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Sociability in relations between paid domestic workers and customers

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ABSTRACT: Service relationships are very much a part of modern life. Sociability is an important aspect of many service relationships, and it is frequently a part of what customers are willing to pay for. Therefore many service organizations attempt to encourage their employees to behave in a sociable manner. For service workers, sociability can be a source of negative stress as well as a source of personal satisfaction. This article describes and analyses the meanings sociability has for domestic workers (an occupation which is dominated by women, internationally). Empirical data consist of qualitative interviews with 20 domestic workers in Sweden. Conceptually, this article expands upon Simmel's (1950) notion of sociability as a social form characterized by democratic participation, playfulness, purposelessness, and a focus on relating to one another (Simmel, 1950). It is argued that sociability is a social form that is context-free, yet context-dependent, for it is shaped by the participant's orientation to their particular view of the social context. The empirical results demonstrate that domestic workers describe sociability as lighthearted, with topics that are trivial and unrelated to work. However, sociability is also shaped by the context of work. It is argued to be asymmetrical, as customers decide the occurrence of a conversation as well as the topics that are discussed. Domestic workers also describe that they use sociability to achieve both work-related and private goals. The results have implications for understanding sociability in service relationships, especially as the findings indicate that sociability is fragile and can be damaged when participants introduce a sense of hierarchy or purpose into the social interaction.

Keywords

Domestic work; working conditions; service relationships; sociability; Simmel; interactionism; semi-structured interviews

Introduction

Service relationships are very much a part of modern life. In pre-modern societies, most commodities utilised in daily life were produced by their consumers. In modern societies, the production of goods and services has been outsourced to others. Further, the service sector has grown continually in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In fact, in 2012, 78 per cent of the workforce in Sweden, where this study was conducted, was employed in the service sector (World Bank, 2014). Most citizens of developed countries are involved in social interactions with workers in the service sector on a daily basis.

Sociability is an important part of many service relationships (Price and Arnould, 1999; Rosenbaum, 2006; Swan et al., 2001; Stone, 1954; Oldenburg, 2000; Goodwin and Gremler, 1996). For service organizations, sociability can provide an opportunity to learn about the needs of the customer, enabling workers to adapt their services accordingly. Sociability can also be part of the product that is sold. It can therefore produce value that is measurable in economic terms (Vargo and Lusch, 2004), which accounts for why many service organizations encourage sociability in their employees to please the needs of the customer. For customers, sociable

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interactions can have an important emotional function. In eldercare, it can foster a feeling of security, while in restaurants it can instill a sense of recognition and belonging. Sociable interactions can also have important functions for service workers themselves, on both a personal and professional level. On a personal level, sociability has the propensity to develop friendships but can also result in negative stress. On a professional level, workers may learn more about customers´ needs and gain confidence and recognition for the superior service they provide.

This study focuses on sociability in the context of paid domestic work which is dominated by women, globally (International Labour Organisation 2011a). Domestic workers are individuals who work in the households of other individuals or families, and their tasks and working conditions are variable. Many of them perform household services such as cleaning, shopping, and cooking. Often they provide care for children and elderly family members, while in rural societies, they often are partly farm workers. A large proportion of domestic workers are migrants, either from rural areas of the countries they work in or from other poorer counties (Ehrenreich and Hochschild, 2002; Galotti, 2009).

There are a number of ethnographic studies of social relationships between domestic workers and their customers in modern societies (Anderson, 2000; Ehrenreich and Hochschild, 2002; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001; Kindler, 2009; Lutz, 2008; Lutz, 2011; Meagher, 2003). They indicate that sociability is common in these relationships, but few have focused on the phenomenon of sociability. The aim of this study is to investigate and describe the meaning that sociability has for domestic workers in Sweden.

Previous studies have focused on contexts where there are significant discrepancies in power, demonstrating that this is reflected in an equally asymmetric pattern of interactions, including asymmetric forms of sociability. In contrast, the present study analyses the meaning sociability might have in a context where power discrepancies are relatively small, and where sociability is not an explicit task, but occurs nevertheless.

The research for this projected involved semi-structured interviews with domestic workers in Sweden, whose main tasks consist of cleaning and general housekeeping. Unlike most domestic workers globally, they are formally employed by cleaning businesses, have their own homes and in many cases their own families. They can choose to become members of trade unions, and have full rights in the public social security system (including unemployment benefits, paid sick-leave, and paid parental leave).

The empirical analysis illustrates that sociability is less asymmetrical in the context studied in Sweden than it is in the international contexts discussed in most of the literature. To explicate, although customers have the right to decide whether a sociable interaction will take place and what it will consist of, domestic workers have the right to decide whether they will engage in it. The analysis demonstrates that domestic workers use sociability to achieve both professional goals (to establish trust) and personal goals (for pleasure and relaxation). Further, they also ‘give’ sociability to customers they feel are in need of someone to talk to.

This article expands Simmel’s conceptualization of sociability as a social form that is characterized by playfulness, democratic participation, purposelessness, and by focusing on relating to one another (1950). This study deciphers sociability as a social form that is context-free, yet context-dependent, as sociability is shaped by the individual’s understanding of the contextual environment as well as the nature of work involved.

The results also illuminate the ways in which service organisations steer their service encounters. Sociability is fragile, in that it may falter when it is felt (by a customer) to be a result of organizational training rather than a feeling of genuine inter-personal engagement by the

domestic worker. One important challenge for service organizations is to establish working conditions that permit and encourage service workers to engage in sociability that is experienced by customers as genuinely personal.

