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Service interaction and dignity in cleaning work: how important is the organizational context?

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to explore the extent to which the nature of a particular work activity – cleaning – changes across organizational contexts, considering specific industry characteristics and working conditions in urban settings in Portugal.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper draws on the qualitative analysis of data collected between 2010 and 2013 using open-ended interviews with employees and direct observation in two shopping malls.

Findings – The empirical evidence illuminates how the contexts under study shape the behavior of actors and their power relations. By placing the perspective of employees at the core of the analysis, the paper demonstrates that workplaces provide a major site of conflict and negotiation regarding dignity in cleaning work, but this dispute takes on different contours and sources of tension across organizational contexts.

Originality/value – The seminal comparative analysis of commercial cleaning and housecleaning undertaken in this paper sheds light on the varying distribution of roles and authority at work. Differently than in earlier studies, the actual modes of service interaction in this industry are documented in a detailed and critical manner.

Keywords Workplace, Gender, Ethnicity, Networks, Dignity, Cleaning, Commercial cleaning, Housecleaning, Service interaction, Domestic work

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Considerable attention has been recently paid to the cleaning industry. More often than not, researchers focus on either commercial cleaning or housecleaning service settings, construing them as distinct subjects of enquiry. Such compartmentalization is

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supported by evident difference concerning workplaces and employer-employee dynamics. Commercial cleaning comprises a variety of locations such as retail, office, hospital, or industrial sites. In turn, housecleaning is performed in private households. However, both are located "at an important nexus of the global economy, for they are essential to ensuring that the spaces of production, consumption and social reproduction which define the social architecture of the contemporary economy remain sanitary and functional" (Herod and Aguiar, 2006a, p. 427). Organizational settings are associated with particular social contexts and types of employment relations. Companies and subcontracting are shown to play central roles in the cleaning industry, whereas domestic service relationships are typically based on individual arrangements and private understandings regarding work contents and conditions. An activity-centered approach is bound to note that cleaning is a key service provided in both of these "sectors," and to question to what extent the nature and the meanings of work vary across them. As shown below, the sociological literature is especially useful as it emphasizes the complexity of relational contexts at work and their interweaving with historical dynamics, power relations and asymmetries grounded on class, age, gender, or ethnic differentiation.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the nature of a particular work activity – cleaning – across different organizational contexts and question the existing modes of service interaction. We draw on the empirical findings of two research projects conducted in Portugal between 2010 and 2013. The paper proceeds as follows. First, a variety of contributions from existing scholarship are convened to support the formulation of the problem; elaborations on dignity are paid particular attention. Second, the setting of Portugal and industry-specific characteristics are described. Third, methodological procedures and considerations are exposed. Fourth, the original findings are discussed. Placing the perspective of employees (rather than their employers') at the core of the analysis, we will demonstrate that workplaces provide a major site of conflict and negotiation regarding dignity in cleaning work, but this dispute takes on different contours and sources of tension across organizational contexts. The contrast between commercial cleaning and housecleaning proves to be a useful instrument to advance our knowledge on the distribution of roles and authority in this segment of contemporary labor markets.

Cleaning work across different organizational contexts

The scholarship on either commercial cleaning or housecleaning is too voluminous to review at length here. Instead, our aim is to discuss a number of contributions that help identify the main possibilities of intersection between what is generally construed as comprising two disparate topics of enquiry.

First of all, both cases pertain largely to the same work activity – cleaning. In this regard, they emerge as resilient sources of low-skill and low-pay jobs in contemporary societies. Regardless of actual employment conditions, cleaners play a central role in several spaces of production, consumption and social reproduction which characterize the modern global economy, e.g. shopping malls, as they ensure cleaning conditions and functionality (Herod and Aguiar, 2006a; Sassen, 2007). Furthermore, the persistence of low-skill work in cleaning jobs has been simultaneous with a process of transformation of the cleaning industry toward the standardization of working processes (Herod and Aguiar, 2006b) associated with a general need for certification in a context of increasing competition between companies (Aguiar, 2001). An "interesting contradiction" (Herod and Aguiar, 2006a, p. 431) emerges in this work activity. On the one hand, the prominence of female and migrant workers in the

workforce encourages an understanding of such work as unskilled. On the other hand, discourses of professionalization have engendered new realities concerning standard modes of operating and also new ways of naming this activity. Thus, Herod and Aguiar (2006a), drawing on previous work by Gaskell, suggest that "skill" should be considered a dependent variable related to who is doing the work and under what conditions (a consonant reasoning from a feminist perspective can be found in Cockburn, 1983).

