-workers affects employee mental health?
- Does stigma seem to affect poor mental health help-seeking and reporting?
- Have you ever had a psychological illness or suffered from poor mental health?
- If 'Yes':
- Has having a psychological illness or poor mental health had an effect on you financially?
- Have there been any economic effects on your employer or its employees from a worker being stressed or from having poor mental health? If yes, describe the effects.
- Does your employer provide mental health education? If yes, please describe the education provided.
- Does your employer implement any other strategies for mental health promotion or support? If yes, please describe these strategies.
- What interventions or approaches does the company have to develop employee resilience? Resilience is the capacity of a person to recover quickly from difficult situations through having good problem-solving skills that enable the person to cope when there are difficulties.
- In your experience, what have you found most beneficial for improving employee mental health?
- Has the COVID-19 pandemic had any effect on your mental health? If so why?

Exit statement: Is there anything else that you would like to tell me about psychosocial stressors or mental health hazards, what is done well to manage these hazards and if there are opportunities for improvement in managing employee mental health in the offshore oil and gas industry?

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