

Temping at the Lower End: An Incomplete View from Silicon Valley ¹

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Silicon Valley is the stuff of dreams, with energetic entrepreneurs arriving daily to experience the joy of grappling with engineering challenges and, hopefully, to get rich in the process. Corporate sojourners visit to find out about new technologies, but also about ways of working that they hope can reinvigorate their own workplaces. While they may inquire about temporary workers with specialized technical expertise and large contracts, they seldom ask about lower end temporary workers. The latter, loosely clustered in assembly, clerical, and other service jobs, are seemingly invisible and uninteresting. Yet the offices, production floors, and roadways of Silicon Valley abound with the temporary workers who are a hallmark of flexible accumulation. Even though they disappear from most accounts of the region that emphasize the excitement and sexiness of life on the engineering cutting edge they too are part of Silicon Valley and their stories reveal another facet of life on the high tech frontier.

This paper attempts to capture some of their stories. It rests on the assumption that insider perspectives can contribute to the formulation of effective policy. We may disagree with the perspectives of different individuals and conclude that they rest on erroneous assumptions, inadequate evidence, or faulty logic, but they nonetheless provide glimpses into how lives are lived and how policy might play out. Such perspectives are elicited by placing ourselves as interviewers in the role of learner and asking questions that get the

interviewee to instruct us about his or her life. Such research is time consuming and intensive, and the samples it draws upon are necessarily small. However, the benefits of such research are enormous, and include insights that are only available from the detailed description of work lives. Such interviews are not conducted to supplant the more familiar surveys, but rather as complement to them. They offer something different and important: The chance to bring survey data to life, to see how facts and figures play out in the lives of real people, and to challenge our own assumptions about the world.

What is reported in this paper draws upon two distinct but related research projects. Throughout it I speak of “the interviews” and the “interviewees.”² Unless otherwise noted, these refer to a sample of sixteen lower end temporary workers who were interviewed during October and November 1998. All interviews were conducted in English; several people had recently obtained permanent jobs after years of temping. The author conducted five interviews, and the remaining eleven were conducted by students enrolled in an ethnographic research methods course at San Jose State University. Interviews were transcribed and analyzed by both students and professor, although responsibility for this paper rests with the course professor.

These interviews are understood within the context of a multi-year research project that I am conducting with J. A. English-Lueck and J. M. Freeman, also of the Department of Anthropology. In this “Work, Identity, and Community in Silicon Valley project” (WICSV) we have repeatedly interviewed a sample of 160 people working at a variety of Silicon Valley companies. The latter range from large, well-known high technology employers such as Hewlett Packard, Cisco Systems, Apple Computers, and Adobe Systems, to smaller high tech firms and a variety of other supporting firms. Each person is interviewed about their work life and larger family and community lives, as well as their future scenarios for themselves and the region. Interviews take place in workplaces, restaurants, parks, and homes in order to provide a richer and varied set of interviews.

Some WICSV interviews have been conducted with temporary workers, but these interviews are mentioned here for two other reasons. First, the interview schedule used in the recent temporary worker interviews is derived from the larger WICSV schedule, with appropriate modifications to explore issues of temping. Each temporary worker was interviewed twice, instead of the three interviews conducted with the WICSV sample. Due to limitations of time and the difficulty in scheduling interviews, five workers were interviewed once using a compressed version of the interview schedule. Second, the WICSV interviews provide a larger context in which to understand the temping interviews. They help us see what is distinct about the latter, but also how they fit into larger patterns of work in Silicon Valley.

The interviews with temporary workers were bedeviled by logistical problems. Although a sample of temporary workers was provided by Working Partnerships, the student interviewers experienced extraordinary difficulty in arranging the interviews. In many cases, names were provided, but when the worker was contacted he or she declined to participate. Telephone messages were often not returned and interviewees often failed to show up for agreed upon interviews. These difficulties are mentioned not as complaints, but for what they may tell us about the very lives of the people we were studying. Although some folks disappeared without a word, many offered apologies about the chaos of their own lives, their multiple commitments, and the difficulties they face in planning and following through on those plans. Put differently, the very qualities that made some individuals especially desirable to interview made it impossible for them to participate. Ironically, our sample may include more workers whose schedules are stable than is typical among lower end temporary workers.

How to cogently express the lessons learned from even this small sample of interviews is a challenge; after all, even this modest project generated several hundred pages of text. However, in reading and re-reading the interviews, several recurring themes emerge. These themes are synthesized under a series of

questions that, hopefully, both capture the perspectives of the interviewees and can stimulate discussion about policies germane to temping. The latter endeavor, however, is beyond the scope of this paper and is best left to the reader.

1. What are some basic patterns of temping and how do they fit into the lives of people?

The interviews suggest that there are distinctive patterns of temping that in turn may reflect diverse motivations of individual workers. These motivations reflect how people conceptualize the constraints and opportunities they face at different phases of their lives. Policy responses that assume a single monolithic pattern of temping may thus be insensitive to how temping fits into different lives at different times. On the other hand, attention to the nuances of these patterns may allow the creation of more responsive, and ultimately successful policies.

One pattern is to use temping as a way to develop employable skills while simultaneously learning about jobs, industries and companies, and earning income. Here the person has not decided upon a specific occupational career and he or she wishes to shop around. Often, too they believe that they lack one or more important skill that can best be obtained in the workplace. In some cases, temping is seen as a sort of apprenticeship program or extension of schooling in which dues are paid and broad experience in an industry is gained. Temping is thus sometimes conceptualized as a normal stage in certain career paths.

One woman who had held a series of temporary clerical positions reflected upon her career as follows:

Oh, it's getting a lot of experience if the people are willing to take you, you know. And if you have some type of experience already, you learn a lot. You learn different things. Like I went to (inaudible company name) back in the 80's. I worked there and I've been there maybe like two or three times. But, you know, you learn a little about claims, billing, and things like that, which is good to know. Because throughout my whole temporary thing, you know, when people say, "Have you had experience at this," and I say, "Well, yeah I have. You know, even though it's been years ago, but you get exposed to a lot."

Another commented on the advantages of performing similar work for different employers. Temping, for her, provided the basis for the distinctive contribution she brought to any position:

I feel like I have a leg up on others in work and life experience. Yes, I definitely feel that I have a leg up. There is this expression they like to use of "thinking outside the box." I can do that because I've been in many different situations.

