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[Disaggregating and reaggregating work: Workers, management and the struggle over creating coherency and purpose in a context of work degradation.](#)

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# **Dis-aggregating and Re-aggregating Work: Workers, management and the struggle over creating coherency and purpose in a context of work degradation**

**Key words: Cleaning; Skills; Flexibility; Discretion; Control; Aggregation**

## **Introduction**

There is now an extensive literature on cleaners, pay and the changing conditions of work in that area of employment. Outsourcing, new employment practices, declining general terms and conditions, work intensification, issues in workplace learning and problems in terms of low pay have been a focus of much discussion (Wills, 2009; Munro 2012; Rainbird et al 2004; Gill-McClure and Seifert 2008). Core contemporary debates now mainly address living wage issues, general union representation and rights with an increasing focus on the organising debate and migrant workers (see Tapia and Turner, 2013; Wills et.al, 2009 & 2010).

This paper intends to build on this work by providing a closer engagement with the way degradation is taking place around specific categories of unskilled workers in the cleaning sector, in particular in local government. These changes are an outcome of the changing boundaries and structures of the work itself – hence our use of the term *dis-aggregation*. The paper also engages with debates on flexibility, discretion and control in a range of labour market studies and the sociology of work, arguing that it is not just a case of increasing fragmentation and employer enforced flexibility, or declining discretion, or new forms of discretion at work, but of the way tasks and aspects of work are contextualised in terms of work spaces and combined in competing ways (Gallie et al, 1998; Grimshaw et al, 2006; Rubery et al 2015).

Therefore, the paper focuses on management responses to these developments and outcomes, and its attempts to reconstruct (*re-aggregate*) the nature of such work and create new forms of identity and activities which are meant to enhance the levels of stability and sustainability at work and in operational processes. This management conundrum, which is the realisation of the outcome of the negative changes the organisations and their workforce face as a consequence of such changes, means that management responses need to deal with a range of job related, skills oriented, worker learning, and representation issues. This raises quite significant issues in terms of skills development and labour control in what are deemed to be unskilled sectors of work. Furthermore, they are still the subject of constant intervention in attempts to sustain a semblance of workplace order and regularity. Hence after discussing some relevant literature, the paper will deal with the way this work is being dis-aggregated, followed by a section on the manner in which management respond to the negative aspects of these developments (partly the outcome of their own strategies) through what we call re-aggregation. It is our contention that we need to be aware of the binaries that straddle some debates in terms of discretion or control, or flexibility versus integrated work, as workers and management are responding through combining and contextualising the tasks of work in competing ways in response to broader changes.

### **Literature Review: The dis-aggregation of cleaning work in a neo-liberal context.**

The impacts of successive UK Governments' neo-liberal policy agendas, mainly in terms of privatisation and outsourcing since the 1980s, have made a huge impact in reshaping cleaning and related work in public services. With the major aim being to encourage an organisational model used in private sector companies through introducing competitive pressure to introduce positive changes to the organisation and management of public services (see Colling 1993 on public sector and MacKenzie 2000 on privatised utilities), there have been

negative effects on the nature of cleaning and related work. In a series of studies of cleaning work in the public sector for over 30 years, Munro (2012) charted the impact of these macro level policy changes on the quality of this work. She demonstrated how cleaning work now exhibits many features associated with what are referred to as 'bad jobs' with "...low pay, highly rationalised work systems, with little individual autonomy, high levels of work intensity with tight supervision, unsocial hours, lack of career progression and lack of training opportunities" (ibid: 176). She argues that, although the tasks of the work have altered little over the last 30 years, it is mainly the organisation of this work that has changed. Even where these services have remained in-house, managers have still reorganised work mainly through breaking down demarcation lines between different tasks and combining previously gendered jobs such as portering and cleaning (Munro et. al. 2000).

Gill-McClure and Seifert's (2008) longitudinal study also examines the impact of organisational change through public policy initiatives of 'modernisation', including labour processes of cleaners in local governments. They demonstrate how task fragmentation and tighter management controls over each step of the labour process all led to these jobs becoming degraded, and having a negative impact on worker morale with job satisfaction virtually disappearing, and a certain amount of goodwill withdrawn as the work intensified. This was despite management, worker and union resistance to the changes in their study. Yet, such 'modernisation programmes' were supposedly introduced to 'improve' public services and for them to become 'model employers'.

