Working conditions in interactive (service) work

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Interactive (service) work: a heterogenous field of research

Introduction

- Work that involves social interactions with other people (mostly customers, clients, patients, students, etc.)

- 41% of employees in the EU work in direct interaction with service recipients; 61% of them are women (Eurofound 2020)

- Interactive (service) work (ISW) often involves challenging working conditions (e.g. in terms of working-time or emotional demands), comparably low pay levels, and may have adverse health consequences

→ Despite those features, ISW has only marginally been researched to date

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Different debates

International debates

- No specific or focused debate on ISW

- ISW (implicitly) plays a role in debates on emotional labour, the service triangle, and (the sociology of) service work
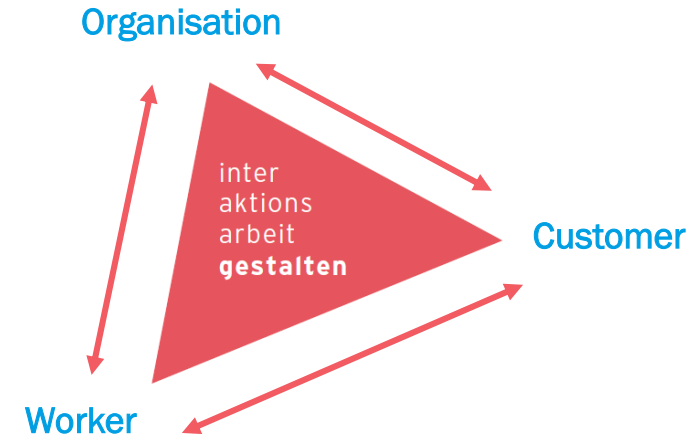
The German debate

- Interdisciplinary debate

- Highlights particular features and job demands of ISW

- Explores implications for work organisation

International debates

- *Emotional labour*: performing / obscuring emotions at work; feeling rules (e.g. Hochschild 1983; Bolton & Boyd 2003; Wharton 2009)

- *Service triangle*: interdependencies between the involved actors (e.g. Leidner 1993)

- *Service work*: customer-oriented bureaucracy approach and tensions between economic efficiency and customer service; ambiguous role of the customer (e.g. Korczynski 2002)

Organisation

inter aktions arbeit **gestalten**

Customer

Worker

Service triangle
(Own illustration based on Leidner, 1993)

The German debate

- Interdisciplinary debate rooted in labour psychology, labour sociology and work science stressing the particularities of ISW

- Differentiation between monological and dialogical tasks at work; consequences for workers and work organisation (e.g. Hacker 2009)

- Characteristics of ISW: role of emotions (service provider and recipient), need to establish collaboration, imponderability inherent to social interactions (e.g. Dunkel & Weihrich 2012; Böhle & Weihrich 2020)

→ Plea for considering social interactions at work as 'real work'

Synthesis: the current state of research

- ISW as interdisciplinary concept is part of various debates (often implicitly) and rooted in different disciplines
  - → fragmented knowledge base; synergies among the different debates should be created and utilized
- Mainly empirical contributions which generally focus on a limited number of occupational groups
  - → more conceptual and theoretical contributions are needed
- Methodological diversity in studying different facets of ISW
  - → could be exploited more (also to generate interest in the topic)

The way forward

"*The presence of the customer requires a re-thinking of our existing understandings.*" (Korczynski 2014: 2)

→ ISW should become an analytical category on its own as it is a distinctive form of work

→ Further conceptual, theoretical and empirical work is needed in this respect

→ The findings should be used to create (and support the creation of) 'high-quality' ISW-jobs

Outlook: potential areas of future research

- Working conditions – what shapes them, and what are their effects on the health and safety of workers?

- Power relations (and resources), inequality and intersectionality – to what extent and how do these concepts affect working conditions in ISW?

- ‚Good' interactive (service) work (job quality) – how could regulation at different levels (company, sector, country) look like, and how can workers be empowered to perform healthy and safe interactive work?

- Comparative research – how do different contexts affect interactive work, and which features exist independent of different contexts?

Thank you very much for your attention.

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