



'It's as if I'm Worth Nothing'—Cost-Driven Restructuring and the Dignity of Long-Term Workers in Finland's State-Owned Postal Service Company

Atte Vieno¹

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Abstract

Organisational restructuring involving cost-cutting, downsizing, and the acquisition and divestment of different functions is an increasingly normalised aspect of employment in both the private and public sectors. This article takes up the question of the effects of restructuring on workers through a study based on in-depth, semi-structured interviews of long-term workers in Finland's state-owned postal service, using the concept of dignity as an analytical lens. The article distinguishes between everyday, organisational, and social dignity, using this distinction to capture how workers strove to sustain dignity in a process of organisational restructuring that generated dignity threats related to occupational devaluation. The study shows how dignity in postal work has been dependent on a particular historical configuration of public service work involving the employer organisation, employment relations, and occupational values. Cost-driven restructuring has destabilised this configuration, producing a stark separation between dignity in everyday work and the organisational indignities of restructuring in postal workers' experiences. Feeling unable to affect organisational changes in their work, postal workers have been left to sustain dignity through everyday relationality, and by drawing intra-organisational boundaries to temporary workers and upper managers based on an occupational hierarchy of commitment and competence. The study highlights the significance of organisational support for dignity at work, particularly in relation to the dignity threats generated by prolonged processes of restructuring.

Keywords Dignity · Dignity threats · Dignity work · Employment relations · Occupational devaluation · Older workers · Postal workers · Public sector · Restructuring

Introduction

In Finland as in many other countries, the public sector and its employer organisations have since the 1990s been subject to forms of restructuring involving downsizing and the liberalisation and privatisation of public services. Aspects of the restructuring of the state such as managerialism, marketisation, and liberalised competition are connected to adverse consequences for working conditions and employment relations in public services (Fairbrother & Poynter, 2001; Flecker et al., 2016; Holst, 2014), although researchers also

caution that such outcomes are not deterministic (Helfen et al., 2020). Across Europe, workers employed in services with a historically strong state role including telecoms, railways, aviation, and postal services, have in recent decades been impacted by restructuring. The transformation of public sector organisations providing these services mirrors practices in the private sector, where the dominance of shareholder value and increasingly financialised measures of performance contributes to the normalisation of perpetual restructuring (Cushen & Thompson, 2016). On the organisational level, restructuring is connected to processes of downsizing and work intensification involving potentially increasing ill-being among remaining workers through mechanisms such as psychological contract breach (Datta et al., 2010; Jong et al., 2016), but research on restructuring has often lacked a holistic perspective on workers' experiences (Harney et al., 2017).

✉ Atte Vieno
atte.vieno@helsinki.fi

¹ Department of Social Sciences, Sociology, University of Helsinki, Töölöntorinkatu 4 B 38, 00260 Helsinki, Finland

The impacts of prolonged and normalised processes of organisational restructuring may be felt by workers through changes in their employment status or terms of employment, but they also relate to the moral economy of work, in which the norms and sentiments of reflective actors meet economic practices and pressures (Bolton & Laaser, 2013; Laaser, 2016). In critical studies of contemporary work, ‘dignity’ has emerged as a conceptual tool enabling the investigation of the complex ways in which workers’ experiences of work are shaped by subjective meanings, working conditions, and tensions between management and workers’ agency (Bolton, 2007; Hodson, 2001). Work-related dignity involves self-respect on the job, opportunities for intrinsically satisfying work, livelihood and economic security, fair treatment in the workplace, and the capacity to make a social contribution (Berg & Frost, 2005; Bolton, 2007; Hodson, 2001; Rayman, 2001). The experience of dignity is fundamentally relational, connected to perceptions of how one is treated by others and to both positive and negative emotions, including pride and shame (Sayer, 2007).

Much of the literature on dignity has been concerned with threats to dignity, arising from issues including denials of autonomy and abusive interactions in the workplace (Hodson, 2001), insecure employment relationships (Noronha et al., 2020; Smith, 2016), the stigmatisation of particular jobs as ‘dirty work’ (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Hamilton et al., 2019), and low organisational, occupational, or social status (Crowley, 2014; Lucas, 2015; Noronha et al., 2020; Yu, 2016), with neoliberal forms of restructuring potentially intensifying such threats (Crowley & Hodson, 2014). This article takes up the question of dignity threats and organisational inequalities in relation to restructuring in the context of public services, where the capacity to perceive a social contribution in one’s own work has been identified as a central element of dignity (Flecker et al., 2016; Hamilton et al., 2019).

Empirically, the study is based on in-depth, semi-structured interviews examining the experiences of long-term workers in the restructuring of the Finnish postal service Posti Group (operating under the name Itella between 2007 and 2014). Run until 1990 by the state as part of the Postal and Telecoms Office, the postal service was separated into a financially autonomous state-owned enterprise during the 1990s. In the 2010s, Posti Group has sought to maintain and increase profitability through the increased automation and centralisation of operations together with extensive cost-cutting programs, which have involved downsizing its workforce and increased utilisation of subcontracting and temporary agency work.

The increasing significance of market competition and a logic of profitability at a large employer with a legacy of public service provision makes Posti Group a fitting site in which to study how structures enabling dignity are

being reshaped in public service transformation. The study approaches the dynamics of dignity by investigating sources of dignity, dignity threats, and workers’ ways of sustaining dignity amid these threats as contributing to a historically shifting configuration of dignity in postal work.