Previous research on sociability

Sociable interaction has been a topic of social science for a long time. Malinowski named this type of interaction 'phatic communion', which he described as 'language used in free, aimless social intercourse' and 'in which ties of union are created by a mere exchange of words' (1923/1972, p.149). Thus, 'phatic communion' has no specific purpose (in contrast to work-related, purpose-based dialogue), and is inherently relational, where the speaker's individuality is emphasised.

Simmel used the term 'sociability' and described it as a social form (1950). Social forms are supra-individual social phenomena that are provided by society and that individuals can use as templates for social interaction with others. Simmel indicated that playfulness is a defining characteristic of the social form that he called sociability, and that there are set norms such as equal, democratic participation and tact. According to Simmel, tact and democracy are central ideals of sociability, while an individual's rank, wealth or social status, ought not matter: 'Sociability is the game in which one 'does as if' all were equal' (Simmel, 1950, p.49). Another norm is purposelessness, that individuals ought not to use sociability as a tool to strategize personal purposes or to coerce others. Instead, sociability is a social form where the central activity consists of relating to one another. According to Simmel, the prototypical form of sociability is conversation. When conversing, the topic is subordinate to the act of relating. Of course, Simmel notes, these rules of sociability can be altered, but then sociability is transformed into another social form.

Decades later, sociolinguists and conversation analysts have attempted to conceptualize this phenomenon by distinguishing it from more task-oriented types of interaction. In studies of talk in organizations, Holmes (2000) suggests a distinction between 'small talk' and 'business talk.' While 'business talk' is oriented to communicating information and is topically focused on topics related to organizational goals, 'small talk' is is free of rigidity and purpose. Coupland (2003) suggested a distinction between 'small' and 'full' talk, where the first is talk where actors orient to one another while the latter is talk where things get done. Conversation analysts have made a similar distinction between 'non-institutional' and 'institutional' talk (Drew and Heritage, 1992). It would be a simplification to make a sharp distinction between 'business', 'full' and 'institutional' talk compared to 'small' and 'non-institutional' talk. Rather, these dichotomies should, (as noted by several scholars [Halliday, 1978; Holmes, 2000; Coupland, 2000; Koester, 2004]), be viewed as two main types, where a single form is often related to mixes of the two. Thus, these types of interactions can take place simultaneously or intermittently (Koester, 2004). One or another of them is usually in the foreground while the other is in the background (Halliday, 1978).

Drew and Heritage (1992) have claimed that there are no words or other actions that are inherently sociable or non-sociable. It would be tempting to say that greetings, humor, appreciation, and a number of other activities are inherently sociable, but they can actually be part of task-related activities, i.e. be tools of achieving organisational goals. Therefore, it would be difficult to define sociability only by reference to the words or speech acts that are performed. Instead, a definition needs to be based on the overall goal orientation of participants (Drew and Heritage, 1992). That is, if actors are oriented to an interaction as sociable, then it is so, irrespective of what linguistic forms are used.

Previous research has indicated that work-related talk can lead to sociable talk. For instance, task-oriented talk between sales assistants and their customers can open up sociable interaction as well as work-oriented conversations (Coupland and Ylänne-McEwen, 2000; McCarthy, 2000; Koester, 2004; Norrick, 1993). Sociable interaction is more likely to arise if participants are familiar with each other, which indicates the likelihood for sociable interaction increases the more often participants meet (Koester, 2004; Norrick, 1993). Further, there are different types of sociable talk at workplaces. In a study of office clerks, Koester (2004) described four types of 'relational talk': non-transactional conversations (gossiping and small talk); phatic communion (talk at the beginning and end of transactional encounters); relational episodes (small talk or gossip while pursuing transactional goals); and relational sequences and turns (non-obligatory, task-related talk with a relational focus).

An important emotional function of sociable interaction is that it can define social situations in non-threatening ways (Beinstein, 1975; Coulmas, 1981; Coupland, 2003). Sociable interaction can be used to distract from what is threatening and focus on what is non-threatening and cooperative. For example, sociability can be used to overcome the awkwardness of sharing a cramped space (Koesner, 2004), or overstepping personal boundaries (McCarthy, 2000). Medical doctors sometimes avoid certain topics, for example patient complaints, by treating them as small talk rather than as complaints (Hudak and Maynard, 2008). Sociability can also take the form of humor (Koester, 2004; Norrick, 1993). Sociability often functions as a 'humming' that can oil the wheels of work-related discourse (Holmes, 2000, p.57).

Besides social psychological and sociolinguistic studies, sociability has attracted the interest of scholars from other areas, for instance business management. Studies of service relationships show they can be more than the exchange of money for goods and services and lead to what has been called 'commercial friendship' (Price and Arnould, 1999; Rosenbaum, 2006; Swan et al., 2001; Stone, 1954; Oldenburg, 2000; Goodwin and Gremler, 1996). The concept of 'friendship' is, as noted by Price and Arnould (1999), fuzzy, and, like 'sociability,' can have several different meanings depending on the social context.

Friendship refers to long-term, emotionally deeper relationships than sociability. In the *Oxford English Dictionary* (2015) a friend is defined as 'a person with whom one has a bond of mutual affection, typically one exclusive of sexual or family relations' and friendship is defined as 'the emotions or conduct of friends'. The academic literature on friendship is diverse in terms of empirical focus and research methods, ranging from micro-ethnographic research on friendship among children (Corsaro, 1985; Goodwin, 2008), to sociological studies of the shapes of friendship in various social contexts (Adams and Allen, 1998) and analyses of the roles of friendship in politics (See Devere 2014 for an overview.) Friendship is a type of emotional relationship that is more enduring than sociability. That is, strangers can spend time socializing without becoming friends, but friends engage in sociable interaction from time to time (Price and Arnould, 1999). Therefore interactionist research on sociability contributes to increasing our understanding of friendship.