Indeed, Cox et al (2008) investigated the possibilities, and constraints against, public sector attempts to become such a 'model employer'. This was through a study of the NHS and 'Agenda for Change' and 'Skills Escalator' initiatives which were introduced to improve pay rates and skills development for lower skilled workers including cleaners. Their data shows that, despite opportunities offered to positively improve pay and skills development for these

workers, there were significant obstacles remaining for cleaners due to the fragmentation of organisational structures (see also Marchington et.al 2005 and Grimshaw et al 2006 on blurring organisational boundaries and the fragmentation of work) and differences in management effort and support. They claim that a major problem was that management were left with a complicated set of conflicting pressures to accommodate the changes.

However, there are other macro policies, such as those that support training and development that offer more positive routes for cleaners in terms of enhancing their prospects of improving job quality, especially through the learning agenda. Munro (2012) points to workplace learning initiatives such as *Return to Learn* that she suggests have contributed to greater confidence and self worth of cleaners, as well as a willingness to work more autonomously. In this respect, the work of Munro points to an important feature for our argument which is the way negative changes are responded to and engaged with by management. Furthermore, Herod and Aguiar (2006) refer to this increased use of 'learning' as the attempted 'professionalisation' of cleaning work in general. They note how outsourced cleaning work, and the process of tendering, creates more competition as external workers and managers compete for continued work, whilst being forced to lower wages to be more competitive. They state that due to this competition "...whereas cleaning has long been taken to be fairly unskilled work, there has been a noticeable move recently to "professionalise" the industry... what may once have been considered to be the art of cleaning is increasingly being viewed by many as a science" (ibid.429). For example , cleaners in the UK can now secure training and receive certificates through the British Institute of Cleaning Science<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, a system of rules provided by the International Organization for Standards (ISO) have led to some companies attempting to present an aura of professionalism by seeking, for example, ISO 9000 compliance. Hence, this pressure to 'professionalise' the industry has led to a different

type of regulation which seems to counter or stand alongside processes of disorganisation in a contradictory manner.

However, there have also been problems with such learning initiatives, particularly in terms of how they have been implemented by management in the workplace. Studies have shown how senior management express concerns about the cost efficiency of introducing learning programmes such as *Return to Learn* or *National Vocational Qualifications* for unskilled workers (Munro et al 2000:519). Furthermore, a central managerial motivation for introducing learning programmes has seen to be to primarily ‘improve efficiency and quality of service’ or relate it to advancing equal opportunities in the workplace, rather than attempts to improve the working lives of these workers. Indeed, Rainbird and Munro (2003:43) argue that many workers continue to experience multiple barriers to their participation in workplace learning. Munro’s (2012) recent assessment of all of these factors affecting cleaners is that it is actually the problems with the *organisation* of this type of work that really needs to be addressed for things to truly change.

Yet this is where serious problems also lie as there are contradictions and tensions in the conundrum between worker autonomy and management control in the organisation of work in the services sector. In key work on the restructuring of employment, Gallie et al (1998) argue that the irony in Britain is that, whilst control systems have tended to increase, they have gone alongside a curious increase in task discretion as well. This development suggests that there are contradictory relations (not zero-sum relations) between control and discretion. This is essential because otherwise we are left with a sense that decentralisation, outsourcing and change, inevitably have very specific or negative impacts: in fact what is suggested (and what we build on) is the fact that relations are more complex, especially in the light of ongoing public sector change and reduction in resources. Rubery (2015) suggests that therefore we need to look at different developments and changes such as feminisation,

flexibilisation, fragmentation and financialisation in shaping such outcomes. She asserts that while these four dimensions of change characterise the outcome of change, there are strong political imperatives underpinning this that are fundamentally destructive as opposed to being reconstructive in terms of de-regulation, de-collectivisation and the de-politicisation of the employment relationship (p641). Yet whilst we are in agreement with this, we feel there is also a need to consider where the positions and responses of management rests in all this and how they and others deal with the contradictory pressures that are picked up and responded to on the ground which is also the focus of this paper. Indeed, MacKenzie (2000 and 2002) argues, in the case of outsourcing and telecommunications, that management has to respond to such changes by establishing quality control systems and new forms of monitoring as well as labour market accreditation. Forde and MacKenzie (2010) have pointed to the varied outcomes of such forms of decentralisation and how decentralisation may be mediated in different ways: these can lead to different forms of employer responses in terms of competing visions of, and practices on, social inclusion and the good employer (see also MacKenzie and Forde, 2009) and this is an insight we build on. Alongside these organisational and HRM dimensions, there is a need to look at these more complex interplays with a view to introducing the question of task and control development in terms of the level of the labour process, for these outcomes are contradictory as Gallie et al (1998) also point out. This is also highlighted in this particular paper. In effect, flexibility and rigidities are combined in complex ways (Martínez Lucio et al. 2000) and what is more, changes to work organisation in the form of greater flexibilities and reductions in discretion need to be understood in relation to each other and specific ways in which work is changing.