The traditional emphasis that sociologists of work give to professions underpins the confinement of low-skill occupations to the realm of inequality studies and thus their undertheorization as far as work relations are concerned (Abbott, 1993, p. 203). Nevertheless, a variety of authors observe that the recent expansion of highly qualified jobs in the upper strata of reward coexists with – and even fuels – the expansion of routinized low-paid jobs in the service industry (Hochschild, 2000; Sassen, 2001; Warhurst and Nickson, 2001; Payne, 2009). In the context of polarizing labor markets, individuals recruited as cleaners share particular socio-demographic characteristics which identify them as belonging to marginalized categories of workers. They are often women with little formal education, minority ethnic background, or discontinuous work trajectories (Anderson, 2000; Ehrenreich and Hochschild, 2002; Brody, 2006). They find themselves under employment regimes that require work intensification and the reorganization of their domestic and child care arrangements (Seifert and Messing, 2006; Herod and Aguiar, 2006b). The close tie between participation in the labor market and family itineraries is not exhausted outside the workplace, since inequality regimes and power relations pervade much of the everyday operation at employing organizations as well (Acker, 2006). The extensive use of networking and informal procedures of recruitment by both employers and workers is a significant illustration of how social structure affects economic outcomes (Granovetter, 1983, 2005). Implications for the actual experience of employees are ambiguous, as they can entail either a loss or a gain of power *vis-à-vis* employers and labor market dynamics at large.

In regard to similarity and difference between commercial and housecleaning, two prominent elements should be discerned. First, workplaces vary in size and nature. Whereas workers recruited in commercial cleaning perform their service in a variety of collective settings (e.g. shopping malls, offices, health institutions, industrial sites), those recruited in housecleaning cater to private homes. Second, this variation is associated with different manners of organizing work and structuring authority. Commercial cleaning typically builds on a web of relations comprising company owners, managers, employees with supervisory roles, and frontline cleaners. Cleaners are often coordinated under a model of "teamworking," although the practical meaning of such word may remain blurred. In his empirical study of commercial cleaning dynamics in Australia, Ryan (2012, p. 259) demonstrates how teamworking can be deployed to increase managerial control over work, intensify work and reduce labor costs rather than fulfill the suggestion of industrial democracy. While housecleaning is increasingly supplied by for-profit companies as well (Devetter and Rousseau, 2009), most of the studies conducted so far emphasize the direct recruitment of individual workers – overwhelmingly women, frequently in-country or international migrants – by private households (Anderson, 2000; Hochschild, 2000; Parreñas, 2001; Ehrenreich and Hochschild, 2002; Lutz, 2008; Abrantes, 2012). In other words, employers vary in size and nature as much as workplaces. In comparison to their counterparts in the sector of industrial/commercial cleaning, the daily experience of domestic workers is likely to be much more individualized and solitary.

What about the contractual configuration of employment relationships? Certainly a wide array of situations coexist and the picture may differ across countries. However,

the empirical studies of paid domestic work cited above (as well as our own first-hand findings, to be discussed below) find domestic cleaners in a condition of salaried employees, even though such employment status is obscured in daily intercourse by the singular nature of private households as both employers and workplaces (Anderson, 2007). In other words, the direct relationship established between employee and household member(s) can be perceived – or instrumentally pursued – by one or even both of the parties in terms that resemble those of self-employment, but it is still defined by labor law as an employment relationship, rights and duties applying accordingly (for an international survey of law and practice in this respect, see International Labour Office (ILO), 2010).

The dominant types of employment relationship and organizational structure are expected to bear an impact on the distribution of authority, roles and autonomy. They are also a piece of key explanatory value to understand developments over time. Outsourcing and subcontracting have become a common feature of modern-day commercial cleaning as a result of corporate strategies to enhance flexibility and labor division (Bernstein, 1986; Ehrenreich, 2002). Informal work – understood as work that is "performed outside the realm of labour regulations and social protections" (Chen, 2011, p. 168) – has been exposed as an important feature of both housecleaning and commercial cleaning (Seifert and Messing, 2006). The inscription of work in broader regulatory or symbolic frameworks of labor relations has implications for the manners in which work is carried out and socially valued. In fact, as noted by Abbott (1993, p. 187), "changes in occupations cannot be construed without the work system that enfolds them." In the present case, the quasi-professional appearance of commercial cleaning and the growth of a "discourse concerning professionalization within the context of a significant neoliberalization of working conditions" (Herod and Aguiar, 2006a, p. 429) contrasts with the less clear position of housecleaning *vis-à-vis* industrialization and, in particular, the combination of cleaning and other household-related tasks in the practical experience of many domestic workers, including the provision of direct personal care. It is significant that researchers dealing with paid domestic work at the empirical level are often confronted with difficulties in defining their very object of study. Definitions of work, domestic and care, to mention only the key examples, are often different across empirical contexts and personal perceptions. "In the final analysis," Anderson (2000, p. 21) proposes, "domestic work is not definable in terms of tasks but in terms of a role which constructs and situates the worker within a certain set of social relationships." For the employees, such social relationships are at once a potential source of protection and abuse. Work environments can turn out to be either friendly or hostile depending to a large extent on the interaction with employers (Cock, 1980; Kofes, 2001; Gorban, 2012).