Service providers can provide important social and emotional support to customers (Rosenbaum, 2006; Rosenbaum, 2008; Arnould and Price, 1993). Research attests that there are groups of customers that are especially open to engaging in sociable interaction with service providers, in particular, singles and the elderly (Rosenbaum, 2006). They can have various reasons for doing so (Gwinner et al., 1998). For example, the social benefits of company, as well as the psychological benefits of safety, along with the economic benefits of discounts, coupled with a more efficient and customised service.

Sociable relationships are also advantageous for service organizations as they can make it easier to predict the needs of the customer. This intern, increases customer loyalty, resulting in an enhanced organisational reputation, that will likely yield higher profits (Gwinner et al., 1998). Such reciprocal relationships can also result in personal advantages for service workers in terms of obtaining social, economic and emotional support (Rosenbaum, 2006).

Besides these substantial observations, there are two observations made in previous research that were considered when this study was designed. First, a number of scholars have used various terms for the phenomenon that is the focus of this article: phatic communion, small talk, non-institutional talk, conversation, and sociability. They have described a number of general characteristics of this phenomenon but it has escaped any clear definition. Therefore, it has been concluded that the concept is 'fuzzy' (Price and Arnould, 1999). One possible reason for this fuzziness is that sociability seems to be an inherently contextual phenomenon. Its' shape seems to depend on various aspects of the social context. For example, the number of people present, how often they interact, their beliefs about future interactions with one another, and the rules of conduct. Second, if sociability is a context-dependent phenomenon, the analysis must describe the particular ethnographic context in which sociability takes place, taking onto account the observed meaning within the specified context.

Previous research on social relationships between domestic workers and customers

The most widely cited topic about social relationships between customers and domestic workers is power. About 83 per cent of the 52.6 million domestic workers of the world are female (International Labour Organisation 2011b, p.8), but their numbers are even higher in many industrialized countries (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights 2011). Female workers are more likely to be victims of unwanted sexual proposals or sexual assaults than their male counterparts (Anderson, 2000; DeSouza and Cerqueira, 2009). Further, most domestic workers have a working-class background (Gregson and Lowe, 1994; Anderson, 2000), and many are immigrants (Ehrenreich and Hochschild, 2002; Galotti, 2009). Immigrants are disadvantaged as they often encounter discrimination within the labor market, while most have lower salaries than their native counterparts (Anderson, 2002; Lutz, 2011). Therefore, immigrant workers can become socially isolated and are often unable to find adequate information about their rights, making them vulnerable to exploitation (Anderson, 2000; Constable, 2002; Kindler, 2009; Rollins, 1985).

According to recent estimates, up to 70 to 80 per cent of domestic workers in Europe are informally employed (Galotti, 2009; see also Sarti, 2005: 74; Lutz, 2011). With no job security, they do not have the same rights to the public social security systems as those who are formally employed (Lutz, 2011: 48). Internationally, domestic workers earn less than half of the average salary in their respective country, and often no more than 20 per cent (International Labour Organisation, 2011a, p.1). Internationally, many domestic workers live in the homes of their contracted customers. Live-in arrangements can diffuse the social relationships and may create loyalty bonds that can increase the risk of exploitation that independent living arrangements may prevent (Addams, 1896; Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2011; Kindler, 2009).

The place of work may contribute to asymmetric power relations as most work is performed in the homes of customers. Homes are often viewed as extensions of the customers' selves, as places filled with objects that are in an order that is not always transparent to domestic

workers (Lutz, 2008; Kindler, 2009). The nature of the job calls for sensitivity and attentiveness on the part of domestic workers, that could result in a form of subordination, which may even be stigmatizing (Lutz, 2011, p.50).

Previous studies have described a number of ways in which asymmetries are reflected in daily social relationships with customers. They describe how customers order workers and express explicit reprimands for mistakes (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001), which can be particularly humiliating when these instructions come from children (Romero, 1992). There can also be rules about how domestic workers must address family members, as 'Mr.,' 'Sir,' or 'Ma'am' followed by family names, while domestic workers may be addressed by their given names or 'girl' (Rollins, 1985). Frequently, family members are allowed to freely express their opinions, while domestic workers are expected to withhold their opinions (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2002; Kindler, 2009; Lutz, 2011; Wrigley, 1999). Even the right to truth can be asymmetrically divided, so that domestic workers are treated as less trustworthy than family members (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2002). There are also customers who wish domestic workers to display a generally subordinate attitude, which in a North American study was called an 'Uncle Tom attitude' (Rollins, 1985).

As a general trend, customers sometimes show interest in the personal matters of domestic workers and help them with personal matters (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2002; Kindler, 2009; Rollins, 1985), and even begin to view them as family members (Anderson, 2000: 122; Lutz, 2011; Meagher, 2003; Rollins, 1985). Previous studies have described paternalistic features of these relationships, where workers are viewed as family members in need of protection, control, and discipline (Cock, 1980; Rollins, 1985). Customers have also been shown to attempt to control workers' private lives, for instance their clothing and selection of boyfriends (Kindler, 2009; Lan, 2003; Rollins, 1985). Some researchers have used the term 'maternalism' to describe the pattern where domestic workers are employed, at least partly, to define the identity of the female employer (Rollins 1985). There are also studies that describe what has been called 'instrumental personalism' on the part of customers (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2002; Mendez, 1998). This term refers to customers who believe they need to relate personally to domestic workers so they can perform well. Therefore, although they do not actually have the time or feeling for it, they spend time chatting and giving gifts.

