

The trap of freedom: Schedule flexibility and labor process control in China golf training industry

Introduction

Flexibility in the workplace is often portrayed as a positive image in the public discussion: the temporal and locational flexibility allow workers to better coordinate their lives and work responsibilities. Employers use ‘flexibility’ as an attraction to advertise their job positions, claiming that their employees could gain more control about when, where, and how long they work. The advancement of technology and the innovation of the post-Fordist production system prompt the rise of the fragmentation of tasks, the decentralized and dispersed working locations, and part-time jobs. The growing popularity of flexible jobs invites labor sociologists to critically examine the employment precariousness, income insecurity, and the gendering of flexible work. Yet, the distinctive role of *schedule flexibility* playing in the labor process is not fully discussed. Moreover, schedule flexibility exists in a much wider context besides the newly emerged flexible jobs. It plays an important role in many conventional yet rarely studied professions, such as the sports industry, media and cultural industry, and academic institutions. While the word *flexibility* seems at odds with *control*, this research intends to examine the role of *schedule flexibility* in the labor process control and its gendered outcome, with an empirical investigation of the working experience of female and male golf coaches in China.

This research is inspired by the survey results on Chinese golf coaches. Nearly half of the coaches used the words ‘free’ or ‘schedule is free’ when asked to depict the features of their work. In the meanwhile, many coaches describe their work with ‘time is not in my control’. In the golf training industry, coaches in principle only need to teach during the time they schedule with their clients. However, the schedule flexibility in the training industry is nominal. Coaches have minimum control over the labor process, since the clients take the initiative in the arrangement of teaching schedule and are not obligated to be punctual. In addition, coaches are assumed to do invisible work outside the scheduled teaching time, such as providing extra lessons and giving advice to clients in personal social media contact. Coaches are obliged to do these tasks because the main component of their salary is the commission for clients purchasing course packages, so that they have to stabilize client resources through voluntary work. The

coverage of working content and the length of working hours are implicitly extended to cater to the need of clients. The employers achieve labor process control through the combination of the flexibilization of coaches' working schedule and the commission-based payment system.

Following the above preliminary analysis, the research aims at digging deeper into the role of schedule flexibility at play in the labor process control, by answering the questions – *how do golf coaches perceive the schedule flexibility, and what is the rationale of employers to employ a flexible arrangement of working schedule?* In addition, as the golf training industry is a male-dominated field, the detailed arrangement of working schedule is likely to be gendered. This research, therefore, intends to further investigate the gendered outcome of schedule flexibility by asking *how do female and male coaches perceive flexibility respectively, and how do female and male coaches arrange their working schedule differently?*

Literature Review

Flexible work and working flexibility

In recent years, there is a popularization of flexible jobs in platform-based economy and manufacturing and service industries. This trend is often perceived as facilitated by technological innovations and the changing mode of production organization, for the purpose of reducing labor cost and increasing labor productivity (Eyck, 2003). The flexibilization of employment has caught the attention of scholars in labor studies. Numerous researches on flexible work have examined the relationship between working flexibility and employee satisfaction (Kim et al., 2020; Possenriede & Plantenga, 2014; Wheatley, 2017) and the increased supply of working hours (Possenriede et al., 2016). Some studies take a more critical stance and point to the precariousness of flexible work (Anwar & Graham, 2020; Pedaci, 2010; Standing, 2011), deconstructing the normalization of insecurity through flexibilizing work. Moreover, many scholars studied the gender implications of labor market flexibility, in particular, the feminization of flexible work with lower wages (Fussell, 2000; Standing, 1999).

In the previous literature, flexible work is usually defined by the features of temporal and locational flexibility. The research objects are often workers in digitally mediated employment or post-Fordist manufacturing industry, such as uber drivers (Vallas, 2019; Wu et al., 2019) and

factory workers (Fussell, 2000). Scholars distinguish these flexible works from standard work arrangement that is full-time employment with benefits and a living wage. Many industries that traditionally have a flexible working schedule is not fully investigated, however. More broadly speaking, working flexibility occurs in many other forms, including self-scheduling, compressed workweek, leave, job share, phased retirement, and term-time working (Omondi & K'Obonyo, 2018). These types of schedule flexibility exist in many conventional industries such as the sports industry, media and cultural industry, and academic institutions (Paull et al., 2009). Working flexibility is a common feature of these work that is considered as standard employment according to the criteria of full-time and living wage and welfare. The mechanisms that employers deploy to reduce uncertainties and monitoring the labor process facing the schedule flexibility of employees have yet been fully studied.

The labor process control in flexible employment

Labor process control is more subtle and sophisticated in flexible employment than in conventional manufacturing industries. The labor process theory developed in the era of Fordist and Taylorized mass production, mainly focuses on the objective moments of the labor process. In *Labor and Monopoly*, Braverman (1974) use Taylorism to demonstrate how scientific management brings about the devaluation of work through deskilling. Edwards (1984) analyzed the transformation of labor control from a historical perspective: simple, technical and bureaucratic control. As a breakthrough, Michael Burawoy (1979) pointed out the manufacturing of ideological structures in the labor process, which expose the subjective part of labor control strategies. From coercive control to the nuanced disciplinary mechanisms, manufacturing consent is becoming more and more common in response to the transformation of production politics.

Flexibility in the workplace is one tactic of employers to produce consent among workers. Flexible work practices are perceived as strategies of employers for retaining and attracting employees. These practices, including flexi-time and flexi-location, make employees feel more control over their labor process, and achieve work-life balance (Omondi & K'Obonyo, 2018). In the gig economy, working flexibility is used to attract and incentivize workers, using the tag line 'You are your own boss'. Uber advertised its platform-based work opportunities by

freedom, flexibility, and discretion (Wu et al., 2019). While many organizations use numerical flexibility, that is, the use of a large number of temporal workers to replace full-time positions, in order to reduce labor cost, workers normalize the precariousness and occupational instability as fair practices, recognizing the arrangement of low salary and short-term contract of flexible work as free and compensating jobs (Pedaci, 2010).