In sum, the range of similarities and differences between commercial and housecleaning settings pertains chiefly to the modes of service interaction. Remarkably, however, the comparison of service interaction in these two contexts remains up to empirical enquiry. In both cases, considerable efforts have been expended to document or compare practices across geographic locations or historical periods, but the same cannot be said of a systematic or comparative analysis focused on the "cleaning occupation" or "occupational practices." Examining these two organizational contexts in depth is also a crucial contribution to bridge the intellectual divide between the study of work and the study of organizations, which requires analysis to comprehend both intra and inter-organizational forces and the socioeconomic effects of organizations on employees concerning matters as diverse as work organization, reward, inequality, career mobility, or work-family balance (Haveman and Khaire, 2006).

Dignity and service interaction in cleaning work

We adopt Hodson's (2001, p. 3) definition of dignity as "the ability to establish a sense of self-worth and self-respect and to appreciate the respect of others," sought by employees through particular acts of resistance against abuse and more or less intentional attempts to reclaim the capacity to ascribe meaning to their work. Instead of subscribing to a dualistic notion that specific categories of work are inherently subordinate or empowering, attention is required to the micro-politics of workplaces as proposed in research about esthetic labor (Warhurst and Nickson, 2001; Casaca, 2012). Workers may resort to passive or active strategies to defend their dignity, including covert endeavors to reduce their individual performance or, on the contrary, to make work more efficient and humane, engaging in multiple negotiations of the (objective and subjective) nexus of autonomy and responsibility (Hodson, 2001). It is important to add that increasing autonomy at the workplace can be associated with increasing work-related stress if not supported by adequate technical, material and symbolic conditions.

A distinction between dignity in work and dignity at work is introduced by Bolton (2007). The former concerns the realization of interesting and meaningful work with a substantial degree of responsibility and autonomy, recognized social esteem and respect. The latter concerns structures and practices that offer equal opportunities, individual and collective voice, safe and healthy working conditions, just rewards and secure employment contract. Depending on their situation, workers may be able to enjoy dignity in one, both, or none of these two dimensions. The separation between skilled and unskilled work is interwoven with symbolic constructions of class, gender and ethnicity, as illustrated in the association of cleaning work with servility. While servility can be seen as opposite to dignified work, "serving others can be a source of dignity where it provides something for other that they could not easily provide for themselves and where it does not require compulsory deference" (Sayer, 2007, p. 27). It is noteworthy the political centrality given to the concept of dignity by the International Labour Organization when addressing working conditions in low-paid sectors such as domestic service (ILO, 2010).

The sociological literature on service interaction is sensitive to the different contexts in which employees and customers build social relations, acknowledging these relations as mutually determinant and varying in their degree of structuration (Vallas *et al.*, 2009). Our fieldwork exposes a case – the cleaning industry – with a particular configuration of service interaction as work is performed mostly when customers (in commercial cleaning) or household members (in housecleaning) are physically away from the setting to be cleaned. This complex interaction (Brétin, 2000) characterized by limited face-to-face communication does not prevent employees, customers and household members from developing elaborate representations about one another. While users frequently express their discontent about the poor quality of cleaning services, the cleaning employees blame users for a careless handling of facilities, interpreting this as a form of disrespect toward themselves. Both in commercial settings and in private households, the matter of "respect/disrespect" is suggestive of how employees feel their dignity to be under threat in daily interaction.

Focussing on the everyday experience of employees, our empirical analysis will explore the extent to which difference in the organizational context and the underlying social logics determine difference in the nature of this work activity and therefore different conditions under which dignity is disputed and decided. An overview of the empirical setting under examination is presented before proceeding into the first-hand findings.

Commercial cleaning and housecleaning in Portugal: industry characteristics

According to the European Union Labour Force Survey, the occupational group of "Domestic and related helpers, cleaners and launderers" is relatively large in Portugal: by 2010, it comprised an estimated number of 282 thousand workers, that is, 5 percent of the total active population in the country, against 3.9 percent in the total EU-15 (Abrantes and Peixoto, 2012, pp. 150-154). The same statistical source exposes a steady volume of this group in Portugal since the mid-1990s, with a significant increase in most of the EU-15. In the meantime, the number of individuals employed in "Activities of households as employers of domestic personnel" evolved in a similar fashion: Portugal remains among the EU-15 countries where largest figures are to be found, standing at 144 thousand workers in 2010 (2.6 percent of the total active population), while the clear international trend is to increase[1].