Thus, many studies of social relationships between domestic workers and customers describe and analyse contexts where asymmetries of power are great and demonstrate how those asymmetries are reflected in daily social interactions. There are also studies that describe working conditions that are less asymmetric and are similar to the context focused here. In a British study by Gregson and Lowe (1994), workers were formally employed, primarily to clean, often undertook extra hours in this sector. The sample in the study worked in one or several houses, were British citizens, and had access to the public sector when in need of assistance, while having rights to the same benefits of the social security system as other citizens. Gregson and Lowe describe how the cleaners refused particularly dirty work or resigned when treated disrespectfully. Similarly, an Australian study about formally employed domestic workers who were legal citizens, described how they tried to make customers happy and how they sometimes were attached to them (Meagher, 2003). These two studies are particularly relevant for this research as they focus on contexts where the working conditions are less asymmetric. Both describe, in passing, aspects of the social relationships that can be described as sociable. For instance, in Meaghers' (2003) study one worker said that 'I still have a couple of clients who I have become a household pet for, and they've become personal friends, some elderly people who probably look more forward to me going there to have a chat with them than for me to clean' (Meagher, 2003, p.14). In another quote, a domestic worker describes the relationship in the following way: 'I have a customer who's in her nineties, well obviously it's more like social

work going to her because you clean her house but she's a very lonely lady (and so) you spend time talking to her and everything.' (Meagher, 2003, p.57). These observations can be taken to suggest that sociability has different meanings when working conditions define the relationship in less asymmetric terms. This article follows up on these observations and analyses meanings of sociability in a context where asymmetries are relatively low, i.e., among formally employed domestic workers in Sweden.

The context

In the beginning of the 20th century, a large proportion of the female workforce in Sweden were domestic workers, but over the century their numbers decreased. By 1990, only 0,05 per cent of the total workforce were domestic workers (Sarti, 2005). The main reasons were decreased demand due to the mechanization of domestic work and the growth of public child- and eldercare, coupled with a general shortage of labour with increased taxes on labour. But at the end of the 20th century, demand increased and it was generally believed that the informal sector expanded. The Swedish tax authorities estimated that 147 000 households bought informal domestic services in 2005 (Skatteverket, 2011, p.11) In 2007, the Swedish Parliament introduced a tax deduction for domestic cleaning, cooking, clothes care, snow removal, gardening, childcare, and help with personal hygiene (Svensk Författningssamling, 2007, p.346). For most customers, it reduced the cost of hiring domestic workers by half, and thus rapidly increasing the market. In the second half of 2007, 46,000 people applied for the tax deduction and by 2012 their number was more than 490,000 (Skatteverket, 2013, p.1) out of a total population of 9.55 million (Statistiska centralbyrån 2015, p.1) In 2012, the number of work hours in this field was equivalent to about 8,000 full-time employees (Skatteverket, 2013, p.1). The most typical customers are 35 to 44 years old and 65 or older (Skatteverket, 2011, p.41). There is an overrepresentation of female (61 per cent) and urban customers (Ibid?, p.41). Further, high-income earners apply for the tax deduction more often than people with lower income (Sköld and Heggeman, 2011).

The tax deduction opened up the market for various ways to organize businesses, as firms with employees, self-employment, direct employment by customers, and cooperatives. The two first are the most common and this study focuses on those who are employed by firms. The working conditions for these formally employed domestic workers differ from most domestic workers in the world. Results of a recent questionnaire in Sweden, (answered by 249 domestic workers in 86 firms), demonstrates that most of them, like their counterparts internationally, are female (81 per cent), and that their mean age is 42 years (Leppänen and Dahlberg, 2012a, p.11). The frequency of foreign-born workers (22 per cent) is only marginally higher than in the total workforce (15 per cent) and much lower than among cleaners in general (44 per cent) (Ibid, p.12). Like their international counterparts, most have a working class background. When asked about their previous work experience, all had had low-skilled and low-paid jobs, most often as cleaners, or as childcare, restaurant, and factory workers. Only three per cent had ever had jobs requiring higher education (ibid, p.17ff.).

Unlike many domestic workers of the world, who provide care for the elderly, disabled and children, their tasks mainly consist of cleaning (Leppänen and Dahlberg, 2012b): about 89 per cent regularly perform routine weekly cleaning. A majority does one-off cleanings (62 per cent) and end-of-tenancy cleanings (58 per cent), and about half of them also clean windows (46 per cent). Only a small proportion of workers report providing care for the elderly (just under eight

per cent), the disabled (just over one per cent), and children (two per cent). That confirms data from the tax authorities that 93 per cent of tax deductions concern cleaning (Skatteverket, 2011).

Unlike many domestic workers of the world, these workers have their own private homes and many have their own families. They do not negotiate with customers over work hours and payment, which is the managers´ responsibility. Their work role is clearer than for many domestic workers internationally as their employer firms define it, not customers. Almost 70 per cent are in permanent employment and about 54 per cent work full time (35 hours or more per week) (Leppänen and Dahlberg, 2012b, p.13). There are national minimum salaries for domestic workers. The salaries are at the same level as for many shop clerks and restaurant staff, but many domestic workers have considerably higher income. Unlike many domestic workers in the world, including the informally employed in Sweden, they have full rights to the public social security system, including paid sick leave and pension rights. They can seek help from authorities, the police or the national work inspection agency, when mistreated or abused. They have full rights to be members of unemployment benefit insurance or of unions, although few actually are members.