Work and Working Conditions as Sources of Dignity and Dignity Threats

Contributions to the literature on dignity at work emphasise the multidimensionality of the concept. A fundamental point of departure involves the distinction between a classical notion of earned dignity as honour attached to achievements, social positions, and cultivated dispositions, and a modern notion of inherent dignity attributed to persons (Lucas, 2015). Both are at stake in experiences of work, as the instrumentality of capitalist employment relationships has the potential to produce threats to inherent dignity (Sayer, 2007), while the difficulties of agreeing on and rewarding contributions often produce tensions related to the organisational distribution of earned dignity (Lucas, 2015). Another important distinction concerns ‘dignity in work’ as involving autonomy, self-respect, and meaning, and ‘dignity at work’ as structures and practices underpinning working conditions, rewards, terms of employment, the exercise of voice, and equality of opportunity (Bolton, 2007). The interplay of objective working conditions and workers’ own practices of meaning-making and agency has been identified as a crucial focus for critical studies of work aiming to avoid connotations of structure and agency (Laaser & Karlsson, 2022).

Experiences of (in)dignity are fundamentally relational and emotional, as maintaining a sense of dignity is contingent on recognition by others and being treated as one deserving of dignity (Sayer, 2007). Dignity and its denial relate to the social bond as an emotional experience of one’s relation to others, what Thomas Scheff (2001) has referred to as the ‘emotional/relational’ world. In the emotional and relational experience of the self, the social emotions of pride and shame are of central significance, and Scheff (2013) analyses these as relating to secure and connected (pride) or insecure and disconnected (shame) states of the social bond. Pride is thus related to a secure sense of recognised dignity, whereas shame is related to both anticipated and realised dignity threats.

Empirical analysis of sources of and threats to dignity might be facilitated by distinguishing analytically between the everyday workplace, organisational status hierarchies, and social dignity beyond the workplace as different levels of relationality on which the dignity of work emerges. The level of workplace relationality is fundamental for dignity in work as a subjective experience of autonomous, interesting, and meaningful work (Bolton, 2007), generated through

relational recognition by others as a competent and capable actor (Sayer, 2007). Threats to dignity on this level involve denials of autonomy and competence, as well as uncivil and abusive interactions in which dignity is disrespected (Hodson, 2001).

Beyond the everyday workplace context, another analytical level involves dignity in relation to the workers' experiences of organisational membership. On this level, objective conditions of dignity at work such as equality of opportunity, just rewards, voice, safe working conditions, and employment security (Bolton, 2007; see also Smith, 2016) are important markers of organisational status. Organisational respect involves respecting inherent dignity by ensuring safety, security, and membership, as well as respecting earned dignity by balancing between recognising contributions while avoiding the institutionalisation of excessive status inequalities (Lucas, 2015). Structures providing for organisational dignity can be strongly shaped by factors outside the organisation, such as national labour regulations, collective bargaining institutions, and the exertion of power in supply chains (Thompson & Newsome, 2016).

A third analytical level involves the dignity of work beyond the workplace. Rayman's (2001) categories of livelihood, self-respect, and social contribution are informative in conceptualising this social aspect of the dignity of work. Attaining a recognised socio-occupational status and providing for one's own livelihood are normative markers of adulthood, and failing to attain such markers may involve stigmatisation and indignity (Paugam, 2016). Organisational and occupational prestige, the financial rewards earned through work, and the perceived social contribution of one's work are all implicated in the social valuation of different forms of work. Particular jobs may also be devalued through their perception as 'dirty work', perceptions which arise from the ascription of physical, social, or moral taint (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Hamilton et al., 2019).

Work, Inequality, and Pathways to Dignity

Conditions enabling dignity at work as well as workers' capacities to experience dignity in work are related to patterns of inequality both within organisations and in broader society. These patterns of inequality can be examined through the concept of class, which has a long and contested history in sociological research. In this study, the conceptualisation of class relies on the work of Bourdieu (1984), in which unequal distributions of economic, social, and cultural capital form a central element. Distributions of capital are related to trajectories leading to different social positions, and life experiences lead people to internalise a sense of such trajectories, generating a sense of the possible on which they draw when prompted to consider their options

in particular circumstances (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 110; Atkinson, 2010, pp. 415–416).

In his own work, Bourdieu paid comparatively little attention to the significance of work and economic capital (Sayer, 2005). In this sphere, key aspects of inequality relate to differing positions in the labour process and resources for navigating the labour market. On the level of the labour process, workers may be subject to very different forms of control emphasising either coercion or worker participation and involvement (Hodson, 2001; Thompson, 2003). In workplace ethnographies, descriptions of coercive forms of workplace control have been shown to relate almost exclusively to manual and service work (Crowley, 2014). Workers' vulnerability to coercive control also relates to their position in the labour market, as workers with limited capital are forced to take up jobs in which insecure and coercive forms of control are more prevalent (Alberti, 2014).