Hence, our interpretation of 'dis-aggregation' differs to the notion of fragmentation identified above, as we see more complex developments in terms of how aspects of work and tasks are separated or combined, intentionally or unintentionally, by workers and managers in different

ways. It is not just whether work is fragmented or not, or whether it is a case of discretion of control: but how tasks get combined in various ways in a context of change and declining resources. Hence we prefer to use the terms dis-aggregation and re-aggregation in relation to aspects of work as changes are piecemeal and often occurring along different dimensions in different ways.

Additionally, we note that the organisational and operational risks to management bring new sets of issues. Hence, the impact of change has had an uneven effect across the workforce and the notion of such jobs having ever been ‘good’ – something rarely discussed in various circles, even critical ones – is something which also needs to be understood as workers reflect back, not just on better conditions, but a clearer sense of identity and purpose, and employment security. Hence, the process of ‘dis-aggregation’ – as we define it in this paper and which instils the nature of the changes they are facing - has much wider effects on workers also in terms of their spaces and purpose of work: and these can in turn prompt a series of management responses as we will later demonstrate.

This paper therefore tries to look at the different ways organisations have ‘responded’ to the nature of change and the ongoing degradation of the work of cleaners, through a series of responses at the workplace level. Clearly, we also need to understand how management are continuing to respond to these changes. The paper demonstrates how management have begun to respond - albeit for various reasons - by attempting to change the language of skills work, the boundaries between jobs and between tasks, and in championing (in rhetoric at least) notions of social inclusion. These three latter dimensions form the basis of the second part of the empirical section where we discuss management responses. The first section focuses on the way dis-aggregation has occurred. The paper therefore, aims to contribute to the discussions by using these notions of dis-aggregation and re-aggregation as in the need to see specific changes in terms of tasks in relation to each other and also how even when



discretion appears to be increasing, these are driven by a logic of control and fragmentation. This in turn leads us to a further contribution concerning how this all requires management to create strategies of re-aggregation that sustain a supposed purpose and support to the way workers are now engaged in terms of their more fragmented tasks.

## **Background and Research Methods**

The study is an embedded case study with multiple units of analysis. The context is the public sector, with the multiple units of analysis being mainly different types of public sector organisations centring on two regions - Yorkshire and Lancashire. Whilst the potential limitations of the generalisation of the data are recognised - as this is a study of cleaning workers from 4 public sector unionised organisations in the North of the UK – the findings will arguably have a broader applicability as there is already an extensive literature on the role of cleaners in the UK public sector with which to make comparisons, and also contribute to, that research already undertaken. The organisations included in the study will be referred to as Yorkshire University, Yorkshire Council, Lancashire Council and Lancashire University in acknowledgement of confidentiality. As this was a study of cleaning workers, representatives of all the major stakeholder groups were interviewed to collate rich detailed information and draw on the role and nature of their job and the social meaning of their work. One of the major intentions of this research was to use the ‘voices’ of the accounts of individuals directly involved in this work sector, giving prominence to the words, interpretations and experiences of the respondents. Therefore, others included in this study were managers and supervisors who could provide a broader view of company policies, history and accounts of how the jobs are managed. The trade unions and their representatives of the workers in the area of cleaning - Unison and the GMB - were also part of the study.

In terms of the workers in the cleaning sector, we had two distinct categories of cleaners. Firstly, those cleaning in workspaces, such as university cleaners, council cleaners, laundry cleaners and school and central processing unit kitchen cleaners. These were predominantly female with 10 females and 4 males interviewed. We also had a second category of cleaner typically those who maintain cleanliness in towns and cities such as domestic refuse collectors, refuse recycling collectors, street cleansing operatives, applied sweeper drivers and litter pickers. These were all male and we interviewed 11 individuals.

Field research was undertaken from 2012 to 2013 using a qualitative inductive case study approach. The primary data collected was mainly based on standardised open ended interviews that lasted on average an hour. In all, 47 face to face interviews were undertaken with 7 union officials, 3 union representatives, 12 managers (in HR, Organisational Development, Ancillary Services) and 25 workers from differing specific categories across the cleaning sector. The interviews were then subjected to a manual thematic analysis to identify general themes. This made it possible to establish a chronology of significant issues relevant to our argument. In the first instance were those that linked well with the literature discussed above such as subcontracting of work, job intensification, skills training, the good employer and related management initiatives, employment relations such as learning and development and increases in performance management. Yet our findings also demonstrated that these themes also had contradictory effects on other issues - job autonomy, worker isolation, discretion, workplace control and performance management. All of these combined had a particular effect on the management of these workers in what we refer to as the 'dis-aggregation' and re-aggregation' of work. This was underpinned by our generic research question which concerns how work is being changed and reorganised within the workplace for workers such as cleaners and the effects for them and the organisation and management. This informed a second and broad research question about how these developments and

processes of change – which we eventually labelled dis-aggregation – are responded to by management and how there are attempts to overcome them. The findings led us to look at the problematic yet curious ways this was done through a particular strategy of re-aggregation. In effect, we wanted to study the relational issues across a range of tasks and roles and this informed our more broader question of how the meanings of work and change were engaged with by workers and in particular management.