Many seem to like their work. The survey indicated that almost 94 per cent agreed with the statement 'I enjoy my work' and 78 per cent agreed that the work was more enjoyable than they originally anticipated it would be (Leppänen and Dahlberg, 2012b, p.21ff.). When asked what they thought was best about their work, the most common answer referred to customers in some way (57 per cent), involving interacting with them, helping them, and pleasing them. The second most common source of satisfaction was flexibility and self-determination (43 per cent), namely, being able to influence their work hours and methods.

Perspective and methods

The general perspective of this study is sociological interactionism, where individuals are understood to be thinking and acting beings that, in their interactions with others in social contexts, learn the meanings of symbols used in those contexts and adapt their actions in response to those meanings (Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934). Although social context to some extent delimits alternatives for action, there is always room for individuals to reflect upon and define the situation before responding to it (Ball, 1972; Thomas 1923). In that process, there is always propensity for creative production of meaning and action.

The methodical principles that guide this study follow those described in the qualitative methods literature in the tradition of sociological interactionism (Blumer, 1969; Silverman, 1997). The general aim is to take the perspective of the investigated individuals, understand how they define social situations and how they respond to them.

The empirical data was collected by means of semi-structured interviews with 20 formally employed domestic workers in private firms. All firms were established after 2007, when the above mentioned tax deduction was introduced. None of the researchers had any contact with informants prior to the research and have no economic interests in the area of research. This article reports results from a study of working conditions for domestic workers and social relationships with customers that was fully financed by FORTE (2009)

Semi-structured qualitative interviewing was the method chosen for two reasons. First, there was previous research about working conditions for domestic workers historically, as well as in other countries. That knowledge made it possible to anticipate the types of work and common themes that were likely to surface from the interviews. Second, no previous studies had

been conducted of this particular group of domestic workers. The openness of semi-structured interviewing gave opportunities for participants to describe their experiences using their own words and to explore these with follow-up questions. Note that the overall study did not specifically aim at analyzing sociability, but as informants recurrently described sociability, it was decided to explore this theme further.

Firms were found through an Internet search, and managers were contacted first by telephone and provided with a short verbal description of the project. When a manager showed interest, a written description was offered, outlining the purpose and methods of the study as well as how it would be reported with a declaration of confidentiality and anonymity as well as the addresses of researchers and the university department were it was based. Managers then gave these names and telephone numbers to workers, who were informed in the same ways as managers had been.

Interviews were conducted at these firms, except for one that took place at the university and another one in a café. Of the interviewed domestic workers, 13 were female (of which nine were native born). Seven participants were male (of which four were native born). Sixteen interviews were conducted in Swedish and four in English.

All interviews were transcribed verbatim, except for names and other identifying words. Analysis was semi-inductive, where general topics had been defined in advance but where interviewing and analysis were open to how they were manifested in this particular context. After discovery of the phenomenon described here, which was followed by repeated listening and annotation of parts of the transcripts where it occurred, a more focused search was conducted to find other parts of these interviews where sociability was a theme.

Core meanings of sociability

When domestic workers described sociable episodes of interaction with customers they often expressed it is trivial. This surfaced in the terms that were used to describe this form of interaction, namely as 'talk,' 'chat,' or 'be sociable.' When describing what they did they could say they 'just chat' or, as in the following quotation, 'talk about this and that':

> Well, there's some customers I've never met, then you don't have a relationship with them, but as some who you mee— … like the ones I just mentioned, they meet me, they have help once a week, I meet them; either I meet the father or the mother every week, so there you get a bit, so you can communicate and talk a bit about this and that. (Marianne)

Sociability was also described as lighthearted. Occasionally workers said they 'have fun' with customers. One said that she, when visiting a particular customer, would 'talk, joke, have some tea also, hehehe.' Another said that 'sometimes some customer is at home and then you know you have fun and ni- with them, drink coffee and talk while cleaning'. They could also illustrate lightheartedness with their talk, for instance with the stereotypical 'blah blah blah':

> Because I'm fairly talkative, I walk in there and *blah blah blah* hurh huh [mimic talking, laughs] and of course many people like that, and many people don't like it. (Petra)

As in both the above and the following excerpt, informants also illustrated lightheartedness with laugher, sometimes interspersed into talk:

> Some clients are home, they do stay home and um they're, they're all very friendly and a … I enjoy talking to them, so when I get there we chat and uhm … *sometimes I chat a bit more there* [smile voice], huh huh [laughs], you know, chat a bit more, because they are all *hey'yahaaall* [high voice] and stuff. (Eric)

In this excerpt the worker describes the situation in which he interacts with the customer as 'chat' and 'chat a bit more there.' He also claims that he, together with the customer, sometimes use quite a bit of time to do that, which is followed by laughter and an animation of the joy of that situation by shouting 'heyahaaall.' He continues to describe the relationship with customers by quoting customers' utterances and animating the talk with 'blah blah blah':

> DW (domestic worker): Yes, you start to build a relationship because you go there every week or every two week, so when you see them again they are like, 'oh hello hello how are you' and then another weekend the conversation picks up more and so of course it's a little bond starts to build, if they are there all the time and you start chatting and stuff so yes
>
> I (interviewer): Is it possible to say that you know some of you customers?
>
> DW: Not so, I can't say I know them, I only know them on a very basic term, some of them do, like I say the ones who are home, chat, they ask me where you from and blah blah blah so we chat like that but its only to that extent. I don´t know anything else, anymore.
>
> I: It's nothing personal?
>
> DW: No, nothing personal at all, no. (Eric)

One important function of these animations is that they actually perform the emotions and the interactions that these emotions were part of. Thus, they differ from mere descriptions of emotions and provide stronger evidence that specific emotions were relevant in the particular situations spoken about by providing more direct illustrations of them.