Still another spoke of how she would advise someone to build a solid career on a basis of temporary work:

The main thing I would tell them is to have a good attitude. Don't look at work as something that's impeding what you want to do or stopping you from doing something else. Look at work as a way to do something else. Use experiences that come to you as a bridge to do something else in the future. Besides have a good attitude, make sure that you keep good relations with anyone you meet in life. You may need them somewhere

down the line or they may know someone who can help you out down the line. So don't burn bridges.

In another pattern, temping is practiced as a component of a work life that incorporates both temporary and permanent employment. In this pattern, other obligations and opportunities such as helping relatives, obtaining education, or parenting are salient. Here temping is used to manage the shifting constraints that different people face over the course of their lives. Sometimes permanent employment is desired and the person sees himself or herself fundamentally as a permanent worker who occasionally cannot manage the commitment of a full time permanent job. Sometimes the shift to temporary work proceeds almost unconsciously, as when a person takes a leave from a permanent job, never returns, and then looks for temporary work to get back in the flow of things.

Susan is a middle age woman who has held a lengthy series of temporary and permanent positions that changed with the demands of motherhood. Speaking about permanent jobs, she remarked:

Permanent jobs. B of A. I worked there maybe three . . . Let me see: Started in '75 or. I don't know. Two or three years there and then I went to Wells Fargo. I did data entry for them. (Then I left because) I think I was expecting then or something. I started with Wells Fargo around '81, but in between those two jobs I think I did a lot of temp work.

Other interviewees also spoke of alternating permanent and temporary jobs as children were born and then entered school, and as marriages and other family relationships waxed and waned. Yet temping was seldom portrayed as a clear solution to the problem of finding time to discharge family obligations. Despite the reduced income, much temporary work does not allow the predictable schedules that people desire in order to fulfill recurrent obligations. Temping, in other words, can provide some desired flexibility while paradoxically introducing a measure of chaos into family life. Emily had raised her children and juggled temping. With her children now grown, she reflects upon the complexity of temporary work and family life.

The main issue would be having to back out of things because of work conflicts. If they had something scheduled to do, something with work or family, they have to skip it because of a work commitment. This comes up quite often. Some people will say that they don't even schedule that kind of stuff because they assume work is going to get in the way. I also know some people use work as an excuse. If there is a family gathering or event, they'll say, "Oh, I've got work I've got to do." Then they'll run off into another room, checking email or just playing with their computers. I was telling one co-worker to make sure they leave their laptop here and he is like, "No way! That's how I get away from it all."

In a third pattern, temping is used as a way to obtain a permanent job. Here the idea is that some companies use temporary agencies to find prospective permanent workers. Alternatively, word may spread through a network of friends about someone who got a permanent job by temping for a company. Others fear the process of obtaining a permanent job and they believe that if they can only get the opportunity to demonstrate their talents then they can bypass the formal channels. Robert's comments are typical:

The last job I held it was temp with Intel. They stated quite emphatically that you have to do at least a year temp before they consider you for a permanent placement. So

in a way they didn't say, but they implied, that you're lucky that you're working at Intel as a temp. And if they like you or they need you for that particular assignment, they'll offer you a permanent job, kind of like a gift.

Another person noted that temping limited the person's ability to rise in a single company, although it could support career advancement through switching employers:

It doesn't allow you to work your way up in the company, but it does allow you to work your way up switching companies. I understand a lot of people use temping as a way to find a place they would like to become permanent. That's an advantage of temp work, 'cause if you go to an interview and you get hired for the job, and then six months later you hate this place, that doesn't look good. So temping, you can hop around and not look bad, and at the same time you're keeping an eye out for a permanent place to land. That's an advantage.

Yet another pattern is to use temping as a way to avoid some aspects of permanent employment. Here temping is conceptualized as an escape from the hardship of permanent employment, and it serves an almost therapeutic function in the life of the worker. Several motivations can be distinguished. First, permanent employment requires that workers regularly show up and it thereby limits personal freedom to take care of other matters. Alternatively, some permanent jobs require displays of commitment or loyalty beyond narrowly "doing the job." Some people are unwilling to make such presentations of self and so they avoid the need to do so by temping. Sid's discussion of a simultaneously good and bad day at work indicates the desire to avoid commitment:

I had a bad day when my car wouldn't start and I missed work. But it was a good day and a bad day because they didn't hold that against me. I didn't even call in. They called me and told me, "Oh, that's OK. We were just worried about you. Come in tomorrow." It wasn't a big problem like with my past employers. They say, "You're fired!" or "You've got a written warning. If we let you do it, we let everyone do it." They exaggerate it. (This employer) didn't. They just said, "Call and don't be doing it again."

Two other interviewees reiterated the desirability of being able to freely depart, something that they said is difficult to do in a permanent position:

#1. Say, for example, something happened that you need to go away for a while out of town, or you know, one of your family members got hurt or something and they needed you assistance. You could easily tell the temporary agency, "Well look, I have to. I have a family emergency." Opposed to, let's say you had a permanent job that you couldn't do that as well. They only extend you so many days, you know.

#2. And you're not really under, you're not obligated so much to, you know, certain things. Other than just your work assignment and the amount of time that you're in there or something like that. Basically, I'd say that you have, you don't feel like you're glued there, you have to you know be there all the time. I mean, you gotta fill your assignment and all. You may want to say, "Oh, I wanna go take a few days off. But if you're in a permanent position or something, maybe you can't take off."

Another motivation is to escape permanent jobs that are highly stressful, resulting in “burn out.” Here temping is a therapeutic relief from the stresses and strains of permanency. Margaret had spent fourteen years working at a hotel before she departed when new management took over. She could have stayed, but, she explained, the hectic pace of work had finally become too much:

You were booking rooms or sometimes conventions and different things and you would do airlines. You were actually programming them into the hotel schedule which is different from the airline schedule—the days are different—and we had those that had to be put in, and they had to be read lots of times so we’d have to decipher that. It’s so different and it was fun. I liked it while I was doing it, don’t get me wrong. I did really enjoy it, but then I think it got to a point it was just too much, and I had never known anything different.