### **The Dis-aggregation and ‘Re-aggregation’ of Work: the contradictory dynamics of control**

The research pointed to a set of issues which can be placed under the broad label of dis-aggregation. There are various ways in which cleaning work in dedicated workplaces, such as schools or in the public as in street cleaning, have been steadily changed over the past few years. Four dimensions to these changes were observable across the cases albeit in different ways. Firstly, as discussed in the literature review, there has been a move towards subcontracting or competitive tendering which has had an effect on the way the organisational unit, in terms of the employer, has been developed even when contracts are kept in house in the public sector. Second, there has been an ongoing reduction in staff which has led to new forms of work whereby cleaning is reduced even with a system of contract specifications. Thirdly, this has led to greater isolation within places of work and less staffing to the point where it has become a more isolated job within a range of different workplaces and work spaces. Fourth, there has been more systematic performance management and monitoring which has led to specific responses from cleaners in the way they prioritise work. To this extent, the financialisation of organisations has led to four tiers, or types of change, from the nature of the operational unit, through to the nature of the ‘human resource’ and their resourcing, through to the greater spatial isolation of the worker due to such strategies

and resource reductions, and then greater levels of individual monitoring at the individual level.

### **The Dis-aggregation of Work**

Many of the cases we looked at were still maintained in-house as cleaning operations (in one case they had outsourced but returned the service to direct public control after a significant decline in the quality of services). However the in-house operations were increasingly having to compete and exhibit aspects of competitiveness and efficiency in the context of greater pressures to outsource. All the cases we looked at were internal sub-sections of the overall employer, but were having to continue to extoll features of the 'good employer' legacy common (albeit less so) in the public sector, regardless of the financial pressures and the escalating problems of increasing demands from quality oriented scrutiny.

### ***Staff reduction and the consequence for work***

Secondly, within these organisations there have been constant attempts to reduce staff although the extent of restructuring has been limited. The pressures for saving have meant that there have been ongoing operational changes in terms of changing the parameters of work in spatial and task related terms. The consequence of this was the concerted move to ask staff to work with less facilities and less support. This was seen as an inevitable outcome of cost cutting and led to successive operational changes. In Lancashire Council, cleaners had to choose between what teaching rooms within a school they had to clean and what to leave for another day. They were asked to quickly evaluate the state of various spaces and then to prioritise certain aspects. Within Lancashire University, office carpets were left according to a visual judgement that had to be made by the cleaner and which was then backed up by visits to the sites by line managers over a period of time. In Yorkshire University, one cleaner who

had worked there for 16 years described how she was basically left to decide what she felt was a priority due to the fact her work had intensified,

...at the moment currently I'm doing two buildings. I've got two and a half hours to do those whole two buildings. They've got a list of what you're supposed to do every day but I'd much rather do my thing, so if I come in one day and I'm not feeling well I don't have to go crazy. If you get a different supervisor in and they decided they want it done another way, they don't understand that you've been doing it so long you know...but it just depends on who is supervising you.

The street cleaners at Yorkshire Council also explained how they were left to decide how to organise their work,

They (management) don't tell you where to start, you're pretty much to your own devices, it's how you want to work it out for yourself. You've got control, pretty much. And to be fair they do leave it to your own devices.

The fact is that job intensification in terms of expanding the work areas and tasks of cleaners was actually linked to a greater reliance on them having an ambivalent impact on the autonomy of their work.

### ***Staff preparation and engagement***

Even with the development of BICS training for many of these workers, and the use of BICS certificates to enhance the profile of cleaning workers – which prescribed certain forms of working and procedures – the workforce in one case performed around these procedures, continuing to work in an autonomous manner, in part due to the need to make strategic

choices about how their work was done in a context of declining organisational support. As two of the cleaners clearly described,

Now they do that BICS thing. I thought it was a waste of time. Because if you do everything that they expect you to do you'll never get the job done. They expect you to soak your toilets and go back to your toilets and stuff like that, and you can't do it. When you're wiping down and stuff you don't have time to be leaving from one thing to go to another.

She got a BICS certificate but said "I wasn't bothered". She also did not want to go to the awards ceremony and said, "I would rather that they just sent them to us". Then she pointed out that they were "a waste of time" for most of the cleaners.