While position in the labour process and resources on the labour market clearly influence workers' capacities to sustain dignity in work, the multidimensionality of dignity means that this relationship cannot be understood as deterministic. Buzzanell and Lucas (2013) note how workers' relations to their careers are shaped by differing emphases on meaning, money, security, and leisure as reasons for work. The literature on dignity contains many examples of workers seeking to sustain their dignity in difficult circumstances such as overwork (Stacey, 2005), insecurity (Noronha et al., 2020), and social devaluation (Hamilton et al., 2019). A common thread in these studies is the ways in which the meaning of work is perceived through commitments to other people, places, and practices. This is a point addressed by Andrew Sayer (2005), who criticises Bourdieu's approach to class as downplaying human capacities for reflexive moral and emotional reasoning. Sayer (2005, pp. 39–42) argues that the forming and upholding of commitments to causes, practices, and persons enables the development of moral character as a matter of both personal identity and social recognition. Violations of valued commitments are prone to generate senses of injustice and forms of opposition (Bolton & Laaser, 2013).

Class inequalities are detrimental not only because of the denial of material goods, but also because they constrain opportunities to choose and form commitments allowing for the construction of self-worth (Sayer, 2005, pp. 126–133). Studies of multiple industries including railways, banking, and telecommunications have shown how stable moral orders and traditions supported by large employers have historically allowed workers to form commitments through which they have been able to develop a sense of moral worth (Laaser, 2016; Mackenzie et al., 2017; Strangleman, 2012). While such moral orders may provide pathways to dignity, they can also be undermined by shifts in the economy, corporate governance, and the labour process, which become

particularly evident when they are accompanied by protracted processes of restructuring.

Public Service Transformation and Restructuring at Posti Group

Restructuring in the Finnish postal service is related to a broader European context of public service transformation. Since the 1990s, European governments have engaged in the liberalisation of formerly monopolised public services particularly in the energy, telecommunications, transport, and postal sectors, a process which has been facilitated by the European Union and by neoliberal political agendas advocating for the efficiency of competition and privatised service provision (Hermann & Verhoest, 2012, pp. 11). The ensuing processes of reform have been found to have undermined the job security, decent wages, and opportunities for career advancement that were hallmarks of European public sector employment in the postwar era (Holst, 2014; Schulten & Brandt, 2012). In a comparative study of postal service reform, Brandt and Hermann (2012) found that former European postal monopoly companies have responded to liberalisation by cutting labour costs and by attempts to restructure their labour processes through work intensification, direct control, and the deployment of labour-saving technology, leading to a deterioration of working conditions.

At Posti Group, restructuring has involved an interplay of competitive pressures generated by liberalisation, a shift of institutional logic from public service provider to a publicly owned company seeking profitability, and technological changes in communication and delivery. Under what is called the universal service provision, Posti Group is obligated to carry out the delivery of stamped letters and internationally outbound parcels up to 10 kg, while other postal services including corporate billing, newspaper delivery, and most parcel delivery are open to competition. While the digitalisation of communications is driving a decline in the volume of mailed letters and newspapers, the simultaneous expansion of electronic commerce is driving increased demand in a competitive market for the sorting and delivery of goods. In the 2010s Posti Group has responded to these pressures by undertaking consecutive cost-cutting programs, including a 3-year program seeking to cut annual costs by 100 m€ launched in 2011, a further 2-year program of 100 m€ annually launched in 2013, a program of 75 m€ in 2015–2016, and a program of 150–200 m€ in 2019–2021 (Itella, 2011, 2013; Posti Group, 2016; Pöyry, 2019).

Posti Group has sought to lower its operating costs in various ways, which have included investments in automation as well as the restructuring of its functions. During the 2010s, almost all post offices have been closed, with their functions turned over to outside postal agents (such as kiosks

or supermarkets) and parcel storage systems operating on self-service principles. Mail and package sorting has been increasingly automated and centralised, which has resulted in a decrease in the number of units operating local deliveries, from around 800 to 200 over a period of 10 years according to the postal workers' trade union (Pöyry, 2020).

These processes of cost-cutting and restructuring have also involved labour-shedding and an ongoing transformation of employment relations. One manifestation of this has been downsizing, with the number of full-time equivalent personnel employed by the company declining from 22 129 to 16 780 between 2008 and 2018 (Itella, 2008; Posti Group, 2018). Employment relations have also been qualitatively transformed through the establishment and acquisition of subsidiary companies and the increasing use of temporary agency workers.

This study takes up restructuring of the labour process and employment relations at Posti Group as a process of moral economy (Bolton & Laaser, 2013), seeking to understand the ways in which this process is reshaping workers' capacities to find pathways to dignity through their work. Earlier studies have documented an ethos of public service involving a contribution to the common good through which postal and other public service workers have been able to lay claim to dignity in their work (Flecker et al., 2016; Hamilton et al., 2019). This study takes up this question of the dignity of public service work, examining it in relation to a prolonged process of restructuring and cost-cutting.

Data and Methods

The data of the study consists of 21 semi-structured interviews with current or recently separated workers of Posti Group, with each interview lasting between 70 and 150 minutes. These interviews were collected between January of 2020 and September 2021 as part of a broader study concerned with workers' experiences of restructuring in service work organisations. Interviews were adopted as an appropriate method for studying dimensions of social experience related to emotions, self-concepts, morals, and ways in which people strive to find worth and value in their experiences (Lamont & Swidler, 2014).