Another interviewee reflected upon her own tendency to excel at work, and to push herself ever harder. She had started several businesses with her sister, which were then sold when the pressures of running them became too much. Her elderly father laughed and had commented that he had raised a family of “workaholics.” He urged them to slow down and enjoy life. Speaking of her latest temporary job she remarked:

When I went in working, I thought, “Well, I’m just gonna work on the line.” And that’s okay because I sort of burned out of what I was doing before. And I thought, “I just need a job that I can go to work and come home and not worry about it.” I have a tendency to, you know, see things that have to [laughter], that could change.

She went on to explain that her tale is not unique:

So you go into it (temping) for a lot of different reasons. Some people because of lack of skills, some people because they’re tired of what they were doing before. And, you know, there’s a lot of people in there that had very good paying jobs and they’re doing this because they’re sort of burned out.

Desire for education provides another motivation. The workloads of permanent employees sometimes preclude obtaining the education that is necessary to obtain better jobs. Here the person can remain employed permanently and earn a modest income, but they cannot get permission from their employer to attend classes, even at their own expense. They reason that if they are ever going to find a better job they must reeducate themselves, and the only way to do so is by quitting their full time permanent job. If part time work is not available, they may work temporarily in order to pursue their educational goals. For example, one interviewee was working temporarily in order to save enough money to return to school:

I’m constantly being called and if I don’t want to work that week then I say, “Well, you know, I’ll wait till next week.” And that works out great for me. I don’t know that everybody has that option. You know, some people have to go to work every day. And I was at that point and then that’s why I had to have a better paying job, you know, when you’re bring your kids up and everything you gotta bring home from that paycheck. And so for right now it suits my purpose. However, I see in the near future I’ll have to go back to school and take some computer classes if I want to get back into the field I was doing before.

She cites this as an advantage of temping, but cautions that it is not without risks. Specifically, people sometimes cannot live on the income from one job and so they take on a second one. Soon there is no time for school:

If you don't take advantage of the time that you have off to get a better education or get training of some sort you're gonna be sort of stuck in these warehouse jobs unless you're capable of doing something else. And that can be a real disadvantage for people, you know. Sometimes they find themselves getting two jobs because they can't make it on six dollars an hour or seven or whatever they're paying. So there is no time for bettering yourself. You don't have any time. That would be a disadvantage.

The hassles of ubiquitous office politics that are often linked to career advancement also motivate people to seek temporary employment. Not everyone sees themselves as a good player of the political game, and so they seek refuge in temporary employment that allows them to move on before politics becomes an issue. They sometimes see themselves as the ones doing the "real" work, while the permanent workers fool around with irrelevant political games. One person spoke of the pleasure of making contributions while avoiding larger workplace entanglements:

It's like being a hired gun. What I mean by that is like you're not there for the full battle necessarily but while you're there you're making an impact.

Several people recalled earlier workplace battles that left lasting impressions. They turned to temping to avoid such situations in the future. Leo, a man in his mid-thirties with a lengthy and diverse career as a temporary worker, recalled a turning point in his work life:

One of our sales representatives was a native of Oregon and he had a degree and he pretty much knew both states, Washington and Oregon. And so I got him pretty much hired because when our general manager came he had this interview with him and I told him, "Go for it. Go with him." And there were a lot of things that he didn't know about the company and I would cover it before it got back to headquarters so that he wouldn't look really like he didn't know what he was doing. So I helped him along the way. And then months later I get a call and he comes into my office and tells me the president of the company said that they're doing vast changes throughout the operations and he wants me to be your boss instead of you being my boss. And so that was pretty much like a kick in the teeth. I learned that's business and it's just the way business is. And that's what I meant by how they use people. They wanted me to train this man to become my boss.

Finally, some people mentioned dropping out of long standing permanent jobs due to boredom. They deliberately shift to new lines of work that they see as unconnected to their previous jobs. One person who had worked for fifteen years at the same company commented,

After a while the four walls became too familiar. Getting gray hair. Seen three different carpets, different administrators, half a dozen managers. Doctors with gray hair. The walls painted three, four times. More and more people got computers.

One day he left work and never returned. A middle age woman recalled her career at a hotel:

I just felt really at this time a little bored. I didn't like the, I didn't mind it but I didn't care. It was more changes and I had been through enough changes while I was working there. It was fourteen years.

In addition to moving between permanent and temporary positions, other interviewees speak of temping as a career. Here the person describes a lengthy history of seeking and finding temporary work, with little effort at obtaining a permanent job. In some cases, they claim to have turned down permanent jobs in order to continue temping. Occasionally, there may be ill-fated permanent jobs that punctuate such careers, but the overall sense is that of eager or grudging acceptance of temping.

One person extolled the virtues of temping and explained that she would, if possible, remain as a temporary worker with minimal commitments:

If I could I would be a temp. If my family could afford that and if I wanted to do clerical work; see I only think of temp as clerical. I know there are a lot of other fields of temp work, but it's a very satisfying field if you don't need a set budgeted monthly amount— You know, exactly the same pay every month, 'cause it might change. The disadvantages are that they call you that morning and need you for a job in an hour. You better have reliable transportation, otherwise that could be stressful. Also, you don't have an allocated amount of money coming in monthly. But if you don't care about that—you just want to stay up to date in the work force or just keep abreast of what's going on—then it's a great opportunity.

Leo, who temped for many years, had only turned to permanent employment when he married and inherited a family:

When I was single it was great because I didn't have to rush home. Didn't have anyone to go home to, so it didn't matter what hours would shift. If I'm working, if I have to do a double back which is working in the same day twice, it didn't matter because I didn't have anything to go home to. But now it makes a difference, so we talk about the hours, the scheduling.

The temping patterns discussed above are inferred from a small sample of interviews, and other samples will undoubtedly reveal additional patterns. But that, of course, only amplifies the point that temping as an activity is itself complex and varied. It takes different forms, it reflects different motivations, and it serves different functions in the lives of workers.

It bears noting that virtually all interviewees stated that they desire permanent employment, at least at some junctures of their lives. They speak of its advantages (see below), but these may, to some extent, be rationalizations of their unfortunate situations. Still, it is apparent that temporary employment is not a simple, well-defined “problem” that can be solved by a solution.