In the above excerpt, another important aspect of triviality surfaces, namely its shallowness, as 'nothing personal at all, no.' That is, the informant describes that topics do not concern any personal details, but neither are they about work-related matters. Instead they are described as about 'how are you,' 'how has the weekend been,' 'where are you from,' and the like. Thus, the topics seem to be about rather general topics where participants are given the space to define exactly how to answer and how to present their experience.

In sum, informants presented sociability in terms that are very similar to Simmel's (1950) description. They emphasised triviality and lightheartedness, the equivalent of what Simmel called

'playfulness.' They described the talk as shallow talk, focused neither on personal circumstances nor work-related matters, but instead about more 'neutral' matters. That describes what Simmel called 'purposelessness,' but it also describes what Simmel calls 'democratic participation,' as it does not invoke internal or external qualities or social status. Therefore, sociability allows participants to present themselves and their experience as unrelated to their status as customer and service provider.

The limits of sociability

Domestic workers also told stories of customers who broke basic norms of sociability, typically of customers who talked too much or complained about everything and nothing:

> There are customers, they're really annoying, they're all talk, talk, talk, and talk and talk *huhhhhh* [suppressed laughter] *all the time* hhhh, and and— …… yes, they COMPLAIN. (Salma)

Another example, an elderly disabled woman:

> All she did was complain, complain, not about the cleaning, about everything and everyone eeee things were wrong with her eee the electricity and the fuses went, and she'd look into it, and she had a mobility scooter and she can walk better than I can because I've got a bad back and left hip, and she can walk much much better than I do, and she's got a mobility scooter, and she gets to be accompanied when she goes by train, and has to have so bloody much, and she's is a very, very difficult person, if you don't take her the right way then it's screwed, then it's just screwed [cough], and eee, yes, out and takes photos of people talking on the phone, and eee out and takes photos of the steps up to the hospital eee entrances to shops to see if she can complain and send them to the local authority that no one who's wheelchair-bound can get in, she's that kind of person. (Gerd)

In these excerpts, domestic workers describe norms about sociability indirectly, by discussing customers who break them. They are described as speaking too much and not allowing domestic workers to express their views. They are portrayed as too one-sidedly engaged in complaints and their own negative emotions, thus breaking the norms about lightheartedness and triviality.

Asymmetrical rights to initiate sociability

The inputed meaning of sociability seems to constitute its core meanings. But sociability was also shaped by the context of work, where the right to initiate a sociable interaction was asymmetrically divided between the participants. The agreements between firms and customers state that domestic workers visit customers to clean and perform other domestic chores.

Sociability is not explicitly considered to be a part of the service, but a component that can arise in the course of the interaction.

For manual work, social relationships between customers and workers are asymmetrical in terms of power. This power relationship is based on the fact that customers pay for the work, decide its content, and have the right to terminate the relationship. But these relationships are also asymmetrical on the question of who has the right to decide whether the participants will engage in sociable interaction. That is evident in workers' descriptions of customer interactions, where the latter always take the social initiative. They converse about customers who invite them to talk for a while, have a cup of coffee, etc. For instance, one domestic worker tells about an elderly couple:

> And the second customer … eee … also they are home and they are also elderly, maybe more than 80 years old, and, yes, they are also very nice when I come. 'Oh Mike, you should take a break and have some juice'; I say 'No no no, now I've got to work.'

Thus, manual work is the dominant activity, an activity 'whose claims upon an individual the social occasion obliges him to be ready to recognize' (Goffman, 1963, p. 44) while sociability is a subordinate activity, that is, an activity the worker is 'allowed to sustain only to the degree, and during the time, that his attention is patently not required by the involvement that dominates him' (Goffman, 1963, p.44). In this context, both the dominant and the subordinate activities are subject to asymmetries of power in that workers are oriented that customers have the right to decide what activities will take place. Observe also that the customer's power to decide over what activities should take place gives her an opportunity to present herself as sympathetic and generous, as in the above extract where the customer is presented as 'nice.'

Another aspect of this asymmetry surfaces when domestic workers express that an important competence of their work is their ability to 'read' customers, for instance, to infer whether they want to talk or not:

> So, it's, they … you always have to read people; what's this person like … some are very talkative and then of course you chat, some aren't at all talkative and then you can't just go in and talk to that person, because if they don't like it, then obviously it's … er …. it's a bit off. (Daniella)

Asymmetrical contents of sociability

Domestic workers also described how sociability, at least initially, was asymmetrical in terms of content. They clearly expressed the norm that customers' circumstances should be the primary focus. This was particularly evident when a domestic worker discussed a holiday stand-in who challenged this norm:

> DW: Because after all, I had a stand-in last summer and that hadn't gone so well,
>
> I: Oh no?

> DW: probably the chemistry between them just wasn't right, so that …
>
> I: Did anything particular happened? Or was it—
>
> DW: Well, they— they, they talk about it a lot, yes, what …. happened, they really do.
>
> I: What, did the stand-in do something wrong, or was rude or something?
>
> DW: Yes, she can come out with different stuff that they don't, well, and she … well … eeee … well, I can be chatty, yes?
>
> I: yes
>
> DW: but I can also be quiet … if you know what I mean, *hhehhe* [laughs] and I might praps not talk about <u>myself</u> all the time, everything shouldn't revolve around <u>me</u>, everything's got to revolve around this <u>customer</u> (Lena)

These asymmetries potentially oppose the norm of democratic participation. When a superior stance is explicitly and vehemently emphasised by customers, it threatens sociability and can potentially even transform it into another social form involving domination. If customers want to initiate sociable interaction, they need to do so with tact and cautiousness, and suppress these asymmetries on the surface of interactions.