To avoid affiliating the study with company management, interviewees were recruited by circulating an invitation to participate on two social media channels, one of them a channel of the postal workers' trade union, another one an informal channel for workers at Posti Group. The invitation was specifically aimed at rank-and-file workers, and the participants who responded had work histories in either mail sorting or as mail carriers, with four interviewees having risen to a supervisory position in relation to these processes. The invitation also specified that participants should have

a work history of at least 2 years, ensuring that they had the ability to evaluate changes which had occurred at the workplace. All participants had several years of experience at Posti Group, with 10 years of service being typical even in the case of the younger interviewees. While there was a lack of women among the mail carriers participating in the study, this is balanced by the fact that the four participating female delivery supervisors had all previously worked as mail carriers. More details of the participants are provided in Table 1.

Workers with long experience appear to have been particularly motivated to participate in the study. This was consistent with the aims of the study, as these are likely to be workers for whom postal service work has been a significant commitment and are also well-placed to evaluate the changes organisational restructuring has brought over time. Despite its limited size, the sample holds information power (Malterud et al., 2016) derived from a specific focus on a particular group of workers, a thematic focus on organisational restructuring, and the salience of the research theme for interviewees which enabled the dialogical emergence of informative, in-depth accounts. The most important limitations of the sample relate to workers who are not represented, these being workers who have

recently started work at Posti Group, temporary agency workers, and workers of migrant background. The information power of the sample thus relates to the perspectives of long-term workers of Finnish background.

Research design was informed by a combination of theoretically directed and inductive methodology. The design of the interview guide was informed by a broad interest of examining workers' experiences of restructuring in relation to the labour process, employment relations, and corporate management as distinct analytical levels (see Thompson, 2013). Questions in the interview guide were designed to cover these different levels and related topics such as workplace community while remaining neutral and open-ended. Workers were not directly questioned about dignity but were instead asked to elaborate on what they felt to be positive or negative aspects of their jobs. Other central topics of the interviews concerned workers' histories of postal work, their experiences of changes at work in relation to restructuring, and their feelings regarding their present situation and occupational future.

Data analysis was conducted according to principles of directed qualitative content analysis, which is characterised by the alternation of prior theory and inductive coding over multiple iterations of analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). After interview recordings were transcribed, an initial round of coding was conducted to organise the data into topics, with particular attention paid to how workers related to different levels of everyday work and the organisation as well as different groups in and beyond the workplace. This initial coding generated themes across a broad range of topics, such as positive aspects of jobs, emotions related to restructuring, and relations with management. Based on this initial immersion in the data and after consideration of its relationship to prior research, dignity was adopted as an appropriate concept to narrow the topic of the study and guide further analysis. Analysis was then directed towards examining sources of dignity in postal work, injuries to dignity generated by restructuring, and the ways in which workers attempted to sustain their dignity in the face of such injuries. Interview summaries focused on these issues were produced, and these revealed important tensions within single interviews, such as that between commitment to the work and reducing effort to protect dignity. In the writing and review process, further rounds of analysis were conducted to develop second-order categories based on the initial codes, the focus on dignity, and the analytical levels of everyday work, organisational membership, and society beyond the workplace. In the following empirical sections, analysis of the sources of, injuries to, and means of sustaining dignity on different levels is based on these second-order categories.

Table 1 Interview participants

Gender	Last held position	Age*	Employment status (current or former employee)
Female	Delivery supervisor	40 s	Former
Female	Delivery supervisor	40 s	Current
Female	Delivery supervisor	40 s	Current
Female	Delivery supervisor	50 s	Current
Male	Mail carrier	20 s	Current
Male	Mail carrier	40 s	Current
Male	Mail carrier	40 s	Current
Male	Mail carrier	50 s	Current
Male	Mail carrier	50 s	Current
Male	Mail carrier	50 s	Current
Male	Mail carrier	60 s	Former
Male	Sorting worker	30 s	Current
Male	Sorting worker	30 s	Current
Female	Sorting worker	40 s	Current
Female	Sorting worker	40 s	Current
Female	Sorting worker	40 s	Current
Female	Sorting worker	50 s	Current
Male	Sorting worker	50 s	Current
Male	Sorting worker	50 s	Current
Male	Sorting worker	50 s	Current
Male	Sorting worker	60 s	Former

In interview excerpts, interviewees' background is reported in order of position, gender, and age, e.g.: (sorting worker, M, 50 s)

*Reported as indeterminate to protect participant anonymity

Sources of Dignity in Postal Work

In the interviews, workers constructed the dignity of postal work by drawing on multiple sources across the levels of the everyday experience of work, their position in and relationship to the postal service as an organisation, and the broader social significance of postal work and their own participation in its accomplishment.

Finding Meaning in Everyday Postal Work: Spaces of Autonomy, Competence, and Commonality

The everyday rhythms and accomplishments of postal work emerged as a significant source through which workers described positive aspects of their work. While the specifics of these positive experiences differed according to workers' different roles in the labour process, they nevertheless revealed a common orientation towards intrinsic meaning as a significant reason for work (Buzzanell & Lucas, 2013). Workers constructed a sense of everyday meaningfulness in three interrelated ways: in descriptions of autonomy on the job, by drawing attention to their competence and contribution in the labour process, and through descriptions of commonality and social connection in the workplace.