2. What are the consequences of temping for individual lives?

In discussing their lives as temporary workers, many of our interviewees cited its advantages; some of these were mentioned in the preceding discussion. Interviewees repeatedly mentioned that it entails little stress or commitment. They are expected to show up and do the work, to offer no suggestions nor to care much, and to depart quietly. Whether they go beyond this depends on whether they see a particular job as leading to a desired and obtainable permanent position. For some folks this lack of commitment is frustrating, but for others it is exactly what they want. It provides the ability to sample areas, industries, occupations, and companies. It enhances their ability to develop a well-rounded resume. Much can be learned by temping, but most spoke of their work as something they did because they needed an income, and not as an integral part of their lives. Few mentioned creativity or self-fulfillment as temporary workers: Such concerns were luxuries for the permanently employed to enjoy.

The drawbacks of temping were numerous and they were described consistently. Prominent in all interviews was the lack of benefits, and the resulting stress as individuals worried about on the job injuries. The story told by Jeremy, a middle age interviewee, captures the worst fears of many temps. His saga began as a lengthy temporary placement was drawing to a close. He describes the fateful day:

There was a young co-worker there who has a reputation of being somewhat aloof. He had an attitude problem, thinking that he was better than most of the other people. One particular day we were gathered at a meeting and something happened up front where he was. He became upset about something that happened at the meeting: I don't think he performed the task to the satisfaction of the project leader. He came storming out from the front and was headed back toward his cubicle. As he was coming by, I was paying attention to what was going on up front and he, rather than saying, "Excuse me," plowed his way through and kind of (pause) I didn't really realize that he was going to hit me, but he did. He hit me in the shoulder and kind of knocked me off balance. I caught myself on the cubicle wall. It didn't knock me all the way to the floor. but had I not caught myself on the wall I would have been knocked down.

Jeremy went home and awakened the next morning with a painful shoulder. He returned to work, reported the injury and was taken to a hospital where he was diagnosed with a torn rotator cuff. Unable to lift more than twenty pounds, he was unable to work on the manufacturing floor and his hours were reduced. Then he was laid off: "I wasn't too pleased with it, but because it was a temporary assignment I knew there was not much I could do about it." And then he explained, his problems began in earnest. The firm at which he worked and where he was injured claimed that he was being let go at the request of the temporary agency that had placed him because some of the duties he performed were not in his job description. He argued that the description was generic and vague: "The initial job description submitted was that I did little more than sit in a cubicle and operate a mouse and keyboard." The complexities of this case cannot be captured in a paper of this length, but soon Jeremy found himself caught between the temporary agency, the firm at which he had been working, and an insurance agency. Initially awarded only unemployment insurance, he finally obtained workman's compensation, but only at great personal cost:

It's very hard. I mean \$230 a week is the maximum you can receive in unemployment and to be housed—myself, my wife and our three children—it virtually took (pause) We have no savings, we have nothing left. We had lived in the same house for eight years. My youngest daughter doesn't recall living anywhere else; it was home to her. We were evicted because we couldn't keep up the rent.

Jeremy was also involved in a dispute regarding payment for overtime, and he feels that that dispute contributed to his problems. After a contentious series of meetings and hearings over nine months, during which he was accused of making invalid unemployment claims, he prevailed and was able to secure workman's compensation. However, the toll on his family was great: "I feel real bad for my children. They had to suffer along with myself and my wife had to suffer." Clearly, this case is complex and presented only from one perspective, but it captures the feelings of frustration and powerlessness expressed by other interviewees.

The very lack of commitment that was so prized by many also had its dark side: transitory relationships and lack of membership. The following comments express a widespread sentiment:

You're always switching jobs to all different locations and you know maybe next week you might not have a job. Just that it's temporary may be the only disadvantage. You get to know people for a few weeks and then you're not working there any more.

Another person welcomed the freedom and lack of commitment that accompanies temping, but also noted its disadvantages:

You went into different office environments and if you really did not want to work for any period of time, you didn't have to. The disadvantage is you don't have steady work. You are not getting paid a lot and you don't really make any friends or meet people. Just job uncertainty. You can be fired anytime and it might not be your fault but you can't say anything.

Despite the oft-mentioned sense of freedom, people also spoke of poor placements and their reluctance to decline too many referrals. One person noted a particularly difficult situation:

I didn't like it, but since they offered it I took it. And once I got there, after five days, I couldn't handle it. My feet hurt and I got all wet. But I didn't want to quit yet because they hadn't sent me to the next place. So I called Manpower and asked if they have something else. I had heard about HP from them, so I went there after I called them.

A middle-age woman with a long history of temping noted the pressure to accept all but the most undesirable referrals:

Unless it's some really, the hours are way out, like nights where you get home late at night or something and you have kids at home or something like that. But otherwise, it's kinda the job. Because I don't try to refuse too many jobs unless they're really kinda unreasonable.

Another disadvantage is the perceived lower status of much temporary work and the lack of recognition from supervisors and co-workers. Again, the ability to come and go without attachments was praised, but the lack of acknowledgment often hurts:

I like recognition. Like any other worker I like recognition for a good day's job. That's why I always like it when I see workers working at McDonald's. McDonald's got it right on. They just don't ask a lot from their employees. They recognize their achievements on a daily basis so it's a small evaluation where they accent the positive. They thank you for coming to work. They thank you for coming to work on time. They make you feel needed.

This person went on to say that such thanks were not often forthcoming in temporary work.

Jeremy, who we met above, also desired recognition for his efforts:

There's nothing that made me want to perform more than to receive recognition for the hard work you did. That in itself is a stimulus: You're getting recognition, you're being rewarded for working hard. Nothing makes you feel more important than when you've got a few extra dollars in your pocket. You can take your family to dinner or you can take them on a vacation. At the same time, your children can come home and see you're happy at work.

Jeremy believes that in addition to the financial setback that resulted from his injury, the treatment he received was an attack on his many contributions at work.

Temping also creates difficulties in personal lives since stable schedules are often unavailable and planning becomes difficult at best. The constant change to new employers in different places makes getting to work especially problematic, especially for those without reliable transportation. Richard remarked,

One thing affects another thing. If you have to work overtime you may already made plans ahead of time, especially if you have a girlfriend or partner. You would like to know ahead of time so that if you need to buy tickets it doesn't cause conflict. And also, other people are working sometimes and if you're called in early to work you may have a schedule for your car to be worked on or something. So they may have to give you a ride or pick you up. Things like that. Doctor appointments, also. You may have to miss work or schedule it after work. Life is a hassle. We all struggle.

Another interviewee echoed the same sentiment:

You never know when they're going to call you, so you don't exactly know when you're going to go to work. I'm in the kitchen in the middle of, I don't know, whatever. Well, you might not be available then. You just don't ever know when they're going to call you.

