The changing nature of unskilled work in a context of austerity and organisational change: valuing work in the cleaning sector

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Summary

The privatisation and outsourcing of large parts of the public sector since the 1980s has had a huge impact in reshaping cleaning and related work (Clark, 2000; Crouch, 2011). Our previous research has also shown the degradation of the role of the cleaner in very specific ways. For instance the move towards sub-contracting, and an ongoing reduction in staff, means it has become a more isolated job. The sector has also seen the introduction of more systematic performance management and monitoring (McBride and Martínez Lucio, 2016).

So cleaners today are having to deal with growing limitations on resources, while at the same time working across and within more spaces. They also work in a context where the job itself, or the worker doing the job, is socially stigmatised and there is also an ongoing threat of violence.

Against this worrying backdrop, the question therefore is how do we come to value such work? And how do we come to appreciate its complexity more generally, especially at a time of austerity and major political uncertainty in the wake of the Covid-19 crisis.

Research

Our major argument is that, in relation to specific debates on questions of dignity, dirty work and the value of work, the existing literature recognises the worker, but tends less to recognise how people generally perceive and judge the skills and contribution of certain types of work, and how changes occur across various levels in relation to such work.

Using interviews with cleaners working across four different public sector organisations, in this paper we argue for the need to reconsider the changing nature of 'unskilled' workers. Our aim is to consider the complexity of cleaning and the processes of this work, and we then measure these through four 'dimensions' around which we structure our analysis and where we see the need for cleaners to use greater discretion in relation to an increasingly complex job.

Our research is primarily built on interviews with directly employed (not sub-contracted) cleaners, but we also interviewed other key stakeholders including managers, supervisors and trade union representatives. The latter group are particularly important to the study as they are not only now dealing with a more fragmented sector, but also with broader health and safety issues such as stigma and danger at work.

Our interviews were with two distinct categories of cleaners, those working inside and those outside. Internal cleaners, who are predominantly women, work in closed workspaces such as schools, universities, council buildings, kitchens, and laundries. External cleaners such as domestic refuse and refuse recycling collectors, street cleansing operatives, applied sweeper drivers, and litter pickers, are predominantly men.

To respect confidentiality, we refer to the case study organisations under the pseudonyms of Yorkshire University, Yorkshire Council, Lancashire Council, and Lancashire University.

Dimension one: The growing locational and spatial isolation of work - reflection and calculation as a part of the job

Within our case study organisations, pressures for saving and cost-cutting by management has meant that there have been constant attempts to reduce staff. A major consequence of this has been to ask staff to work with fewer facilities and less support.

This has also meant that there have been ongoing operational changes in terms of varying the parameters of work in spatial and task-related terms. In the main, many workers have found they are now working more in isolation.

In one example at Yorkshire University, a cleaner who had worked there for 16 years described how she used to work as part of a team, but due to cutbacks in staffing her work had intensified as she now individually cleans an area that used to be cleaned by a team. She is also now left to decide what she feels is a work priority, indicating a use of more discretion in the workplace - but due to negative reasons and causes.

This was also highlighted in our Lancashire case studies. For example, council cleaners had to choose themselves between what teaching rooms within a school they had to clean, and what to leave for another day. Within Lancashire University, office carpets were left according to a visual judgement that had to be made by the cleaner. Litter pickers at Yorkshire Council also highlighted the discretion that emerged due to the broader operational range of the work, in part due to the relative isolation.

Working day

One litter picker took us through the entire work day and his tasks, describing a much clearer sense of the solitary experience of these jobs:

"I start at half nine and I have a set round, like I do a block basically in the town centre, and then some of the streets surrounding that block, and that's my area. And within that area I'm responsible for all the bins, all the litter, broken glass, cigarette butts, all the stuff, basically keep it clean.

"First thing on a morning I walk around and I check all the bins to make sure they're not overflowing as people are going to start coming into town and having their breakfast and stuff like that. And then once I've done all the bins then I go back and get my dustpan and brush and I walk my round again sweeping up where it wants sweeping, then have my dinner, more or less the same in the afternoon. By the time I've done it twice that's about it, it's time to go home. Finish at half past five."

What is drawn out from these particular workers is a sense of increasing discretion which could be perceived, albeit superficially, as a further complexity of the work that undermines the use of the term 'unskilled'.

Furthermore, as Sayer (2011) argues, if an employer allows some discretion in the work, then employees' sense of dignity may be greater. However, our evidence demonstrated negative connotations in that an increase in their discretion also equated with working more intensively and working on their own instead of as part of a team.

This is something we argue needs recognition in the debates when constructing a framework of dignity for workers in such jobs. For, consequently, there are contradictory features to this supposed increasing discretion at work due to the context and consequences of such changes. Indeed, other interviewees began to draw out a growing sense of awareness of the context of the environment and the way it impacts on their work and decision-making.