In the accounts of sorting workers and mail carriers, descriptions of autonomy emerged in relation to the elements of repetitiveness in their work. Manual workers have been noted to be prone to forms of coercive and direct control limiting their opportunities for the exercise of autonomy (Crowley, 2014), which in turn poses a threat to their sense of dignity (Sayer, 2007). The workers in this study acknowledged elements of repetitiveness, but many of them drew attention to spaces of autonomy in their work, forestalling simplistic perceptions of their work as simple, monotonous, and unskilled: 'There's a lot of the same from day-to-day, the routines and such. But you can kind of switch it around a bit.' (sorting worker, F, 40s). The most minimal level of autonomy thus involved carving out small spaces of freedom in the way workers performed the work in a hierarchically managed and potentially monotonous labour process. For mail carriers, autonomy as freedom from micromanagement was most evident in descriptions on being out 'on the route':

'When we say we leave to go on the route, that's when you actually get out there to deliver, and that's when I'm on my own, maybe meeting some of the recipients, making my own pace, and that was always a good moment.' (mail carrier, M, 60s).

Besides being valued in themselves, spaces of autonomy in everyday work also allowed for the development and use

of occupational competence. For mail carriers, their work on the route involved not only freedom, but the satisfaction of acquiring and using local knowledge:

'When you're on a route you know, and you remember the people who've lived there for years, then you can see it if there's been a mistake in the automatic sorting, and you can stop that mistake there. There's still a responsibility to it and a skill to it, even if it's less than before.' (mail carrier, M, 20s).

Many of the sorting workers were likewise able to assert a sense of occupational competence against perceptions of their jobs as simple and monotonous:

'It actually does take a while to get the hang of it, it's not so easy like you'd just learn it in a second, and it's been to my advantage to learn a lot of different tasks [...] driving a forklift for example [...] once you learn them you get them in your muscle memory. Or learning postal codes, which number is in which building and learning the area of your own unit by heart.' (sorting worker, F, 40s).

Recognising and acknowledging monotonous elements of their jobs, both mail carriers and sorting workers nevertheless found and valued everyday spaces for autonomy and the development and exercise of occupational competence, spaces which were highly significant for their capacities to experience their work as meaningful.

Besides opportunities for autonomy and competence in the labour process, meaningfulness in everyday postal work also emerged through depictions of commonality and social connection. Some of these were connected to a sense of engagement in relation to a common effort, as for this sorting worker who was part of a team charged with operating a particular sorting machine: 'when people work, when the machines work, it's surprisingly satisfying, everything snaps prettily into place and neat little packages come out' (sorting worker, F, 40 s). In other cases, social relationships emerged as meaningful without reference to the demands of the labour process, as in the case of one mail carrier who would regularly check up on an older woman with Alzheimer's disease during his regular route. Many workers valued a sense of commonality between postal workers, which was often described as an atmosphere of informality conducive to meaningful coworker relationships: 'It's an old-school, face-to-face kind of workplace [...] people are really just being themselves, there's kind of a feel like it's just a gang of friends, out in the backwoods' (sorting worker, F, 40 s).

Autonomy, competence, and commonality thus emerged as ways through which both mail carriers and sorting workers were able to experience everyday postal work as meaningful. This everyday meaningfulness was constrained insofar as it was carved out within a labour process involving

aspects of monotony and restricted autonomy, but nevertheless highly significant for workers' capacities to experience their jobs as satisfying, dignified, and valuable.

The Organisational Dignity of Postal Work: Occupational Values and the Security of the 'Bread of the State'

Beyond the everyday experience of work, workers constructed their relationship to postal work on a longer temporal scale, interweaving the history of the postal service with their personal biographies and trajectories of employment. This historical sense is encapsulated in the following account provided by one of the oldest participants in the study, who recalled entering the postal service in the 1970s in a remote industrial town:

'I had this sense of knowing [about postal work], not first-hand, but we lived in a place where I could see the postmen go to work. There was a kind of respect then for the Post, for the proper uniforms and such. And it's what everybody used to say "the bread of the state is long and thin", and I remember when I started how people said, "oh, how good that you got a job there". [...] There was a sense of it being a good job and a sure wage, although the actual pay was poor in those days. [...] The pay would have been better by half at the [paper] mill, but I went to the Post instead.' (sorting worker, M, 60s).

This account of getting a permanent position at the Post demonstrates the significance of the postal service as an employer in a small-town milieu defined by constrained employment opportunities. It also encapsulates the sense of organisational dignity which older workers recalled was attached to the postal service in this period, when postal workers were employed as civil servants. Related to this is the significance of employment security as a particular aspect of the dignity of the civil servant, in contrast to the unpredictability of private sector employment.

Within the postal service, older workers remembered being inducted into a system of occupational values:

'There's this kind of old-time postman's work ethic. In the 80s and 90s we still had these postman's courses, I was on the second to last to graduate. That was a time when people were really committed to the Post, there was a civil service responsibility, of taking care of the customers. Even today, now that official responsibility is gone, I still want to make sure that customers get their goods properly and intact.' (sorting worker, M, 50s).

This worker presents accurate, timely, and careful delivery as central occupational values internalised by workers and historically fostered by the organisation, showing how commitment to the Post and its customers was embedded in an organisational moral order and a tradition of responsible civil service. Finnish Postal workers ultimately lost their status as civil servants with incorporation in 1994, similar to developments in other European postal services (see Brandt & Hermann, 2012, pp. 64). Nevertheless, the history of the post as a public service continued to emerge as significant in workers' commitments to occupational values and the way they related to the organisation in the present.