Sociability as a means to establish trust

Domestic workers also stated that sociability could be utilised to achieve both professional and private goals, thus giving sociability additional layers of meaning. Domestic work takes place in customers' homes which means customers allow workers into a physical place that, as discussed above, they own and that contains objects of symbolic and economic value, but also reveals customer information. Therefore, trust becomes a relevant issue, i.e., customers need to assess whether domestic workers can be trusted to be safe when handling objects in their homes and also, if the worker is capable of respecting the confidentiality of the client's information.

Domestic workers clearly expressed that customers often wanted to get to know them in order to be able to decide whether they would trust them. One worker said, 'most times they want to know who is coming to their home, you know' (Adam) and another said, 'all of them want to get to know who comes and works.' (Julia) Most workers stated that it took considerably more time for many customers to trust them, therefore, being sociable provided opportunities for customers to get to know the workers and increase the likelihood that they would trust them:

> We talk about *everything*, about private stuff, and what your weekend was like, and, yes, *everything*, so you feel like a bit, well, family, you could say that that's why they leave their house in my hands and *everything* in the house. (Julia)

In this excerpt, trust was about protecting material property, but equally important was the protection of information:

> Then the chemistry's got to be right, that they like me, because they feel that they can confide in me, that's how it is, and I can confide in them, and that you don't go off and talk out of turn and prattle on and stuff, but they know it stays between us. (Lena)

Against this background it is not surprising that many domestic workers stated customers wanted the same worker to visit them regularly, and refrained from engaging in contractual service agreements when the regular domestic worker was on vacation.

> And I have one down in Brantevik who doesn't want cleaning on … so when I was on holiday because she didn't want anyone else turning up and … [croaky, quiet] so that way I feel like it's fun to order to clean people's homes because you get, well, as I say, subconscious contact with each other so we trust each other probably. (Gunilla)

Sociability as time to rest

Sociability could also be used for the worker's own purposes, as domestic work is often labour-intensive, and a conversational break, would often be most welcome. Also, when customers are out of their homes, workers can take short breaks when they feel it is necessary. However, when customers are in residence, there are fewer opportunities to rest. Many domestic workers discussed the frequency and length of time of breaks to be an issue with customers, and therefore, were cautious about it when customers were present. When customers were at home, they could have a break by accepting an invitation to engage in sociable talk:

> Sometimes you feel like I just want to go and get the job done, and you can't face going and talking as it'll just take up a lot of time, but sometimes you can think it'd be so nice just to get to take a 5 minute break and chat with someone, rather than just going in and working, so that, sometimes, well, it's good that it varies. (Daniella)

Sociability as a gift

Workers also told of particular customers who 'needed' someone to talk to. These customers were described as pensioners, on sick leave, on maternity leave, students, and those who work from home. In the following excerpt a domestic worker speaks of an elderly couple and their obvious need to talk:

> Yes, there are two pensioners… they are also alone so it like when you come, it's like they they been waiting for so much to talk to for the past one week also, so it's like aaah they just talking and talking. (laughter) (Mike)

Although interactions with these customers is often described as trivial and fun, that is not always the case:

DW: *Yes? Well, they need that bit too, after all; they might not meet so many people, as it were … who take the time to* [quieter] *listen* hhh, but then you can also get this, I also have someone who hhhh eh, who I always clean, like the toilet, right? huh hh, and then she sits down on a chair outside and we'll natter, and I'll clean, right?

I: yes,

DW: or if I'm dusting somewhere, she'll sit down there … and then we talk.

I: What do you talk about?

DW: Oh, we talk about everything, she, it's mostly, she talks about the old days, and hh what it used to be like, and …

I: yes,

DW: and stuff, and

I: yes,

DW: usually, she generally talks about … tch! and then if they're, well, … sometimes feel praps a bit sad and stuff then they talk about it. hhh [higher voice, faltering]. (Lena)

In this excerpt sociability changes from the triviality and lightheartedness that is associated with its core meaning and turns into quite a different social form, 'troubles-talk,' (Jefferson and Lee, 1980; Emerson, 2010), that is characterized by quite different interactional roles and emotional tones.

The workers emphasised that listening was voluntary. In the following quotation the domestic worker describes her response to a customer who is described as 'lonesome' and 'needs to talk,' as 'I let them talk about it, why not?'

So I think they need to talk, and often, as I said, then … well, they're lonely eh … and stuff's happened to their nearest and dearest, either they've passed away or they've become mentally ill, terrifically, well, so there was someone who'd had someone who was really mentally ill who can't even remember her and so … ooo … diseases and all of that, so I let them talk about it, like, why not? (Anna)

In a sense, the domestic worker, as a listener, undertakes a role as a caregiver. The care is not formally defined but is undertaken voluntarily in response to the customer's perceived needs. The worker's rationale behind consenting customers to discuss their plights, implies a sense of personal satisfaction that domestic workers may feel as they engage in sociable conversations.

> … You can understand why they need to talk like that, I fee— I get like so happy *heheh*, when they open up like that (I: Yes) because then they feel all the better for it.