### ***Space and isolation at work***

The main problem emerging from these new forms of operational changes was a greater sense of workplace isolation in terms of space and time. In the schools we found that cleaners were normally working either on their own or were working in much smaller teams. There was a greater time committed to cleaning beyond out of normal hours and this pattern of work was increasing throughout most of the cases. In Yorkshire University, all of the cleaners explained that they worked alone but one interview also illustrated how some struggled with the unsociable hours and pattern of work time,

Since I had my child, I can't do mornings anymore and have changed to evenings. Because I'm a single parent and I don't have anybody to look after my child in the morning. I can't leave home at 6.30 in the morning and leave him in bed when I come to work and I have to take him to school, but the evening is fine because of

my aunt. I came back to work when he was nine months old and I used to have to take him to my aunt's, get up in the morning and take him out of the house at five o'clock because I don't drive, and drop him at my aunt's who lives a mile away, and I did that for nearly a year and a half. In the winter, snow outside, and I'm taking my baby out so I can come back and work here, to come and work for two and a half hours.

Other interviewees at Yorkshire Council also explained how they worked alone, as a litter picker described,

Sometimes I don't see my supervisor till five o'clock at night. If I haven't rung in sick they know I'm here.

Within this context, management became alert to the fact they were having to rely on the discretion of the workforce in terms of judging what to do and how to deploy their labour. This led to a realisation that there was a greater level of discretion emerging within the workplace as a consequence of the fundamental changes to resourcing. Some of the refuse collectors stated,

They took two rounds off, maybe more... and we're getting more work 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.

Yet they had to use their own discretion when out on their job to ensure the same job was finished on time.

### ***Performance and control***

Despite this discussion thus far appearing to focus on a perceived rise of 'autonomy' of a lot of work, within this context we can also see a greater move to performance management and

more detailed inspection of work routines. However, this has been limited by the extent of change and, due to the increasing physical distance from management, there have been greater forms of informal inspection as explained by a refuse collector in Yorkshire Council,

You don't have to do it (the job) the same way, we don't get timed, but we time ourselves, so we know how long it takes to do a certain area. There's obviously also the timesheets and stuff to do...

This has created a peculiar situation where cleaners have to ensure that they formally or informally record what they have done or are able to recount what they have done, and justify it. The interviews brought out a growing awareness of being evaluated, but at the same time this required a greater awareness of the demands of monitoring and the need for clearly established and reliable routines of work within constrained resources. The pressure fell often on the supervisors to decode and make choices in relation to performance measures, but it also required a dialogue with local staff and greater comprehension of these developments. One of the litter pickers explained how he understood the monitoring as their breaks being sometimes monitored,

He (the manager) drives around about dinnertime, a driver coordinator will pick him up and he'll just have a drive round... they'll park up and watch them, what time they go in the café and what time they go out.

The manager explained what his understanding of this monitoring entailed and referred to it as 'test and inspect' ensuring they have the correct protective workwear (PPE) and following the job procedures correctly,

So how do I do my test and inspect, it's quite simple really, it's Monday morning, I'm driving up Church Bank and Kevin's at a litter bin and he's working, I can see he's got his PPE on, I pull up, I say right, Kevin, just carry on, normal procedure, he'll get the litter bin out correctly, so he's adhering to the work rules and regulations. He's putting



the bin on the floor, he's taking the bag out, he's tying it up, he's putting it to one side, he puts another bag in the inner sleeve, puts it back in the bin, locks the bin up, so he's achieved that...I do that with every one of them every month.

These features have various consequences for the experience of the work. Our research showed people having to deal with different management mind-sets over recent years as costing and different forms of control over the management of labour are developed. The basic link with the place of work as an entity is distant as the relation is more contractual and the responsibilities more systematically outlined through the notion of tasks and their clear measurable status. Finally, the measurement of the work is increasingly located in terms of individual tasks and not the organiser and executor of the task. To this extent there is a perceptible experience of *re-aggregation* but one defined in a particular manner. One could argue this was a process of de-skilling but we would argue that the process of change is as much about the way the changing organisational context and workplace environment become uncoupled in various ways.

### **The Re-aggregation of Work: Management Responses to deterioration and fragmentation**

These new control strategies may appear to be deliberate strategies of control by management which rethink the way the individual worker is managed and 'deployed', but they represent only one dimension of the experience of those we interviewed. For example, many line and middle management interviewees were aware that the work had become more difficult. In addition, they had increasingly relied on more vulnerable workers, who appeared more amenable to the new forms of work, partly out of necessity. As one manager explained,

We have workers with special needs...With the changes in finances and the cut backs we had a complete change at work – a complete restructure so it were

deemed that they were going to come to this department and they have come on board and I work closely with the NHS support staff looking after them...