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Dimension two: The context of fear, violence and threats in the job due to operational changes

The fact that many of the cleaners we interviewed were isolated at work meant that some were also at greater risk in terms of danger, fear, violence and threats.

One female cleaner demonstrated how unsocial hours of work can be ridden with fear. She did not drive and therefore needed to take the bus to work, but prior to taking the bus she had to take her baby son to her aunt's house for childcare at 5.30am.

She confessed that on dark mornings she was sometimes fearful and felt threatened walking to her aunt's and then to the bus stop alone so early in the morning. This was clearly an indirect threat in terms of a perception of danger which we feel is important to highlight as it clearly affected her, and this dimension to her work is something that is not often recognised or appreciated.

Other cleaners who worked alone explained how they had experienced more direct forms of threats due to their spatial exposure. Several street cleaners presented evidence of this in terms of negative reactions from members of the public. For instance one street cleaning operative told how he sometimes received verbal abuse while having his breakfast in a café and had learnt to bite his tongue: it appeared that they thought he was 'skiving' and that council workers 'had it easy' when he was actually taking an official break to have his breakfast after starting work at early hours. "You cannot say too much because it comes back on you," he recounted.

Physical abuse

Such negative reactions from the public extended to even physical abuse for some council workers, as described by one domestic refuse collector:

"Oh, you get abuse all the time, like. I've had stuff thrown at me, bags and everything. They come out and swear and shout at you and everything else and we get told (by management) 'if they start swearing at you or being abusive you just walk away'. So, I just walked away and they've thrown bags at me. I was even spat at recently, I couldn't believe it. It's just dirty isn't it, just not right, spitting. It carries disease, it's filthy. I did lose it a bit then, I must admit I did get a bit...I said "what are you doing?" and they said "f*** off you white b****". I couldn't believe it, I were like, are you mad?"

This example shows how cleaning workers in our study not only needed to exercise discretion with how to operationalise their work, but also how - in a locational and spatial context - they needed to be able to judge themselves how to deal with threatening situations.

Once again, there are contradictory elements evident here. In particular, the idea of having more discretion suggests a positive aspect of the work. However, negative views of the work are much more prevalent, particularly in the way other people value these workers and what they do as a job - and also how the worker feels 'valued', not just as a person or citizen to be treated equally and fairly (as in Sayer's analysis), but in terms of the challenges of the job they actually do.

Many of these workers perceived recent cuts to their operations as a contributory reason for an increase in negativity by the public and were having to respond to this in various ways. The failure to appreciate this and respond to this aspect means that dignity-oriented discourses and studies need to be supplemented by an awareness of how workers have to deal with these tensions.

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Dimension three: Austerity, cutbacks and worker responses in terms of discretion

During our interviews it became apparent that there were many issues around austerity and cuts creating negative social perceptions of the work of the external cleaners, not only between management and workers, but also between workers themselves.

This was mainly because of the extent of change, in terms of the need to use greater discretion, and the challenges brought on by working in more varied locations with greater spatial exposure. However, it was also due to reductions in rewards too. As one interviewee told us:

"With our pay, I mean we lost a lot of money…one minute we were worth £9 an hour, and the next minute we're worth £6 an hour. I mean, you do 20 years at a job and then somebody says 'I'm going to cut your pay by a third.' And then, you still do the same job. It's disheartening. Because you feel…I think you feel worthless."

These particular cuts had caused a lengthy dispute that had left some ill-feeling in the department. The resulting strike had also created a sense of workers not being valued, not only in the new challenges and roles they were facing in their work, but also in terms of the lack of remuneration and its declining levels.

There were also some different cutbacks by the council that affected these jobs. For instance, some of the refuse collection workers suggested that cuts elsewhere had also caused a rise in complaints by the public about the service, as well as negativity about their work. As one put it:

"…they keep cutting back, the council, keep wanting cutbacks, keep wanting to get rid of things, but you can't cut it anymore. They took two rounds off, maybe more… and we're getting more and more work, we're working longer hours, it's just, oh it's ridiculous. Less money and longer hours we've got to put in."

Discretion

The wider point here is that pay was being reduced at a time when management was actually relying on a greater discretion among workers in terms of judging not only what to do and how to deploy their labour, but also in terms of evaluating the risks to them within and beyond their spaces of work. As we have mentioned earlier, this included having to use discretion in terms of verbal and physical violence from the public.

Street cleaners also provided evidence to explain how greater discretion was needed in their job, not only in threatening or violent situations, but also when facing hazards to their health in the work they undertake, such as when handling needles (part of their work as a cleaner of the streets is to dispose of the needles left lying on the streets by drug users that are hazardous to the public and themselves). They also talked about the fact that they were sometimes expected to supervise colleagues. We asked one street cleaner if he had received any training in supervision, but he claimed that he had not been provided with any training or support.