The conditions of temporary work also expose people to large and small injustices, with few options for grievance. A young African American woman described the supervisor at a previous position:

Well, this guy was really racist. I just couldn't stand it anymore. He was on the phone talking with his buddy, saying racist things about Mexicans as if that's okay somehow. If he is saying these things about Mexicans in front of me, what is he saying about people like me? Just his attitude toward me: He was very condescending, small-minded. Usually when you go into a temp job someone takes a few minutes to show you what they want you to do. They give you enough information for you to do the job. This guy would give me less than 60% of the information. Then when I would mess up or ask him to explain he would act like I had not listened or that I'm too stupid to grasp what he was saying. He would get very irate about it. You didn't want to stand too close because you weren't sure if he wasn't going to start swinging or something.

She left this job, explaining her frustration with the temporary agency that had referred her to the job:

On the phone they were all, "Sorry you got sent into this situation. Da-da-da, come by the office and we'll talk about it some more." By the time I got to the office he had

already spoke to them. He told them how stupid I was. They were totally cold shoulder when I got to the office. Like I had done something hideously wrong.

Another woman explained the frustration of trying to address injustices on the job.

One thing that is really like a pet peeve is that working as a temp really negates all kinds of issues, like issues of discrimination on the job, even sexual harassment because if you raise these issues it runs the possibility of the employer saying, "You know what? We're investigating." And then they'll caucus and they'll say, "It's got nothing to do with the issues that were raised by you, but that assignment is finished and we're going to call you back and we'll meet with you on these issues, and we're going to call you back as soon as there is something coming in and I think that'll probably be another day. Call me or I'll call you."

One man spoke of finding himself in a situation of sexual harassment and being unable to resolve it. He ultimately quit and moved on to other temporary jobs.

I found out that it wasn't so much my ability to perform, it was me that she was after. And when I didn't respond to how she wanted me to respond to her, she went to her manager who was on vacation, and to the manager that was taking her place and I talked to her and she said, "It seems you and your supervisor don't get along." And I explained to her why. And I had a few girls back there under her too and they said they'd back me up. But before I could talk to the manager she went in there and talked to the manager and since it was a temporary position all she had to do was say, "I don't need him no more," and there it was. From there I floated around and there with more temporary work.

Another man described the futility of trying to meet an impossible work schedule:

They wanted you to do 70-80 stops a day, and stops that I wasn't familiar with. You know the streets but you don't know the buildings. To get a route you had to buy a truck to deliver the packages. But since I didn't have \$35,00 for a van and I didn't want to get involved with that they sent me into all these different kinds of routes every day. And I couldn't perform.

Finally, one person noted that the supposed benefits of permanent employment were not always forthcoming.

There was a company I was working for where after a couple of weeks I was given more responsibility. And it was fine. I didn't mind doing that. But then, to add insult to injury, they offer you a permanent position with the minimum pay. And you're thinking, "Now they know I do a good job for them but yet they want to pay these miserable wages." And it's sort of bad, it makes you feel bad because you think, "You know, people want to use people."

Temporary agencies are viewed ambivalently. The primary advantage cited is that they find the jobs. This represents enormous savings of time when the job search can be longer than the duration of the appointment. Ideally, they provide a one-stop interview process: several people spoke disparagingly of

submitting to additional interviews at the work site. Most interviewees use multiple agencies that they hope will connect them to different job markets. They hoped that such a strategy would increase their chances of finding steady work, and they acknowledged that it provided a poor buffer to any general shortage of jobs. The main complaint about agencies was the frequent lack of information about specific jobs. There were many tales of poor placements and of jobs that bore almost no relationship to their description. Several people spoke of the frustration of going to placements and receiving no instruction as to their duties, much less training. Other people echoed Jeremy's concern that agencies and companies have mutual interests that may be pursued at the expense of the temp.

Temporary agencies, however, are typically only one element in the quest for permanent employment. Most people spoke of pursuing a complex strategy of using several temping agencies, plus job training centers and employment agencies, and word of mouth via friends and family.

3. What is the Silicon Valley in which people temp, and why does it matter?

There is a deceptive clarity about formulating the issue as "temporary work in Silicon Valley." Silicon Valley is a name that has passed effortlessly into the national and international lexicon. Many people recognize it as a place in California, although they may be uncertain as to its geographic parameters. "Are we in Silicon Valley here?" and "Is this still Silicon Valley?" are oft-heard questions from visitors. Debating the boundary around the place is a long standing local sport, and the resulting formulations are shifting and situation dependent. For example, few people doubt that Palo Alto, Mountain View, Sunnyvale, Santa Clara, Cupertino and San Jose are "in" Silicon Valley. The status of the cities of southern Alameda and San Mateo Counties may be debated. San Francisco is not part of it, but that city's Multimedia Gulch area might be. Likewise, Santa Cruz County is "over the hill," except that Scotts Valley just might be an extension of Silicon Valley.

The debate is even more complex than one about geography, for there are entirely different conceptualizations of Silicon Valley. In one, Silicon Valley refers to a high tech industrial sector that exists within a geographic region. Thus, people often say, "I live in Silicon Valley," referring to the geographic place, and "But I don't work in Silicon Valley," referring to the high tech industrial sector. Alternatively, people sometimes speak of Silicon Valley as a fusion of selected high tech jobs distributed across employers and a sort of supportive infrastructure that includes travel agencies, health clubs, restaurants and caterers, law offices, financial services, etc. Here a personal fitness coach might speak of being in Silicon Valley because of their clientele and how it has shaped their delivery of services. Silicon Valley is also routinely defined as a "state of mind" that embraces technological savvy, risk taking, entrepreneurship, heroic individualism and acceptance of at least some kinds of change. It is also defined temporally as a place where the future has arrived today as it is becoming tomorrow.

These various definitions can be quite confusing, and the reader may seek solace in a simplifying definition that purports to define the essential or real Silicon Valley. Yet such solace is likely to be illusory because multiple and inconsistent definitions are simultaneously used, and they have important consequences for how we think about temporary work in this region. Silicon Valley has a panache that is sought by cities, companies and even individuals. To speak of working in Silicon Valley might mean to have a job in a taken for granted geographic region, but it might also refer to working at any job within a high tech industrial sector or to working with a high tech clientele or to adopting a certain set of assumptions and values. Working in Silicon Valley is ambiguous, and temping in it is no exception.