The amenability of such groups of workers did not mean an immediate ability to realise or gain knowledge on some of the challenges of the work especially in the shorter term. The increasing realisation that work was being segmented meant that the organisations leading cleaning operations needed to address a range of key issues. The first was that the lack of resources required more decision making capacity by workers – both vulnerable and others - in the field and a greater level of discretion in terms of deciding what tasks to prioritise. This would be whether a classroom was cleaned or a section of the street. Furthermore, the increasing routine-like nature of some aspects of cleaning meant that they had to work through more detailed cleaning plans with precise costs linked to them as well. This meant that the work, whilst becoming ‘de-skilled’ in some cases, was requiring greater discretion and choice.

This final point can be only be understood in terms of previous experiences and alternative ways in which a cleaner’s identity was linked to the manner in which they related to the broader organisational context and community of work. For example, in local schools, cleaners had a more stable relation with the management and staff, even being able to be vigilant in terms of pupil needs during school cleaning. There was a more personalised relation which meant that emerging demands from day to day routines were responded to. This meant that cleaners formed part of the established community of workers. In Lancashire University, the cleaners were able to engage staff and discuss with them specific requirements especially during the transition moment when cleaning began just before the end of the working day, yet this was becoming unsettled by the deployment of agency staff and staff across different parts of the university.

### *Learning and the relinking of tasks through a new language of development*

Given these dilemmas and realisations, management and organisations at various levels and in different ways, had to start rethinking, and linking in new ways, the segments of the work they were overseeing. The problem was one of creating work which was able to retain a semblance of stability in terms of recruitment, retention and sustainability. Motives within management varied, yet a realisation that a certain amount of cognitive understanding was required to execute the kinds of choices necessary, in terms of de-selecting tasks, was clear. This contributed to an interest in the development of a Learning Agreement which was apparent in the case of Yorkshire Council where work primarily with the GMB trade union, and also with UNISON, had proceeded in developing a series of courses and learning strategies directed at a range of lower skilled workers including cleaners. The GMB shop steward explained how this was initiated,

I took my ULR qualifications, covered a survey of the shop floor, identified people's needs. And, what was identified was managers were not acting on people's appraisals, so we started getting into dialogue with HR to ensure people's qualifications and their needs were being met. It started as just basics covering the shop floor, asking each individual what they would like to do, and what came out was we had a list of candidates that wanted to do English, Maths and IT classes. Now, 245 people have got certificates, that's people on our own shop floor, but we also gave the invitation out to the schools and people from the schools got in touch with us and said, can we come and get English, maths and IT skills?

Management also found the learning agreement to be useful,

We have about 1,800 staff here. About 1,200 or so of those work within catering, cleaning, building support services, and they come in with zero qualifications... So people come in from a zero qualification background and they've survived into adulthood, had their kids and all sorts of things, brought up families without going into any education and training, and development is seen as an option. When we did our first pilot on literacy and numeracy, when we went through the appraisal scheme for information, it flagged up saying 16 people could've come forward for literacy and numeracy courses. But the unions presented us with a completely different picture with 40 odd people that would benefit from it. And because the people were more prone to go to a shop floor union rep and disclose that they would need literacy and numeracy, it's fair enough, I'm alright, they don't want to disclose that.

This development was eventually clearly well received and this conforms to some of the more positive readings of the possibilities of the learning agenda as developed through various joint forms of engagement between trade unions and management (see Rainbird and Stuart, 2012). However the management motives for such development were not solely linked to the personal development of individual staff, or the enhancing and deepening of a mutual gains agenda with trade unions. There was a serious operational challenge emerging from the ongoing changes in the nature of work, the levels of risks being taken and the need to create an acceptance and understanding of the pre-requisites of performance measurement and greater scrutiny of the work being done. In this respect, the developmental and judgemental dimensions of work and management were balanced in a curiously functional manner.

*Re-aligning and re-combining jobs and tasks*

A second strategy related to the way different tasks and even jobs were linked. One of the challenges has been with a declining level of income and the greater segmentation of tasks – contextualised by the drive of greater savings - which has required innovative ways to repackage tasks and jobs. This has meant creating new types of hybrids which were visible in various locations we studied. In the Lancashire and Yorkshire Universities, there was an attempt to tie cleaning jobs with portering tasks getting those associated with the latter to accept within a specific department a unification of their work with a series of different tasks. This required a new type of position which would deal with security and general cleaning agendas. A new set of terms were developed and new grade. New uniforms were issued with ‘Cleaning and portering staff’ embroidered on each top indicating how management were engaging with issues of identity. However, one female cleaner demonstrated how these jobs were still ‘gendered’ with certain tasks still seen as ‘male’.