Women compose the overwhelming majority of the population employed in these occupational groups (between 96 and 98 percent, in Portugal). Again, this has been observed at the international scale, and it is particularly significant in Portugal. The large and still increasing proportion of women in paid employment – which distinguishes this country from the remainder of southern Europe – coexists with persistent patterns of gender segmentation in the labor market, which are especially unfavorable to women with lower schooling or immigrant background (Torres, 2008; Bettio and Verashchagina, 2009; Ferreira, 2010). While professional areas of higher status gradually open to women, a gendered differentiation of skills at the bottom tier of jobs remains in place (Ferreira, 1999; Amâncio, 2007). It is important to bear in mind that policies regarding gender equality, family and care, although they can be neatly approached as distinct issues of public intervention, are uniquely bound up in their practical outcomes (Crompton and Le Feuvre, 2000; Rubery, 2002). The countries of southern Europe provide a critical illustration of this relation, as impressive accomplishments in women's rights over the last decades remain in conflict with limited supportive policies concerning childcare and eldercare, an issue with implications for both labor demand and supply in domestic service occupations (Catarino and Oso, 2000; Crompton, 2006; Lazaridis, 2007; Wall and Nunes, 2010; León, 2010).

Likewise, the growing number of immigrant women in the labor market is associated with their concentration in the secondary or peripheral labor market, characterized by a predominance of low-skill occupations under precarious contractual arrangements (Góis and Marques, 2009; Casaca and Peixoto, 2010). The early inflow of migrants from the former Portuguese colonies in Africa has been overtaken by the arrival of migrants from other countries, especially Brazil and Ukraine, many of whom are women moving on their own or ahead of other family members. Considering official statistics, 41 percent of the foreign working women in Portugal by 2010 were employed in "Elementary occupations," a broad category covering jobs in services, industry and agriculture for which no prior specific training or credential is required (Abrantes and Peixoto, 2012). Domestic service remains their most common employment sector, reaching over 20 percent of their total number. In addition, Portugal has been signaled in earlier research for an expanded underground economy, which is expected to be largely fuelled by the operation of small enterprises and undeclared domestic services involving a disproportionate number of women and immigrants (Baganha, 1998; Schneider and Klinglmair, 2004; Casaca and Peixoto, 2010).

In short, cleaning services are located at the intersection of various pressures observed at the national level: the expansion of the service industry, the spreading of corporate flexibility strategies including subcontracting and outsourcing, a change of mind frame in public policy from full employment to employability, and the resilience

of occupational segregation based on gender and ethnicity. This is likely to be associated with competition and hierarchy both at the workplace and in the labor market at large. The reviewed studies show that the socio-demographic profile of employees recruited in commercial cleaning and housecleaning is similar and many women with little schooling and/or immigrant background experience employment in both of these settings over their lifecourse, a trend that is confirmed in our own fieldwork. Notwithstanding their interlinkage, there are also distinct dynamics in commercial cleaning and housecleaning when it comes to labor demand and supply, as shown in the discussion of empirical evidence below.

Research design and methods

This paper draws on results from two research projects recently conducted in Portugal. The empirical investigation on commercial cleaning (June 2010 – January 2012) consisted of semi-structured interviews with ten women employed as cleaners in two shopping malls in the city of Porto and direct observation of their daily work practices. The technique of direct observation is particularly useful to capture the work activity itself (Tope *et al.*, 2005), and it allows capturing spatial and temporal elements from the daily work of cleaning employees and their interaction with customers. It has the capacity to generate rich description and an understanding of cleaning work based not only on employees but also on customers. Two sites of observation were selected: the strolling areas of the shopping malls, where we registered the movements of employees who clean up at different periods of the day and the week; and the toilets, chosen for its relevance in framing the nature of the work activity under analysis. During the semi-structured interviews, our strategy – and remember the title of the book by Studs Terkel (1972/2004), *Working. People Talk About What They Do All Day and How They Feel About What They Do* – was to listen to the cleaning employees talking about what they do in their daily work and how they feel about it. To be sure, "listening" was informed by an interview script covering questions about the career, work activity, job satisfaction, family dynamics and personal lives.

Second, the empirical investigation on housecleaning (April 2011 – February 2013) draws on open-ended interviews with 25 paid domestic workers in the city of Lisbon. Similarly to what was done in the first research project, respondents were located through snowball recommendation, an adequate strategy to gain access to an occupation often performed in the underground economy as advocated in much of the existing research on paid domestic work (Cock, 1980; Romero, 1992; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001; Van Walsum, 2011). The semi-structured script covered experiences in the labor market, the organization of domestic labor, relationship with employers and other relevant individuals and institutions, personal and household trajectories, and demographic and socioeconomic features. The formulation of new elements and research questions by respondents was encouraged. Regular consultation with public officers, experts and other strategic informants provided useful background suggestions and clarifications.