The interviewees reveal the same diversity of understandings of Silicon Valley that we have found in our previous projects in the region. One person's definition captures the sense of a high tech industrial sector:

It's a very hectic pace. People like to get things done quickly. The faster you do it, and if you really want to have the status that everyone likes to have here, (then) you work in an electronics industry. Whether you're temp or perm, you have an e-mail address, (are) computer literate. You have a cell phone. You know your softwares. You know how to communicate with people on those terms.

Here the high tech industrial employment drives an entire way of life that affects interpersonal relationships, the consumption of products that mark one as an insider, and participation in a specific status system. One is not simply a person who gets a job in an industry within a place, for there are implications for personal identity and social life. A specific set of skills might be implied, but so is a way of life.

To work in Silicon Valley, however it is defined, is often seen as participation in a larger endeavor that is changing the world, generally for the better. It can transform work into an activity that helps people construct meaningful personal narratives centering around education, excellence and transformation. The following remarks capture this sense of participation in a meaningful, transformative activity:

(Silicon Valley is) a place of innovation. We are the trendsetters for the world. Stuff that comes out of Silicon Valley today shows up in Oklahoma in five years. We are the leaders in a lot of things. Technologically we are so influential. Other parts of the country name themselves after us.

Another person links Silicon Valley with quality, excellence and high standards:

I would say the jobs are important because the world or everything revolves around computers and electronics. Everything within the companies has to be done pretty much perfect—98% as far as building and testing and everything. You can't send out anything that doesn't work because it's going out to the consumer.

These comments are echoed by yet another interviewee who explicitly defines Silicon Valley in terms of technology and education:

My impression of Silicon Valley is that it is advanced technology: the computer industry, lots of entertainment, education, businesses are growing. It all seems like it will help us in the future. A booming place of computers, technology. In education we all use computers, so what happens here affects my work eventually. It provides an advancement in our way of education and communication. Personally, too. Also at work we are always looking for ways to advance education, including access to it, and the computer is a major avenue for doing that.

Not everyone, of course, concurs with these assessments of Silicon Valley panache. Some people critique the status hierarchy, but in so doing they confirm that it is operative. The following skeptic, for example, defines the place in terms of jobs but disconnects them from larger issues of status:

It just means good paying jobs. It doesn't impress me. What they have and how things are available and how they accomplish things is impressive. I know the Internet was

invented here. Those things are impressive, but as far as status that doesn't impress me. It's a facade. I think people just like to identify with it. I'm going to give you an example. One time I was putting in gas when I was working at Intel and I was on the East Side going to work. I was waiting in line and this one person came up to me. They make you wear a badge at Intel. He came up to me and he says, "You work there?" I go, "Sometimes I do." (He says,) "No, really? Do you work there?" Like a status thing. He couldn't believe by the way I look 'cause the dress code for where I work was casual, not suit and tie. He look(ed) like he didn't believe that I could work there. I've heard people say, "Oh, I work at Cisco." But it's really subjective because when you go to the grocery store and you tell them you work at Cisco they'll say, "Great. Pay for that bread."

There are thus multiple Silicon Valleys, and not everyone has clear ideas about it or them. The comments of Maria, a young woman living in Fremont, a city in southern Alameda County that is deliberately defining itself as part of Silicon Valley, indicate that Silicon Valley can be a place of considerable mystery.

Silicon Valley. I don't know. Every time I hear "Silicon Valley" or I see "Silicon Valley" that means, like, job opportunity. Lotta jobs and stuff. My mom went to Silicon Valley College to get her phlebotomy license. So that to me always in my mind meant, you know, jobs or you know education. That's what I always thought it meant. I never really understood. My grandma tells me, "Go to Silicon Valley College, you know, and then you can get a grant to be in the medical field, too, you know, like your mom did." But to me it just meant generally opportunity, I guess.

When asked if she would move in order to be closer to those job opportunities, she admitted to ignorance about whether Silicon Valley was a place or a business: "I didn't know if it was an area or it's a business. So it's an area?"

What sense are we to make of these diverse understandings of Silicon Valley, and what are their implications for how we think about temping in this region? Based on these interviews and our eight years of studying Silicon Valley, I offer several suggestions.

First, there are a variety of jobs in this region. Some have a distinctive high tech flavor, although this needs to be spelled out for each job. Other jobs are decidedly non-high tech, although they many are defined as "technical" jobs with distinctive skill sets due to the penetration of technical work in the region and its accompanying status. We have interviewed many people over the years who speak of the special technical qualities of seemingly ordinary jobs because of the local predilection to define work as technique and to reward the technical.

Second, entering Silicon Valley's workforce may involve moving across the boundaries between seemingly invisible worldviews. Working in Silicon Valley is partially a matter of possessing the required skill sets, but for some people it also involves entering a different social world. The work that characterizes this world may not be viewed as "real work" and its claims to significance and status may be off-putting. The implication here is that preparation for work in Silicon Valley may involve embracing a somewhat distinctive worldview and "soft" or social skills, as well as the more familiar technical skills needed to perform tasks.

Third, Silicon Valley values of risk taking, entrepreneurship, and individual responsibility shape jobs in Silicon Valley. Workers are expected to assume primary responsibility for constantly “working on” or improving themselves, upgrading their skills, managing their own careers, and—in Silicon Valley parlance—reinventing themselves. Such a work environment poses distinct challenges, especially if new workers expect the sheltered or protected employment of previous generations. An implication is that skill mastery is but part of the challenge that workers face: managing themselves and their careers in a turbulent job market is an equally formidable challenge.

Fourth, Silicon Valley may be emblematic of a personal high tech career that is not well defined. The mantra of “computer literacy,” for example, is ubiquitous but what it means is not consistent. Preparing for work in such a region may well be guided by unfounded assumptions about requisite skills promulgated by purveyors of training and networks of friends and family members. Accordingly, people may spend considerable resources on developing skills that map poorly onto available jobs.

4. How do family and social networks affect temping?

The roles of family and social networks figure prominently in the lives of our interviewees. Sometimes family obligations set constraints that shape the selection of jobs, as when a parent declines permanent work in order to perform childcare duties. Several people mentioned children with disabilities that demanded more time than is available with permanent employment. Others spoke of exchanging baby-sitting services and helping each other out in various ways.