Another aspect of organisational dignity was faith in the security of postal work, even for workers who had joined the organisation in the 1980s and 1990s. Connected to this sense of security was a notion of the availability of postal work:

'I'd failed in my studies... I just had to come up with something. In the 80s they'd [the postal service] take in anyone who could physically cross the threshold.' (mail carrier, M, 60s).

While organisational prestige was diminished from its heyday in the 1970s, the postal service was until the recent past perceived as a secure employer where work was available irrespective of prior qualifications. Entering postal work was often related to a sense of 'having to come up with something' in life histories involving constrained circumstances. For some workers, these were related to adversity in education or difficulties in finding work matching educational qualifications. For others, they involved job loss or work-related health issues which had pushed them out of other fields, often involving periods of unemployment, as was the case with this sorting worker:

'I found out in a nasty way [in a previous job in the public sector] that night work really wasn't for me. I came down with depression. So I quit. Everyone told me I was crazy to quit, when I had a permanent position in a government job. But it was my health or the job [...] and it was hell to find work after that. In the end I felt like I'd do pretty much anything. I really had to just lower my standards.' (sorting worker, F, 50s).

Later in the interview, she recalled the transformative effect of gaining regular employment after years of financial dependence on her husband:

'One thing is that you get just a bit of money [...] it used to be my husband was maintaining me, really it was dismal, like I was on an allowance or something [...] I was so happy to get a regular job. Even if it's just doing this and the pay is just that, still it was like a little solid, stone foundation.'

Throughout workers' narratives spanning multiple decades, entry into postal work was a process framed by a sense of constraints in relation to uncertain and limited opportunities in the labour market. This sense of constraint can be understood in relation to Bourdieu's theory of class as the possession of resources of economic, cultural, and social capital. Without reserves of money or educational qualifications, many of the workers in this study had been forced to navigate situations of constrained opportunities, dominated by pressures of economic necessity and consciousness of the social indignity of prolonged unemployment (see also Atkinson, 2010). Experiences of insecurity led these workers to place great value on security as a reason for work. The postal service provided work that was available, guaranteed a decent wage, and had until recently remained powerfully connected to a promise of secure employment in the public sector. European postal services have traditionally been among the largest employers in their national economies (Brandt & Hermann, 2012, pp. 63). For the workers in this study, the organisational configuration of the postal service as a large, well-known employer providing available and secure employment was crucial in enabling a route to dignity in employment despite the constraints many of them encountered in the broader labour market.

The Social Dignity of Postal Work: Social Contribution and Recognition

Beyond everyday work and the organisation, workers also constructed their sense of dignity through the ways in which their work related to outsiders, including postal customers and civil society:

'It appeals to me to know that this is the old Finnish Post, and to know that we're delivering citizens' mail. I'd much rather do this than sell insurance or some pointless hustle [...] it's honourable.' (sorting worker, F, 40s).

The honour of postal work derived from the provision of a public service necessary to customers. Perception of workers' own part in this socially valuable task went together with a sense of occupational responsibility in handling the communications and goods of others: '[the mail] is a message from somebody and to somebody, and I want to take it seriously' (sorting worker, M, 60 s). Beyond this responsibility to customers, some workers also drew connections to broader social functions of the postal service:

'It's [public service] one of the most important things in the job. Reliable and neutral relaying of information, it's an important aspect of a civilised state and getting societal matters done. Traditionally the Post has had a

big role in running elections, and in relation to public health and such.' (sorting worker, M, 50s).

Workers' sense of social contribution beyond the workplace was thus configured not only in a narrow sense through responsibility to customers, but also through a broader sense of being employed by an institution with a civic purpose, with both of these feeding into a sense of social dignity derived from contributing to a broader common good (see also Flecker et al., 2016; Hamilton et al., 2019).

Expectations that contributions to the common good should be matched by social recognition are fundamental to the earned aspect of dignity (Lucas, 2015; Sayer, 2007). When postal workers considered the social prestige of their work, they did so through descriptions of its decline:

'On that matter [reputation of the Post], 10 years ago, when leaving work, you'd keep your Post jacket on when you went shopping for your milk. Nowadays you'll make sure there's nothing on you that refers to the Post.' (delivery supervisor, F, 40s).

Organisational prestige thus appeared as a lost source of dignity, a missing counterpart of social recognition to workers' own sense of social contribution. Read together with their expressions of personal pride in the provision of a public service, workers' accounts of feeling pride in the past point to an ideal of social dignity in which the provision of a needed service should be reciprocated by social recognition. Taken in this way, social dignity is a matter of the social bond involving both contribution and recognition, together with a sense of earned pride rooted in secure social connectedness (Scheff, 2013, pp. 115, 116).

Everyday, organisational, and social sources thus combined to shape a particular configuration of dignity of postal work. For workers, this configuration appeared as an ideal through which they could demonstrate their commitments and develop critiques of transformations affecting their work (Strangleman, 2012). In the next section, I turn to the ways in which public service transformation and organisational restructuring were experienced by workers as destabilising the moral order of postal work and generating threats to their dignity.