In both research projects, the snowball recruitment of respondents permitted a satisfactory degree of trust, increasing the completeness and reliability of data. We have tried wherever possible to diversify the demographic profile of respondents, which required rejecting some of the contacts suggested and looking for others. According to the premises of qualitative research, the concern was not to select a statistically representative set of individuals but rather a "socially significant" one. Therefore, respondents are considered not only as single individuals, but as part of a social group that shares common characteristics (Rapley, 2007). The analysis of data builds on the notion of actors being located in specific social contexts, therefore giving

prominence to their creation of meanings (Weick, 1995). Borrowing from the narrative forms of organization studies, interpretative analysis permits "elucidating along theoretical, nonnormative lines a viable way of combining narrative with the logic-scientific mode of reporting" (Czarniawska, 1998, p. 14). In the next section, we begin by demonstrating how daily operation in the contexts under study shape the behavior of actors and their power relations. Afterwards, attention turns to the distribution of authority and roles.

Commercial cleaning and housecleaning: empirical analysis

The "what, when and where" of working arrangements and their impact on the personal lives of employees

The first cleaning shift before the appearance of customers in shopping malls occurs from 6 to 10 a.m. This corresponds to a part-time arrangement of four hours; others over the day consist of six hours (e.g. noon-6 p.m. and 6 p.m.-midnight). Additionally, there are full-time arrangements consisting of two shifts, one in the morning (the period of 6 a.m.-2.30 p.m.) and the other in the afternoon (the period of 2-11 p.m.). The cleaning companies offer a wider variety of part-time arrangements based on rotating shifts in order to fulfill the needs of the shopping malls by which they are subcontracted. The combination of part-time schedule and subcontracting status reinforces the vulnerability of cleaning employees in shopping malls, contributing to the devalorization of their labor (Bernstein, 1986).

The need to go into work before the opening hour of the shopping mall is a result of the mismatch between the rhythm of life in these commercial establishments and the cleaning service to be provided (Brétin, 2000). Consequently, this shift requires employees to begin working before dawn, which produces various constraints over the structuration of the employee's everyday life. Exemplary is the following account:

> I start very early. When I get up, it's not 5 in the morning yet, it's still dark, I'm very tired, and sometimes it's very complicated because there are few buses and very few people walking on the street, some of them have a nasty look and I get scared [...] Not always do I have to wake up my little two-year-old one [...] because sometimes my husband, when he takes off to work, he can take the child to his mother [...] but when he must start working that early as well, during the night, then there is no other way, I wake him [the child] up very early, the poor thing [...] and take him to my mother-in-law, then he [...] he goes in his pajamas, so that he's not cold [...] then my mother-in-law stays with him, then later I go and pick him up after lunch [...] before that, I still work two hours at a lady's place (Gabriela, 33 years old, commercial cleaner since 2009, 24 working hours per week).

Two elements must be underscored. First, burdensome working shifts are required from employees who do not get sufficient rest and must frequently impose the same anti-social rhythms on their children. Second, commuting on public transport at an early hour (when a small number of people is around) raises feelings of personal insecurity. These feelings contrast with the outburst of security that employees experience as soon as they enter the shopping mall, an area of permanent electronic and human surveillance (Ocqueteau, 1996).

The negative impact of night working hours is associated with the changes of shift or even workplace established by the cleaning companies as a response to the requests of shopping malls or to fill in for absent employees. Requests from shopping malls can be a result of the organization of special events, for instance fairs or sales promotions, which demand a greater volume of cleaning services:

> My workplace is this shopping, this is mine, but sometimes I work in a different one. If it's nearby, we walk. If it's far away, the boss takes us in a van [...] sometimes that happens, when there's more work than expected or when a colleague is missing [...] this is how it goes,

> they [the supervisors, the employers] own us, if we don't want to do it they will get younger ones, twenty-year-olds, who are available to do it, and we have no choice […] (Manuela, 42 years old, commercial cleaner since 2000, 40 working hours per week).

Considering this situation, the approaches of Hodson (2001) and Bolton (2007) to dignity and abuse at work are useful. Even when supervisors are described as pleasant people, employees are often informed about their reassignment to a different workplace on the very day, or about a change of their working shift on the day before. Confronted with such flexibility concerning times and spaces of work (Puech, 2007), it is difficult for employees to manage personal and family everyday lives. The tension drawn from the notion that younger women are available to take their place is symptomatic of the social stratification based on age and the subordinate incorporation of older women with little schooling in the labor market. At the same time, it unveils regular episodes of moral harassment at work (Einarsen *et al.*, 2010). The use of psychological pressures is intertwined with body-related complaints, suggesting that hardship is not limited to working times: it expands to all of the other realms in the life of employees as it builds on their scarcity of social and economic resources. Drawing on Bolton's (2007) conceptualization, the cleaners interviewed during our fieldwork do not enjoy dignity in work as they are deprived of autonomy, neither do they enjoy dignity at work since secure employment and respectful social relations are absent.