On top of the consent making, flexible working schedule is a productive component in the labor process control. In an organizational study, Yang and Zheng (2011) suggested that the highest level of productivity actualization is associated with workers who enjoy a factual flexible work schedule. The manufacturing of high-performance workers is achieved through gamifying rewards (Kellogg et al., 2020). The adoption of a flexible job arrangement, along with extensive reliance on incentive pay, results in substantially higher levels of productivity than more traditional labor control practices (Black & Lynch, 1997). Wu et al. (2019) have identified three strategies that Uber has devised to control its drivers' labor process and to ensure the service quality: an incentive pay system, a customer evaluation system, and flexible work arrangements. The making of competition incentivizes workers to voluntarily working longer hours than the working hours legalized in labor protective laws. As Burawoy puts (1983), hegemonic control is dominant in workplaces where strategies are developed to prompt workers voluntarily subscribing to capitalist accumulation. The flexible working schedule becomes a way to achieve high productivity and ensure the quality of labor products.

Sports training industry as the ethnographic field

The sports labor market is often neglected in labor studies. The professional sport is seen as an isolated field where the human capital accumulated in other professions can hardly be circulated. In professional sports setting coaches are tied with powerful characters such as leadership, masculinity, and assertiveness (Norman, 2010). However, with the commercialization of the sports training industry, many common characteristics as other professions are presenting under the market competition, such as precarious labor, emotional labor, and flexible working schedule. The golf training industry in China possesses the above three features simultaneously.

The golf coaches in China are precarious employment (Aurélien & Xueyun, 2020). The introduction of golf sports into China is of less than three decades. However, institutional

regulation is ineffective. A substantial proportion of current golf coaches do not obtain any kind of qualification (Aurélien & Xueyun, 2020). A steady flow of incomers, encouraged by the high earning prospect which is enjoyed by a few, enters into this profession without the capacity to teach. The golf academies do not intend to build up their reputation through recruiting qualified coaches and providing high-quality teaching services to clients. Instead, golf academies strive to expand the customer base and grow revenue by transferring the competition and earning uncertainties to coaches. The salary of coaches consists of three parts: the monthly basic salary, hourly paid class tuition, and commission for clients purchasing class packages. The third income resource is usually the most crucial and profitable part. The implication is that golf coaches make a living by stabilizing client resources and selling course packages. Coaches perform emotional labor regularly and rely on interpersonal skills more than ‘hard’ skills to secure client resources in order to guarantee continuous employment and income stability.

In line with the precarious employment, golf coaches have minimum control over the working schedule and are supposed to do extra work besides teaching activities. The working schedule is nominally flexible. In principle, coaches will only need to work during the time they schedule with their clients for classes. However, they actually have minimum control over the labor process, since the clients in many cases take the initiative in the arrangement of the teaching schedule and are not obligated to be punctual. They have to standby and be ready to teach in case the clients arrive ahead of time or decide to cancel the class. Besides, golf coaches often provide extra lessons to clients outside the course package in order to stabilize the client resources. Coaches will give advice to clients either on-site or through personal social media contact. In addition, to manage a good relationship with clients, golf coaches will play with clients on the course. This is a tacit agreement between the coach, the client, and the employer. The extra work is rendered invisible as it is not counted in the formal working hours on the employer’s side and coaches take those extra work as their voluntary labor to compete with other coaches for the client resources and thereby increase their income. The combination of a flexible working schedule and a commission-oriented pay system achieve the labor process control.

The working schedule is also mediated by coaches’ gender identity in the labor process. The golf training industry in China is masculinized as nearly eighty percent of coaches are male. However, there is gendered discourse in the industry that female coaches are in an advantageous

position in the competition for client resources thanks to their feministic attributes. Emotional labor and service labor, as discussed in Hochschild's work (2012), is often associated with females. The strategies adopted by female coaches in response to schedule flexibility and market competition are likely to be different from male coaches. The gendered outcome of schedule flexibility could be a distinctive reflection of the gendered division of labor in the sports training industry.

Methods and Materials

The three research questions will be answered by interviews, ethnographic observation, and survey analysis. Firstly, investigating how male and female golf coaches perceive the flexibility in work, is to answer whether the flexible arrangement is making consent of employees and whether coaches subjectively feel that they have control over the labor process. The method to answer this research question is through interviewing golf coaches. The interview objects will be selected based on gender and working experience. Secondly, asking what the rationale of employers to apply a flexible working schedule is, helps to answer how employers control the labor process and whether the employers want to use the schedule flexibility as a labor control strategy. This research question will be answered through interviewing employers, i.e., the golf academy managers.

Finally, the ethnographic observation combined with survey analysis will help to answer the third question: how do female and male coaches arrange their working schedule? While survey analysis can give a big picture of the teaching schedule of golf coaches, ethnographic observation is necessary since there is invisible work that is usually not considered in coaches' mind. It is important to observe how they manage their relationships with clients and their daily activity after work. In terms of the survey analysis, I have distributed an online questionnaire with 260 golf coaches answered. The survey collected the demographic information, the earnings constitution (teaching income, commission, tips from clients and others), teaching hours in the last week, and other professional information including playing skills and training background of coaches. The survey analysis is supposed to present the different patterns of working schedules of male and female coaches. The patterns will be explained through ongoing interviews and ethnography.

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