They offer first aid training and stuff to the porters (all male). And because there's only three of us (all female cleaners) working at the moment I asked if I could do the first aid course. They said no. Because security is here and security is already first aid trained. But I'm working with two Asian ladies and if it's a male on they might not feel comfortable with getting first aid from them you know?

Within the Lancashire local authority there was an attempt which developed beyond the pilot scheme that saw cleaning jobs merge with specific tasks from the catering area within schools. The ability to piece or link together so called low skilled jobs and tasks, and widen the remit of work in terms of these tasks, meant that part time jobs could move into a full time mode (this was one of the justifications) and that the work linked to a more relatively broader set of activities. It also facilitated a greater pool of employees who could work in different areas and re-construct a semblance of a stable internal labour market.

### *Diversity and the championing of inclusion practices*

This was also a growing priority for the organisations, given also the challenge of welfare reforms since 2010 which have lowered the level of social benefit that many of their workers received from the state, and it was explicitly seen as a major challenge in gaining access to staff and generating a sustainable supply of labour. Whilst some could argue that such erosions in benefits would make employment more attractive, nevertheless it also means that jobs have to be able to be integrated, accessible and consist of more than a few hours of cleaning at anti-social times of the day. Hence the drivers for re-aggregating work for these ‘better’ employers were both social and economic – and expedient in nature. This brought a social dimension to employment in two forms. The first was the employment of individuals with intellectual learning disabilities who could be supported by providing them with a job which was in theory not intellectually challenging and can provide a degree of social support. This was present mainly in Yorkshire Council. This aspect of cleaning and similar jobs is rarely studied, but in our research we noticed how in various previous locations, and in those we studied, there was an inclusive agenda towards such categories of workers.

There were a small group of workers with intellectual learning disabilities at Yorkshire Council and they all worked as litter pickers with an NHS supporter checking their well being at work every three months. When queried as to their training for this work we were informed by the manager,

They all went through the normal works procedures that the Council have. They go through all the risk assessments, but we don't do that. The NHS support workers do

that. We give them the works procedures and et cetera, and they go through it with them.

He also commented upon how the NHS supporters ensure that these workers are being treated well at work, while the council provides other opportunities for training,

They all took NVQs and all passed their NVQ in maths, basic street cleansing issues, and English and they've all just recently ascertained level two in maths and English in NVQ, which they've got their certificates and they're all there with their pearly white teeth, and they've got the pay that goes with it, and they're all buzzing and they're all going home and saying (manager's name) has done this for us. Well, their pay went up, I think it went up something like about, I don't know, 60p, 70p an hour.

This manager also explained how these workers sometimes blurred the boundaries between work and non-work and asked if the manager would visit their external care centres to see their 'other' work,

They want me to go here and go there with them, and it's hard really...but Robert, because on a Thursday he doesn't work, he has his outreach work and he's up at the local community centre, and they do all sorts of crafts and stuff. And he wanted me to go up and see his work and see his carer.

In addition, and secondly, Lancashire University used an independent and socially oriented employment agency as a first step to integrate employees from a particularly extreme disadvantaged background and from minority ethnic and refugee backgrounds. This resonates with findings about alternative uses and possibilities of employment agencies in relation to minority ethnic communities (Forde, et al 2010).

**Conclusion: between the dis-aggregation and re-aggregation of work**

Building on various studies on the work of marginalised workers, in a context of organisational decentralisation and change, the paper attempts to point to some of the contradictory developments in cleaning work. The debates on such a subject are normally focused on the way conditions are deteriorating and fragmenting as outlined in our literature review (for example Rubery 2015, Grimshaw et al 2006): some debates function on the basis of a set of binaries concerning the balance between control and discretion, as well as the extent of workplace flexibility (Gallie et al, 1998). Our contribution builds on these insights but in addition it also focuses on the ironies of such organisational changes for organisations themselves.

For example, we argue that whilst key organisational changes, the increasing lack of resources and financial pressures (see Rubery 2015), have led to workers being more isolated at work, and, ironically, even if formally there is an increase in the level of management control, they are having to use their discretion much more in such a context, with regards to strategic decisions and choices about their jobs, as well as the tasks and their own position in relation to them. Therefore, growing dangers of this type of work and increasing disconnections in terms of identity, spatial relations, and operational processes, has had the curious effect of putting the worker in a critical position.

The growing awareness and costs of these developments within organisations, and the risks they pose to them let alone their workers, means that there have, in some cases, been a series of management and employer responses through what could be labelled a ‘re-aggregating’ of work and its constituent elements such as the development of a new learning agenda which has been fairly positively received by unions (Munro et al 2000; Rainbird and Munro 2003). Another response has been to link different tasks together and create new hybrid jobs that



allow for more settled working time patterns and new forms of broader work identity. In such cases, the objective is to create more meaningful work, a new language of skills and identity, as management attempt to address – even if symbolically – the negative features of disaggregation experienced at work.