Differently, housecleaning is characterized by daytime working shifts and thus more favorable to the articulation of labor market participation and other personal or social activities undertaken by the employee. The field research uncovers a typical pattern according to which working periods occur between 8.30 a.m. and 6.30 p.m., from Monday through Saturday. It is especially noteworthy that some respondents state that they are able to arrange their working schedule according to their own convenience. Their main priority then is to reconcile their work arrangements with various households, as well as other part-time jobs (often in commercial cleaning) and unpaid labor at their own home. Their capacity to negotiate the length and distribution of working shifts depends chiefly on the degree of trust and amicability that they have developed with the employing households. Helena, for instance, caters everyday to two private houses between 9 a.m. and 6 p.m., where she is responsible for cleaning, cooking and doing the laundry. Between 6.30 p.m. and 9 p.m., she cleans the office of a private company. In turn, Rita works as a cleaner in the headquarters of a public service institution from 7 a.m. to 4 p.m., before taking off to clean a private apartment in the same neighborhood (4.30-7.30 p.m.). Joaquina starts off her working day cleaning a beauty saloon (8.30-10 a.m.) and then provides cleaning to various households during the day (10.30 a.m.-8 p.m., up to three homes per day). Patrícia is only available to work as a housecleaner in the morning, since she works at home as a childminder from 1 through 7 p.m.

Another important aspect pertains to the location of work, since housecleaners – differently than commercial cleaners – maintain steady workplaces and may even exercise some power to promote their geographic proximity, thereby reducing the distance and time of their daily errands. Two practical strategies are deployed to such end: privileging recruitment through neighborhood networking and resigning from private households that are located in inconvenient areas. Otília's weekly agenda comprises eight apartments, all of them located in the same suburban Lisbon neighborhood where she resides. Lurdes travels every morning to a distinct suburban neighborhood where the seven private households employing her are located. Both of them walk between their workplaces. The situation of Lurdes is indeed relatively

common and it provides a reasonable desideratum to the domestic employee insofar as workplaces tend to be concentrated in particular areas of the city – those inhabited by families in the top income brackets.

However, the meaning and content ascribed to the housecleaner's workplace and working time is also a source of tension. The standard practice is to ground the labor relationship on a given number of working hours, which are settled between the parties at the outset and determine pay. Such negotiation is typically fast and serene. The focal point of contention in fact is shifted to the volume of work to be performed within the established working time. This is a frequent reason for dissatisfaction and conflict between the parties:

> I leave at the scheduled time. No, it's not by the minute! […].
>
> — In the days that you stayed until later, was it because you were asked something particular by the employers?
>
> Either they asked, or sometimes I get delayed. In regard to food, sometimes she [the employer] asks to me cook a lot of food and then I do a bad time calculation and I'm not going to let a soup half done, right? I'm not going to leave the mop bucket in the middle of the kitchen floor. I'm not going to let the clothes in the water […] I have to be respectful, haven't I? And that's it, sometimes it's 6 o'clock and that's when I leave. By the Christmas time, I remember leaving at 6:30 [one extra hour, unpaid] (Marina, 43 years old, housecleaner since 1989, 36 working hours per week).

Corroborating the concern of Anderson (2000) with regard to the undefinition of tasks, our respondents consensually report having been recruited as a "domestic worker," a role in which cleaning tasks are central but do not exhaust expectations. The very looseness of the term "domestic worker" supports the expectation that the employee shall be available to fulfill the wide and changing needs of the employing household. These can be unpredictable and go as far as to include cooking, taking care of children or elderly at home, looking after pets, shopping, or doing occasional favors unrelated to work incumbencies. Unsurprisingly, changes in job content often happen over time, for instance when a child or an elderly is brought into the composition of the household. According to the respondents, the main risk is related less to the diversification of responsibilities (which is described as a good thing) than to work overload. The actual reaction of the employee to the increase of work volume is also closely associated with the emotional bond established with the employing household, corroborating earlier research about paid domestic work (Hochschild, 2000; Colombo, 2007). In the case of a strong bond, quitting the job is construed as "abandoning" the employer, and notions of ethics and loyalty are considered by the employee.

The distribution of authority and roles

The supervision of cleaning in the shopping mall follows a multi-tier model. On the one hand, chief supervisors circulate in the malls where the company operates; on the other, there are supervisors who work together with the lower-rank employees, performing the same tasks and ensuring service quality. Supervisors on the ground experience uncomfortable situations as they are frowned upon by the other employees for controlling their working times and tasks. They organize work through a set of direct and indirect prescriptions (Brétin, 2000) based on the joint action of the cleaning companies and the shopping malls. The employees share a feeling of distrust for their supervisors since they are not informed about the degree and accuracy of control and surveillance, as underscored in the following excerpt:

> We are never quite sure whether the chiefs are controlling us […] when they [the supervisors] are with us, we are never very happy […] when we are with them, we behave in a way, but

> when the chiefs are absent, the behavior is different [...] the atmosphere is not very good [...] for they have a lot of contact with the other chief who walks through the shopping malls, the one that we never see [...] she speaks with the chief that works next to us (Rita, 38 years old, commercial cleaner since 2008, 36 working hours per week).