Dignity Threats in the Restructuring of the Postal Service

Dignity threats emerged mainly in relation to recent experiences of organisational restructuring. They were often related to the sources of dignity perceived in the earlier configuration of postal work: everyday autonomy and competence were being threatened by automation and micro-management, organisational employment security by layoffs

and the introduction of fragmented employment systems, and social dignity by a sense of deteriorated levels of service and devalued organisational prestige. Beyond this deterioration of an earlier configuration of dignity, injuries to dignity were compounded by a sense of intra-organisational status inequality stemming from powerlessness in restructuring processes.

Everyday Dignity Threats: Intensification, Constrained Autonomy, and Social Fragmentation of the Workplace

Restructuring affected workers in the everyday through the introduction of changes in the organisation of the labour process. While these changes took different forms for sorting workers, mail carriers, and their supervisors, they had a common origin in forms of restructuring oriented towards reducing labour costs, a type of restructuring identified in earlier research as a source of work intensification which can generate imbalances between job demands and resources (Harney et al., 2017).

Intensification was particularly central in the accounts of mail carriers and supervisors. For mail carriers, intensification was related to a long-term trend of increased workloads brought about by the enlargement of their routes: 'efficiency means 900 drops on a route that used to have 450', as one delivery supervisor put it. This has brought increased physical strain, and several mail carriers reported of injuries they connected to their increased workloads. Supervisors in the study also reported of increased demands in their own work:

'It was just the workload [...] there was pressure to get such and such tasks done in a set time, and when you can't make it then you clock overtime and you shouldn't be clocking any overtime [...] it was just stressful running with the staff we had.' (delivery supervisor, F, 40s).

Supervisors felt caught between managerial demands and diminishing resources with which to meet those demands, manifested in reduced staffing levels, a lack of administrative assistants, and pressure to avoid overtime hours. Both mail carriers and supervisors struggled with a sense of inadequacy in meeting increased demands in a work environment dominated by cost-oriented restructuring. Overwork thus emerged as a major factor hindering workers' capacity to experience a positive sense of meaning in everyday work (see also Stacey, 2005).

In addition to increased workloads, workers also reported of the intensification of management control and surveillance in the labour process. Some of the mail carriers complained of being sidelined from involvement in the planning of delivery districts, which had been increasingly automated: '[Planning] by somebody on the Excel, knowing bugger-all

about delivery work or the characteristics of different districts and such' (mail carrier, M, 40 s). Planners' ignorance of delivery work was perceived to produce increasing inequalities between workers assigned to different delivery districts. On their routes, mail carriers complained of task fragmentation produced by increasingly automated mail sorting. Increased automation meant that carriers were being asked to follow rigid task instructions as they delivered automatically sorted mail, in contrast to an earlier system in which they themselves had been able to construct their delivery 'bundles':

'We go by the work instruction. Accuracy has been put aside, that would require looking at the addresses and names, and comparing and stopping to think. [...] But I have many years of experience of that area, and sometimes my hand just stops and I think, wait, does that person really live there... [...] you just have to go by the order [...] Accuracy and local knowledge are pretty much lost.' (mail carrier, M, 50s).

This mail carrier provided a vivid image of struggle over the 'frontier of control' (see Hughes & Dobbins, 2021) in the labour process, with the conflict between management aiming to exert increasingly minute control and the mail carrier's own sense of occupational autonomy and competence being played out in the movement of his hand. While sorting workers were less concerned with their autonomy being constrained—perhaps because they had enjoyed less autonomy in the first place—they too reported of increased surveillance and constrained autonomy, such as experiments involving tracking the weight of mail sorted by a particular worker. Processes combining automation and surveillance thus contributed to a sense among workers of being reduced to the status of unskilled labourers.

In addition to increased workloads and constrained autonomy, workers connected processes of restructuring to a fraying of social connections and commonality in the workplace. Mail sorting in particular had become increasingly characterised by a fragmented employment system involving regular full-time workers, 'regular part-time workers' (often students), and temporary agency workers among whom there was greater turnover:

'The old Post folk do chat and so on. But there's so many of these temps we've had and they go in their own groups, on breaks and such. [...] it has changed the culture a lot. [...] It's more like they're in it for the money, as we are of course, but they don't all care whether the goods are delivered right and intact.' (sorting worker, M, 50s).

Fragmentation in employment relations was thus reflected in a fragmentation of social relations involving social boundaries between different groups of workers. This was

experienced by workers as a diminishment of workplace commonality, particularly in relation to a sense of commitment to shared occupational values. Regular workers found the high turnover of temporary workers to be destabilising: they were ‘here today, and gone tomorrow’ (sorting worker, M, 60 s). These issues were aggravated by the increasing application of different collective bargaining agreements to some temporary workers, resulting in them receiving less compensation while working side-by-side with regular workers, who were also expected to participate in their training. This proximity was reported as a source of complicated and charged emotions involving resentment towards both temporary workers and management, but also shame regarding permanent workers’ better position in relation to temporary workers. On the other hand, younger part-time workers were often critical of older regulars whom they perceived as having become demoralised and unable to carry their weight. Tensions between groups were particularly aggravated during periods of industrial conflict, in which regular workers suspected temporary workers of being used as ‘scabs’ to replace striking workers. The net result was a fragmentation of the workplace social environment, which complicated workers’ efforts to find meaning in the everyday social relationships of the workplace.

