

Temporal flexibility: scheduling gifts and the obscuring of employment relations

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Abstract:

Numerous accounts of work have emphasised the ways in which the labour process and employment relations can be obscured. Burawoy (1979) goes as far as to argue that the obscuring of the labour process is a central feature of capitalist employment. Burawoy (1979); Durand and Stewart (1998); Heyes (1997); Pollert (1981) and Peng (2011) all demonstrate the ways in which a variety of 'work games' act to mystify the nature of the workplace and experiences of employment. Findings from the above studies of manufacturing highlight that work games can take a variety of forms. Work games can be based upon the speed of producing goods, reshaping working time and even flirting with managers. Additionally, Leidner (1993) and Sallaz (2009; 2015) find similar games obscuring the service sector workplaces which they study. Other researchers, such as Batstone et al. (1977); Gallie (1978) and Kelly (1998) stress the importance of trade union leaders and activists in framing workers' understanding of their situation. More recently it has been argued that contemporary firms make use of direct 'normative controls' which cause workers to accept and internalise managerial obligations and definitions of the work situation (Kunda, 1992; Vallas, 2003). These normative controls are usually argued to operate via the 'high performance team systems' associated with the post-Fordist paradigm.

Bourdieu (1998: 84-85 [emphasis in original]) provides an alternative means by which employment relations may be concealed from workers. He argues that contemporary flexible work is marked by '*a mode of domination of a new kind, based on the creation of a generalised and permanent state of insecurity.*' In order to elaborate upon this suggestion, it is

necessary to connect it to Bourdieu's primary mechanism of domination – symbolic violence (Thompson, 1984). Bourdieu (1977) illustrates his concept of symbolic violence through the giving of gifts amongst Kabyle peasants in northern Algeria. He shows how the exchange of gifts, which cannot be reciprocated, binds debtor to giver through moral obligations, while shrouding it as a gesture of generosity. According to Bourdieu, such acts of symbolic violence are especially prevalent when developed institutions which maintain domination in other forms are absent.

The current paper elucidates upon Bourdieu's insights in order to argue that in the contemporary workplace 'schedule gifts' can act as a powerful means by which employment relations are obscured. It is argued that the use of manager-controlled flexible scheduling affords managers significant discretionary power over workers' work-life balance and job quality (Wood, Forthcoming). This practice, therefore, creates a workplace environment which requires workers to beg managers to alter schedules so as to limit this harm. Managers respond by bestowing 'schedule gifts' upon workers. Workers are shown to be unable to reciprocate these schedule gifts and thus experience them as acts of kindness which generate feelings of gratitude and a moral obligation to work hard. Under such conditions, employment is not experienced as simply the impersonal exchange of X money for Y labour, but rather as the need to repay what appears to be managers' acts of compassion, caring and friendship.

The above account is developed through the use of two 'extended cases' (Burawoy, 2009). The cases represent two of the largest private sector employers in North America and Europe. Both employers are retailers with similar positions within their domestic markets and are named ShopPLC and RetailCorp. Through combining participant observation of work and union organising with 81 semi-structured interviews of workers and union officials, an

in-depth account is developed of the operation of schedule gifts and the manner in which they obscure the workplace. These cases also highlight the limits of other mystifying mechanisms.

Although the findings are drawn from just two cases, analysis of the 2010 European Working Conditions Survey shows that the number of UK employees experiencing manager-controlled flexible scheduling has grown to 24 percent. This suggests that the obscuring effects of schedule gifts may be a widespread and growing workplace experience. As we consider what 2020 and beyond holds for workers, the findings of this study highlight that the victims of increasingly exploitative employment may not recognise it as such. This will have profound implications for the attempts to improve working life.

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