Interpreting such discourse brings us closer to the elaboration of James Scott (1990) on the difference between the "public transcript" and the "hidden transcript." While the former designates the realm of public control and subordination based on codes of deference, discourse, punishment and domination, the hidden transcript encompasses the remarks, observations, answers and doubts that emerge outside of the formal sphere, that is, beyond the public transcript. Everyday work at the shopping mall is permeated by asymmetrical power relations between employees, their supervisors and customers. Customers' needs are mobilised as a resource (Meyer and Schwager, 2007; Kelkkula, 2011) to legitimize the standardization of employees' and supervisors' conduct and to reduce direct practices of top managerial control (Fuller and Smith, 1991; Korczynski, 2009). With regard to employees and supervisors, their interaction comprehends a public transcript of verbal and non-verbal attitudes by the supervisors, as well as a hidden transcript comprehending practices, discourses and behaviors by the employees which confirm, contradict or modify what emerges from the public one. Nevertheless, both transcripts lack precisely defined and unchanging boundaries. The hidden transcript, for instance, is not an exclusive characteristic of the employees; it is also frequently found among supervisors, or in the relationship between these supervisors and the higher level ranks of the company.

It is especially significant that an upgrade to the role of supervisor is undesired by employees. While it entails a salary raise of 20 euros per month, it implies a social experience of work characterized by the negative stereotype of "being a supervisor":

> If we are supervisors, we are frowned upon, we are the snitches, our colleagues never trust us and we have a very bad working environment [...] then they will say that we are friends with the security officers who walk through the mall to control [...] I was a supervisor for a while, but then I dropped it, the extra 20 euros that you get by the end of the month are not worth it, it's a lot of bothers and a lot of responsibilities, it's better to be there in our corner, doing our job and that's it [...] (Fernanda, 44 years old, commercial cleaner since 2002, 24 working hours per week).

The supervisors resent a hostile atmosphere in their everyday experience at work resulting from the interpretation and action schemes engendered by the employees *vis-à-vis* the modes in which such role is exercised. Ultimately, they resign from that position as in the case of Fernanda, quoted above. This situation is informative regarding both the complex nexus of autonomy and responsibility (Hodson, 2001) and the negative impact of informal comments on daily work experience (Harris and Ogbonna, 2013).

Fernanda's account refers yet to a novel analytical element pertaining to the relationship between cleaning employees and security officers who labor in the same shopping mall. Although this is not a task formally ascribed to them, the security officers who are responsible for making regular rounds along the strolling areas of the shopping mall assist the cleaning supervisors, for instance when it is necessary to enter the male toilets to check on their state of hygiene. These officers operate as "allies" of the supervisors in the exercise of authority upon the cleaning employees. The occupational groups of cleaning and security in the observed shopping malls do not function as autonomous entities, but rather according to the logics of

"linked ecologies" (Abbott, 2003), which bring to light the very existence of multiple and interdependent labor realities (Menger, 2003). These comprise particular spatial and temporal features, articulated and in tune with the practical rationalities underlying the commercial policy of the places at stake.

In housecleaning, the employee finds herself alone *vis-à-vis* the employer: typically, she does not have colleagues by her side, neither is she confronted with intermediate instances of authority and control. She is often given a door key and cleans the premises while residents are away. The employing household exerts something that can be called an absent surveillance. Furthermore, it is not incidental that most of the respondents report having been recruited by a woman rather than a man: even in the cases of dual breadwinner households, it is the wife who plays the role of the "employer" in everyday interaction, supervising and managing the work to be done, an eloquent demonstration of the resilience of gender asymmetry in family and intimacy contexts (Ferreira, 1981; Amâncio, 2007; Casaca, 2009; Aboim, 2010).

The fact that employee and employer share their condition regarding gender paves the way to relational logics pervaded by solidarity and mutual support as much as maternalism and patronization. Such is the case of Marina, who describes her long-time employer as an "older sister": among other things, this employer was the maid of honor at her wedding (in 1993) and her main source of emotional and financial support when she got divorced (15 years later), as well as a provider of precious help to Marina's children at studying for school. It is necessary to clarify that not all of the testimonies collected in our fieldwork uncover this sort of bond with the employers or such a positive assessment about it. Otília, who has several biographic elements in common with Marina (the decade in which she was born, the migratory movement from a rural area to the city, the current situation of part-time work in various households and being the mother of two children) makes incisive remarks about the need to limit emotional attachment with the families employing her. She declares that emotional attachment is very often the ground on which abuses of authority and work overload take place. Therefore, she tries to work, in her own words, "as if she was a company," "you do the service and leave." A distinctive feature of her professional-like behavior, she adds, is that she always carries around her own cleaning cloths, since the private households that she cleans frequently lack the equipment that she considers the most efficient.