Family and friends typically play a role in directing our interviewees to likely job prospects or training opportunities. As with our larger sample of Silicon Valley denizens, the interviewees acknowledge that work-related issues are a major topic of conversation at family gatherings. Legitimate topics of conversation exist within cultural contexts, and work is not an acceptable topic in some cultures. Here it is widely accepted, and our larger research suggests that the sheer importance of work in defining lives in this region drives out many other topics. Accordingly, temporary workers may be like any other workers in discussing work. In some cases, such conversation leads to direct suggestions about job preparation, industry trends, and opening in specific companies. Susan, a young temporary worker, speaks for most when she says, “Oh yeah! We are always keeping our eyes out for things.” You know, “Did you know about this over here?” and things like that. We all do that.”

Individual family networks do not extend systematically throughout Silicon Valley, but they connect with specific segments of jobs, industries, companies, schools, and other job-related services. They subtly direct job seekers in some directions and away from others. They provide the bases for diverse models of attainable jobs, ways to prepare for them, building careers or work histories, and integrating work into other social responsibilities. Some interviewees were connected to family networks in which permanent technical work in the region’s high tech industries was commonplace, and they assumed that they, too, would eventually assume positions there. Other networks rarely touched high tech industries directly, and other contours of the employment landscape were prominent.

One woman described a circuitous work history in which she received a massage therapy certificate. She is deeply interested in health care, but has not been able to earn a regular income in the field. Her latest idea comes from a conversation with a relative:

I’m working on trying to get in this beauty salon. My sister, my cousin in Sacramento said they have them in JC Penney’s and I could believe her. She says she went to JC Penney’s and got a massage in Sacramento.

Maria, the young woman for whom Silicon Valley was largely unknown territory, described at length her own large and tight family network. It is a network that has long helped those who enter it to find jobs.

My aunt (a beautician) cuts our hair. My uncle lays our concrete. He just laid our concrete just a couple of weeks ago. My (other) uncle just put in a new shower for my grandma. My other uncle came and plumbed it for her. (They) talk about their work at family get togethers and stuff. They talk about hair products and shampoos and my uncle talks about plumbing. There are filters for this, and you know a new system and a new shower, and getting my grandma to build a little port over the side of her garage 'cause they have three dogs. And my uncle's like, "You gotta use this lumber" and you know, "Put this kinda concrete." My uncle's like, "I'll put a gas line for you so you can have a stove out there. And my aunt cuts my grandma's hair, styles her hair." "You need to do this to your hair, you know, you need to put this color in it. Let me cut it." Two of my uncles helped my boyfriend find his job, you know. 'Cause he has a friend who works at a dealership and he was like, "I'll tell him to get you an interview there." Or like my uncle works through Santa Clara County and he brought him an application and said, "Fill this out. It's working for the government." They're all really helpful.

Maria spends much of her time with family members, and augments her income from temporary jobs by baby-sitting and house-sitting for relatives. Family members constantly exchange information about jobs and training, but it is not about the region in general, but rather about particular segments of it. Most interviewees fit a similar pattern, although the specific content of their knowledge varied widely.

The interviews also suggest the importance of upbringing in shaping expectations about work and life. Several people commented on the disjunction between their own work histories and those of their parents who had held stable and secure permanent jobs for many years. They are slowly becoming resigned to the fact that their own lives are not likely to follow the same pattern. Others spoke of the early socialization that has prepared them well for lives of hard work under changing conditions. The woman who noted that her father jokingly complained of raising "workaholics" described her own upbringing and the continuing influence of her parents:

My parents are both from Mexico and so we were brought up with a lot of their morals, you know. And we sort of follow in the same footsteps. I find all my family does, you know. We're very united in a lot of ways. My mom and dad still have a lot of say as far as what goes on. I mean they don't make it very obvious, but yet you know when they expect you to do something.

The implications of family and other social networks for employment, including temping, are enormous. They obviously provide important resources of labor, money, and information, but they also establish important constraints on acceptable jobs. Their indirect role in shaping models of work and life, and of connecting people to particular job markets is perhaps even more significant, if only because it may be only obliquely discussed.

5. How do positions in organizations affect the careers of temporary workers?

Not surprisingly, the interviewees spoke of temporary positions that required very basic skills. These skills, and the very temporary nature of the placement, often meant that workers could not demonstrate any

higher level skills that are required for permanent employment. For example, many of today's permanent jobs require ill-defined "soft" skills such as teamwork, self-management or flexibility that can be difficult to demonstrate within the constraints imposed by many temporary jobs. The following four descriptions suggest the simplicity of many of the temporary jobs held by the interviewees.

#1. Basically, what is required is a driver's license and to know the Bay Area. We drive to different companies from Palo Alto to Watsonville, and all over San Jose.

#2. Just basic, like data entry, Windows, basic knowledge, mostly customer service because you were dealing with the public except in publication, but most of it was with the public: receiving people, executives, CEOs.

#3. It's the kind of job that anybody can really be taught. However, people have never worked in the warehouse environment find it kind of difficult to work at a fast pace at first. They get dizzy with the conveyor belts and things like that which they don't know they're gonna do in the first place when they go there.

#4. Filing, know how to use a fax machine. There wasn't any typing. The jobs that I've gone to, basically they want you just for phones. But, you know, other stuff on the side when you have time. But a lot of the companies I've gone to are really busy with phones. That's their main thing. And the mail.

Just as variations in social networks may have differential impacts on employment opportunities, so too do positions differ in their consequences for careers. Some jobs, such as light warehousing, may seldom lead to more demanding and higher paid positions. The work is narrowly defined and often quite regimented, and opportunities to demonstrate abilities that may be required elsewhere are curtailed. Furthermore, the work is performed at the lower levels of the organizational hierarchy. This situation contrasts with other placements that provide some opportunity to demonstrate a variety of skills, to learn how the organization operates, and to be in contact with people who have the power to alter career trajectories. One person, whose temporary position had ultimately become permanent, described her first day on the job at a major high tech firm:

The initial job that I was hired as a temp for was to work with the executive assistant to the VP. I was to help answer his phones and help her make copies when she needed them. But by the end of the day I had already evolved into another job because they saw I had other skills to offer.

This case contrasts vividly with the comments of other interviewees who said that they generally worked surrounded by other temporary employees who obviously lacked the ability to offer them permanent employment:

Pretty much everyone you work with now is temp. So when you go to a site everyone there pretty much is temp. There are not that many permanent people: (just) the employers, the managers. Everyone else is pretty much temp, so that gives you a good feeling, you know?