Even as we see a downward shift in so-called ‘unskilled work’ what is significant here is that there remains complex interfaces between management and workers in terms of *constant* struggles over identity and control. The very nature of workplace autonomy and relations is the subject of ongoing responses. As organisations undermine the traditional linkages between workplace and worker, and as they seek to make savings, the worker is increasingly placed in a position where their discretion becomes more important and where they have to make significant personal and organisational decisions in what are challenging contexts. This in turn requires some assistance in terms of skills, abilities and support.

The broadening of tasks and rethinking of boundaries between what were different jobs as well, has led to a growing corporatisation of identity and this was clearly visible in some of the cases. The move to a common uniform for catering and cleaning staff and new forms of work classifications, linked to the joining of different tasks, represented a shift to a new form of worker identity based on the sub-organisation dealing with such different areas as portering, cleaning, and catering – as well as aspects of maintenance. However, it was also an attempt to create a semblance of identification which – in theory – we meant to enhance the expectations and aspirations of workers, allowing for them to see themselves as being flexible across the different aspects of the tasks and activities they were being asked to deal with. This re-aggregation process was thus part of a general push towards re-establishing to some extent internal structures that supposedly militated against some of the negative aspects

of the job and their changes by focusing on the meaning, purpose and value from alternative strategies, which as we have seen in terms of the above, are attempts at times to redefine problems that emerge from the changes although how authentic they are is open to speculation.

For example, they appear to be symbolic in terms of focusing on basic skills, certification and uniforms: although these symbolical features are a new terrain of struggle, as they represent the fundamental representation and re-representation of this type of work in a context where it is being undervalued and undermined by organisational changes and financialisation. What is more, the idea that ‘autonomy’ or discretion at work is being eroded is not clear: instead it is being redefined in ways that require a closer attention to the experience of work and the differing abilities and skills, and the use of worker discretion that such work now require as there are uneven experiences of change across different aspects of work and in terms of management responses to it. Central to these are rhetorical attempts at re-mobilising and reconfiguring the notion of the ‘good employer’ as the consequences of change are realised.

So whilst others have pointed to new and more direct forms of control at work, these changes are themselves configured and even undermined by worker isolation from supervisors and increasing pressures to make decisions about work related activities in an informal and independent manner. Much of the imperative for management led re-aggregation is driven by a need to respond to these problems and maintain control and minimise risks: although many managers interviewed argued it was also about trying to create some semblance of coherency within the jobs due to the work being increasingly less attractive, more isolated and more fragmented. Hence, the very tension between control and discretion, and the impact of cost reductions and organisational change, are responded to in broader and more complex ways:

this is central to our contribution that argues that the tensions between control and discretion, flexibility and rigidity, play themselves out in highly nuanced ways across very specific aspects of the employment relation and spaces of work. For this reason we need to look at how strategies across time attempt to link particular tasks and features of work together: in some ways and more generally rigidities and flexibilities combine in curious ways (Martinez Lucio et al. 2000).

These responses by various organisations and their management bring to the fore the contested nature of such forms of work and how they are changing. They suggest that key elements of the employment relation are subject to various forms of engagement and contestation as such forms of work become ever more exposed. In an ironic way, management – especially HR managers and line managers - are themselves caught by the broader changes affecting their workforce and their organisation, such as fragmentation, and the consequences of these developments. This means we need to look at how work is struggled over in terms of its component parts and its representation in a way that shows the fundamental antagonisms, not solely between workers and managers, but between intentions and the outcomes as they are responded to in order to curtail – or contain and re-represent - further degradation and change for workers and for organisations. In policy terms it means that in a greater context of work degradation and change, organisations are having to address very serious issues of job boundaries, the spatial contexts of work and the skills required to do them. Re-building the ‘good employer’ as MacKenzie and Forde (2009) point out is retuning as an imperative albeit not always a consistent reality and mainly a rhetorical one. And if anything the reconstruction of meaningful work needs to become much more significant within organisational agendas alongside discussions about pay and general working conditions.

## **Endnotes**

1. The British Institute of Cleaning Science is a private institute with individual and corporate members established in the UK since 1961 setting skills standards and frameworks which are important reference points for training. The aim was to set an industry set of standards and commitments to the management and work of cleaning. At the heart of much of the BICS related activity is an agenda to raise standards in – and recognition of – cleaning work within society. Accreditation of work and workers in this area is an important dimension of its objectives.

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