There were also domestic workers who believed that some customers ordered domestic service not only to have their houses cleaned, but additionally, to satisfy their need for company and the need to converse:

> I: Could it be said that some people get in cleaners in order to have the social bit?
>
> DW: Mme, I'd probably absolutely be able to say that …
>
> I: You think so?
>
> DW: Yeah absolutely, but I think, I'm not sure they would, well, if … after all, some of them have already said that I think this is part of your job, that I get to talk to you, too, as it doesn't matter if we spend an hour and what I've asked for … just talking, because I think this is important for me that, like, you to listen to me, one of them said. (Anna)

Thus, sociability could be transformed into troubles-talk, where the interactional roles of the participants were doubled, from domestic worker to care 'provider' or 'troubles recipient' and from customer to caretaker or 'troubles-teller'. Also, sociability could be used to achieve goals that were both work related (to increase trust), and unrelated (to get an opportunity to rest and to give care to individual customers). The use of sociability may potentially threaten it due to the risks associated from diverging from the norm of purposelessness (Simmel, 1950). That is, if the purpose is highlighted, it may diverge from sociability. It seems as if a calculated use of sociability works as long as it is left unspoken. Meaning, as long as the purpose is not explicitly highlighted, the actors can pretend it does not exist and thus, sociability can be sustained.

Summary and discussion

This study contributes to the growing research on working conditions for domestic workers and their relations with customers, especially meanings of sociability. Unlike many previous studies, that analyse contexts where power asymmetries are prominent, this article reports of a context where power differences are relatively small. The informants were all formally employed by firms, had their own homes, had the same access as others to the benefits of the social security system of the host nation. Further, while previous studies have described how the social relations in contexts where asymmetries of power are significant tend to result in asymmetric patterns of interaction, relationships in this context are different. Here, the core of the relationship consists of the domestic worker performing manual labor and being paid by the firm. Here, negotiations over tasks and work hours take place between firm managers and customers while minor adjustments take place with workers. These basic differences result in less asymmetrical interactions, including particular meanings of sociability.

The results of this study confirm an observation made in previous studies of sociability, namely that 'friendship,' 'phatic communion,' 'small talk,' and 'sociability' are rather 'fuzzy' concepts (see Price and Arnould, 1999.) This fuzziness can be understood both as a conceptual

problem, in need of scientific clarification prior to conducting research, or as a consequence of the nature of sociability, namely that it is a phenomenon that is not entirely stable or static across social contexts. In line with the latter view, sociability is understood to be both context-free and context-dependent, i.e. it is a form of interaction with specific properties (as described here and by Simmel [1950]) and at the same time it varies across contexts resulting in varying meanings for participants. Taking this latter perspective, definitions of sociability need to both refer to its core form and be open to its variability while being grounded in very concrete empirical contexts.

In the interviews, workers described sociability as trivial, lighthearted, and purposeless, where private identities were allowed to surface. The participant's descriptions of sociability are very similar to Simmel's description of sociability as a social form that is characterized by playfulness, democratic participation, purposelessness, and relating to others (Simmel, 1950). These properties seem to be core characteristics of sociability, regardless of the social context, and they define the norms for participants. In the context of domestic work, these norms surfaced most clearly when workers spoke of single customers who challenged them by talking too much, not listening enough, and complaining too much.

Sociability is also shaped by the context in which it takes place. In this context sociability is asymmetrical, both in the sense that customers have the right to decide whether they will engage in sociability, and in the sense that the topics that are discussed are supposed to primarily focus on the customer's needs. However, domestic workers could also use sociability to achieve both personal and professional goals, as sociability could be a means for them to increase the trust of the customers. Workers also stated that sociability could give them opportunities to rest from the often physically demanding work. They could also describe sociability as something they gave voluntarily to lonely and elderly customers who were described as 'needing' sociability.

It is argued that the context of domestic work opposes and threatens sociability in two ways. First, as customers have the privilege to either initiate or dismiss sociability (according to their needs), the asymmetries of power threaten the central premise of equal, democratic participation. Second, the strategic uses of sociability to achieve various goals oppose the norm and premise of purposelessness. Therefore, actors who want to be sociable for strategic personal reasons are best camouflaging their true intent.

This article has implications for understanding the role of sociability in service-sector relationships. Many scholars have noted there is an increasing demand for services that not only consist of exchanges of money for physical goods or manual labor, but that also involve a 'personal' component. Possible explanations for this trend is an increasing number of smaller families, single households, an aging population, geographical mobility, and other changes in family structure that result in increased loneliness and a longing for personal relationshipsMany service organisations attempt to cater for this demand by adapting to the needs of the customer by adding a personal touch to the service.

Of course, there are customers who welcome sociability as it establishes a generally friendly atmosphere, however, many customers do not acknowledge sociability (on the part of the service provider) as a genuine attempt to be 'truly personal', and therefore, it is often met with distance, irony and sometimes even contempt (Goodwin and Lockshin, 1992). These findings suggest there is a contradiction between the understanding of the terms 'service work' and 'personal service.' The contradiction is attributed to the subordination of the service worker by the customer. It is argued that due to power asymmetries between service workers and customers, sociable forms of personal service maybe perceived as inauthentic means to sustain a

commercial relationship by the customer. Thus, it appears as if sociability is a fragile social object that may collapse when customers experience it as inauthentic and as a result of organisational demands upon the service worker. As mentioned, while some customers welcome it, many do not experience it as a genuine expression of sociability and distance themselves from it.

The fragility of sociability has serious practical implications for domestic workers and service organisations. Given that personalised service is profitable, how can service organisations increase the likelihood that customers will experience service interactions as personalised, without providing guidelines for the formalities and informalities of customer service (for example, rules about greetings, smiles, and goodbyes)? It appears as if sociability is likely to take place when it is a genuine option, and not a requirement. If we take this premise, it would mean service organisations should provide adequate working conditions where time is allocated for short interactions with customers, to establish trusting relationships and to sustain dialogue about the goals and meaning of their role within the organization.

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