All this suggests that the relationship between the lower end temping positions that are the focus of this paper and permanent positions that offer opportunities for better pay and advancement is problematical.

The difficulties may be quite direct and obvious, as in the case of jobs requiring simple skills that are inadequate for permanent employment. More subtle are the ways that jobs structure learning about organizations and appropriate ways for presentation of self, and the myriad of soft skills that mark many contemporary jobs.

6. How do people reason about the future and their places in it?

Ideas about the future provide a context for current decision making about training, education and the pursuit of jobs. They can reveal important assumptions and values about the social and physical environment, and human agency. They make some choices likely and sensible, while making others unlikely and incomprehensible. They are the foundation for planning and taking action to realize aspirations.

Many of the interviewees spoke of their futures in terms similar to those used by the WICSV interviewees. In those interviews people speak of relatively optimistic futures which they anticipate will correspond closely to their expected futures. These optimistic scenarios are generally quite realistic and there are explicit connections between current actions and anticipated realities. In no case have our interviewees been unable to articulate such future visions. The following remarks from a temporary worker express this sense of modest optimism:

I would be teaching, hopefully, in ten years. I have a couple of kids, married, comfortable. I don't want to be rich but just comfortable to teach on a teacher's salary and not have to scramble too much. And if we go on vacation we don't have to watch every penny. My ideal economic level would be middle class.

The interviewee had completed college and went on to describe how she would realize her middle class aspirations.

This sense of future was not shared among all the temporary worker interviews, and indeed, the perplexity with which several people responded is striking. A middle age woman with a long history of temping responded, "I have no clue. It's really hard to imagine. I have no clue, I really don't, I really don't." When probed about what future she desired, she spoke of her dream of starting a newspaper, but she did not link it to her current actions or immediate plans.

I don't know. You want to do it and you don't want to fail. I think it's a great idea and I think it would really, really work, but I also think I'm a little bit ignorant about how to get started: What do I really do? I don't know. So maybe I'm kind of ignorant, maybe I'll keep saying I'll go to the library and see how to start a newspaper.

Other interviewees grounded their lack of future scenarios in religious faith, sometimes speaking explicitly about the likelihood of Armageddon.

I have no idea. I mean, the way the world is right now, not getting any better so far as the world conditions and things like that. Not very bright. So it's not very optimistic so far as that kinda stuff goes. But I'm optimistic from a different view, a religious view, I'm optimistic. The Bible promises there's not going to be any world war, and death, crime, and all that. I do have a very optimistic hope about the future, the very near future, because the more that you see things happening, that means the closer you are to that time.

When the interviewer asked if these events might occur within ten years, she responded, “Exactly, if not before.” This religious based vision of the future has obvious implications for educational preparation and career building. Other interviewees expressed incredulity regarding speculations about their futures that was based on a lack of information or interest, rather than being grounded in religious faith. Yet both shared two characteristics. First, the interviewees who spoke this way spoke more generally about being affected or buffeted by events beyond their control. They were not merely passive, nor did they fail to act, but immediate events and concerns, such as a need to pay important bills, drive their actions. Second, these interviews also convey the sense of lives that are made meaningful beyond the domain of work. Indeed, the measure of many of our WICSV interviewee’s lives is their success through work and career, a practice that is alien to many of the temporary workers interviewed.

The sense of being buffeted by external events that one can only partially control was also reflected in accounts of work histories. Several people spoke casually of pivotal events or lacunae in training that shaped their work histories. Some of these events and lacunae are only dimly remembered and they are spoken of without regard to their consequences. They give eerie sense of “things happen.” A young woman recalled,

I went to a regional occupational center and I did nursing assistant. I went through the whole course, but I just wasn’t there to take the test, or else I would have been a certified nurse assistant by now. But I wasn’t there the day they gave the test and you would have to wait like a whole ‘nother couple of months to take it. You’d have to take the whole course again to get certified.

Another woman, looking back over a lengthy career, spoke of a missed opportunity:

I thought I wanted to get into vocational ed(ucation). Because they used to have a skills center in Emeryville and I had a friend that worked there. I would go in and sub for her. I got a temporary teaching, instructional credential for a couple of years, and then I was gonna go get my credits and stuff. I went to UC Berkeley Extension for five months to get twelve units. But it seemed like I didn’t know. I don’t think I, I didn’t get, I didn’t finish that or something. But I went there, you know, and I tried. Because I was gonna try to get back into vocational ed(ucation), but that didn’t work out. I just started getting back into the work force again. Temporary work and stuff.

A third interviewee spoke of leaving one company to take another job that she thought would last longer.

I felt I had no choice but to leave, and then I went to a computer company as a receptionist and I stayed there for about four months and then they had a big layoff in July. I got laid off about a week or two after; quite a few permanent people did. Then they called me back but then I wasn’t available.

When asked if she wanted to return to the job she said, “Yeah, I did want to go back but I wasn’t available because my phone was cut off. They couldn’t get a hold of me and when they did they had already sent someone else.”

Concluding Remarks

The goal of this paper has been to develop some ideas that may provide a useful basis for at least some discussions that are germane to this conference. A subsidiary goal has been to present at least some insider perspectives on lower end temping in the words of those who perform the work. While certain commonalities emerge, so too do the variations in perspectives. Clearly, temping does not simply describe a monolithic way of working, for it is embedded in complex ways in the lives of people. Those lives, of course, vary in markedly in their trajectories and in the meanings that those who live them attach to family, work, and community. The challenge is to simultaneously acknowledge this variability while seeking the junctures and mechanisms that can affect work histories in ways that improve individual lives and communities.

No claim is made that what is described for Silicon Valley is utterly unique, but it is a place with a distinctive panache that colors work and workplaces, lives and communities. Whether it is the future that it proclaims for itself remains to be seen, but it is region in which an endless stream of social and technological experiments intersect in complex ways and with only dimly glimpsed results. Lessons can indeed be learned by watching Silicon Valley, and hopefully those lessons can have broad application.

Notes

[1] The author gratefully acknowledges the contributions of J. A. English-Lueck and J. M. Freeman to this paper. They are co-developers, along with the author, of the interview schedule upon which the research described in this paper is based.

[2] All personal names used in this paper are pseudonyms.