What this shows is that such roles are expanding to the point where they include managerial dimensions in terms of decision-making and using greater levels of discretion in terms of thinking through the consequences of actions.

However, again, it is contradictory for the street cleaner to be given more responsibility of supervising another worker yet for this not to be valued remuneratively or by management. These are administrative features of their work which do not actually get recognised, even if self-management in job administration is extended to the worker themselves.

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Dimension four: Stigma and feeling of being undervalued in the job and the role of resilience

In terms of stigma, and its related factors of dirty work, unpleasant work and risk, internal cleaners in our study also provided negative evidence concerning the social perception of their work. This was not only from the public, but also from their work colleagues and themselves. For instance, cleaners at Yorkshire University mentioned the dirty work they endured and the unpleasantness of it:

"…the toilets, you'll go in and the way that they leave everything, oh my god do they do this at home? And I think sometimes it's just they don't take into consideration that somebody else has to come in and clean this. And then you have to go home and eat, you know. Sometimes when you go into the toilets they are absolutely disgusting….."

What this also demonstrates is how such cleaners feel unvalued in their job by others, and as a person. This cleaner claimed to still 'feel dirty' when she went home to eat. There was other evidence of feeling devalued as a person, in particular from other work colleagues' attitudes to their position as a cleaner. For instance, this comment came from one of the university cleaners we interviewed:

"Sometimes you see staff and you'll say hello and they just totally ignore you. If that is not looking down on me as a cleaner…because I'm sure if I was another lecturer or a student and said hello to you of course you'd say hello because it's the polite thing if somebody is passing. You know, if they don't hear fair enough, but they do hear, they will actually look in your face and just walk past."

A porter/cleaner at the university gave similar evidence about his job and his work colleagues, saying that sometimes they felt that people were looking down on them and would not even say good morning. Another cleaner explained how they were not consulted or informed as to any information pertaining to the university that might also affect them.

Appreciation

This sense of a lack of appreciation, and even new challenges, of their job also extended to other workers in the study. These were in relation to external cleaners, some of whom demonstrated that, despite verbal abuse and a lack of respect from some members of the public, they still had a sense of feeling dignified despite others' negative perception of their work.

Their ability to reflect and think through how they are perceived and rationalise it is important as part of their resilience and response, even to the point where they internalise the critiques of what they do as problematic or meaningless. But as our interviews show, this experience varies. What is clear, however, is that the way the job is viewed externally is not received in a passive and uncritical manner: this ability to reflect critically on one's declining or stigmatised status has also been picked up in various studies (see for example Savage, 2015). It further represents a different feature of the increasing discretion workers have to develop when coping with changes at work in a context of austerity.

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Key findings

Our study shows that cleaners face a number of unique challenges in their working lives. It picks up on how the environment is changing in terms of the growing isolation of work, the context of violence and threats at work, the question of austerity, cutbacks and reducing resources making their work harder, and the need for workers to use discretion in relation to limited resources.

Our research suggests that we need to further understand the contribution of the work of cleaning workers, normally considered to be 'unskilled' workers. We need to build on a set of debates on the nature of such work such as 'dignity at work' and 'dirty work' with a view to engaging and understanding the contradictions that emerge from the changes taking place in this work politically, economically and operationally.

Through focusing on the work of cleaners, in terms of the changes and the dynamics, our analysis demonstrates a clear recognition of the increasing complexity of that work in some cases, and the inherent contradictions that exist within it. We suggest this requires a lot more focus at the centre of the discussions, and not solely in social and economic terms. We have used the voice of these workers as a way of understanding how they reflect on certain aspects of their job and these changes. On how they realise the significance of their responses to the challenges met and the 'practical wisdom' or abilities they require.

The research also reveals that workers in these areas are fully aware that what they do puts them in a very difficult position vis-à-vis other co-workers and non-cleaning colleagues who do not always understand what it is they do, what the importance is, and what decisions cleaners have to make.

Focus

The question of appreciating and understanding so-called unskilled and increasingly intensified work needs, in our view, to now focus on three key areas.

*On a broadening and rethinking of what we mean by 'unskilled work' in a context of austerity and political uncertainty.

*It needs to appreciate the breadth of tasks and decisions workers are sometimes taking on, as much by default, given the pressures on management and organisations generally.

*We accept this does not herald a new and extensive moment of worker control in itself, but it does indicate that there are very real contradictory developments in the way workers have to cope, and indeed broaden, their engagement with work. There is increasingly a realisation of the manner in which different dimensions of work have to be responded to.

Further reading

This paper appears in a forthcoming issue of Capital & Class (to be published in 2020) and a PDF of an earlier version is available from the authors:
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Beyond Work Intensification – the contradictions and ironies of the changing nature of 'unskilled' work in a context of austerity and organisational change

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