Notwithstanding the plurality of employers maintained by Otília (at the time of the interview, she worked regularly in eight private households summing up approximately 30 hours per week), almost all of these employers know each other. In this aspect, her account is similar to all of those respondents who work in more than one household (including Marina, Helena, Rita and Joaquina, to specify only the abovementioned employees). It is through recommendations between individuals linked by family, friendship or neighborhood bonds that the housecleaner attains the consolidation of such network. As suggested by Granovetter (1983), networking can bear ambiguous implications. In the present case, the network of personal acquaintances is also a network of security, as the multiplicity of employers is key not to become economically dependent on a particular one and thereby reduce the risk of an unpredictable cutback in total income. At the same time, the network offers some control to both parties in regard to opportunistic behavior. If employers attempt to harmonize their practices by following standards of social acceptability, a hint about the employee's incompetence in a given household may jeopardize her permanence in the other households. Such network effects – either beneficial or detrimental to the employee – are amplified by the multiplier capacity of information transaction in

places of conviviality such as a school, a church or local shops. In other words, this informal network, a complex of ecologies in itself (Abbott, 2003), provides some stability to the employee at the same time that it is permeated by tensions regarding control and power with clear advantages to the employers: work intensification is favored and resistance claims by the employees are discouraged. Hence, the favorable elements to housecleaners can be seen as partial or negotiated victories at best. It is especially significant that the respondents who have present or past experiences in other types of organizational context (sometimes, in commercial cleaning) agree on the very practical benefits of a friendly relationship with employers in housecleaning. The most frequently mentioned benefit is that friendly employers allow the employees to bring in their own children or grandchildren to work. This is a resource mobilized by employees to deal with the well-known strains of combining full-time participation in the labor market and still a disproportionate amount of family duties *vis-à-vis* their male partner.

Conclusion

The empirical evidence presented in this paper exposes how the negotiation of dignity is conditioned by the different organizational structures in operation. In commercial cleaning, the daily intercourse between employees and supervisors is tense due to the multiple forms of insecurity experienced by the former and the sense of hostility experienced by the latter. In turn, housecleaning employees labor very much on their own, and they engage in ambiguous and complex relational logics with the employing households, permeated by changing emotions and expectations. Despite these singularities, both activities suggest a common pattern of service interaction in which employees have scarce face-to-face contact with customers or residents, as underscored by Brétin (2000) in the case of commercial cleaning. In both cases too, our respondents are often confronted with practices of poor management, abuse and work overload (Herod and Aguiar, 2006a), which can be attributed either to an inapt performance of employers or to their purposeful strategy to optimize productivity. While employer-employee relationship dynamics can be decisive, it is chiefly the mutual construction of subjective perceptions about the work done that contributes to undermine or restore the labor dignity of employees (Hodson, 2001; Bolton, 2007). Notably, the commercial cleaners interviewed during our fieldwork feel their dignity threatened by the devalorizing manners in which customers appropriate and make use of the areas to be cleaned. In housecleaning, the conundrum of salaried work symbolically construed as self-employment (Anderson, 2007) is further complicated when cleaners seek dignity precisely through the consolidation of personal bonds of trust and affection with the household members, i.e. their employers and privileged users of the cleaned areas.

Indeed, the diversity of organizational contexts is far from implying substantially different working and employment conditions. In both cases, the women that we interviewed are subjected to unilateral decisions of employers concerning the "what, where and when" of work. Exceptions in this respect are found only in housecleaning, and they are limited to personal accomplishments and particular individual employers, reflecting the persisting relevance of "employers' generosity" in this sector (Cock, 1980; Kofes, 2001; Gorban, 2012). Both settings encourage work under a part-time regime, which can hinder or facilitate articulation with personal and family activities (Seifert and Messing, 2006). Some housecleaners are able to negotiate working times and locations with their employers; work volume and intensity then emerge as the major sources of concern and dispute, approximating them to their counterparts in commercial cleaning.

The comparative analysis of commercial cleaning and housecleaning contributes to illuminate the different organizational and social logics at work. The contexts of employment examined in this article reveal the same subaltern standing of these two occupational activities on the low-skill fringes of the service sector. Further benefits can be drawn from a comparative lens. Future research might pay attention to work performed by cleaners in yet other organizational contexts and examine how service interaction and dignity are negotiated there. It would also be relevant to deepen our understanding of the interconnection between the daily experience of cleaners and that of other categories of workers (e.g. managers, security officers, retail salespersons), questioning to what extent such articulation can protect of threaten cleaners regarding their feelings of dignity and their working conditions at large.

Note

1. These two occupational groups pertain to distinct classification schemes used in the labor force survey and overlap partially. Although data disaggregation could offer important evidence concerning the fields of activity under study, a finer level of detail requires a decrease in sample size and thus loss of reliability.

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