Organisational Dignity Threats: Insecurity, Fragmented Employment Systems, and Status Inequality

On the level of organisational membership, successive projects of top-down restructuring involving drives toward downsizing, cost-cutting, and attempts at renegotiating terms of employment less favourable for workers had brought about a loss of confidence in the security of employment relationships. Workers expressed an acute sense of insecurity in relation to both the continuation of their employment and future employment terms:

‘At some point, maybe 6 years ago, I thought this would be the job from which I’ll retire [...] I would think oh I’ll work here when I’m old and be here, receiving these shipments and taking down this information. Well, I don’t have those thoughts anymore.’ (sorting worker, F, 40s).

This account encapsulates how restructuring has effaced earlier imagined futures of employment in the postal service. Elsewhere in her interview, this worker summed up the way in which insecurity generated by management decisions and perceived drives to shed permanent workers was connected to a powerful sense of indignity:

‘The skill and the knowhow I’ve built up these 20 years, now it’s pointless, nobody values it. [...] It’s

as if I’m worth nothing. For the board and management, I’m just a bundle of expenses they want to be rid of.’

Workers’ senses of insecurity were reinforced by the increased use of nonstandard employment structures and temporary agency workers in their workplaces. In addition to the tensions that the use of temporary agency workers generated in the everyday, they were perceived by many regular workers as part of a broader management project of gradually institutionalising a new system of unskilled and devalued postal work, which exacerbated long-term workers’ sense of indignity toward the organisation. This is similar to how Lucas (2015) shows denials of competence as producing injuries to earned dignity, but in this case these injuries were not confined to specific events, being instead connected to an ongoing organisational transformation constantly generating new injuries in accordance with its own logic (see also Crowley & Hodson, 2014). Workers’ feelings of personal insecurity and the increased implementation of fragmented employment systems were thus connected to perceptions of the devaluation of their occupational competence in the eyes of management: ‘they seem to think they can just bring in people from the street to do it’ (mail carrier, M, 20 s).

Many workers referred to a ‘chasm’ separating line workers from upper management and the overall organisation. While hierarchical management in itself was seen as typical of the postal service, the restructuring of the 2010s was connected by workers to increasing intra-organisational inequality and the distancing of upper management from the traditional mission and values of the organisation. The outcome was a form of organisational indignity stemming from experiences of powerlessness and devaluation in relation to the ongoing transformation of their own work.

Social Dignity Threats: Service Quality, Organisational Devaluation, and Shame

Organisational restructuring was also connected by workers to a form of social indignity experienced beyond the workplace. This social indignity stemmed from negative publicity related to problems in service provision brought about by restructuring as well as contested processes of organisational restructuring in themselves. As a public service, the postal service is a visible part of society and workers’ recognised its significance in the public imagination. Public perceptions of lowered standards of service were connected in many workers’ accounts to a profound sense of shame: ‘It used to be nice to be someone who worked for the Post, but now I’m ashamed to say where I work [...] I think about how people picture the postal service, how even I myself see my employer’ (sorting worker, F, 40 s). This sense of shame

by association emerged in sharp contrast to the past sense of pride constructed through membership in what had been perceived as a prestigious public organisation.

Organisational devaluation involved not only self-perception but was reported by workers to affect their social interactions, to the extent that might feel compelled to provide excuses to justify remaining in their jobs:

'It's like, "well, I've just ended up staying somehow" or "well, it's because there's nothing else right now" or "well, it's my life situation at the moment, and I'm going to look for some other job", that's the way it's gone.' (sorting worker, F, 40s).

While inequality and powerlessness alienated workers within the organisation, this transformation of occupational pride into shame outside the workplace produced its own distinct sense of alienation, related to the insecure and increasingly devalued social status of both occupation and organisation (see Scheff, 2001, 2013).

Sustaining Dignity: Everyday Relationality, Drawing Intra-Organisational Boundaries, and the Possibility of Exit

The previous section has shown how cost-driven restructuring was a driver of exacerbated dignity threats related to the instrumental treatment of workers. In this section, I will consider workers' responses to these threats under conditions of protracted restructuring, involving both their capacity for dignity work (Noronha, 2020) and its limits in relation to everyday work, organisational membership, and social status.

Sustaining a Positive Relation to Everyday Work: Adjusting Effort, Bending the Rules and Cultivating Relationality

In the sphere of everyday work, workers responded to injuries to dignity by shifting their attitude towards everyday tasks. As one mail carrier explained it:

'I think there's been a great sense of conscientiousness through the years. But today, there's no more value to it. I've tried telling them [managers] that I'm a professional and you might want to listen me, but they ignore me [...] So I've thrown in my towel, in a mental sense. [...] I used to give 100 percent, now I'll maybe give it 60. If there's no respect, there's no point in expecting much effort.' (mail carrier, M, 50s).

Consciously reducing his work efforts served this mail carrier as a form of silent protest and a way of shielding himself from overwork and being taken advantage of, after

vocal protestation failed to achieve its purpose. This however involved a dilemma of how to maintain self-respect, and in another portion of the interview, this same mail carrier 'giving 60 percent' nevertheless noted:

'With this [new] machine sorting and inexperienced workers sorting, there's a lot of mistakes, and [on the route] you have to back up and make them right, even though we've been forbidden from doing that. But somehow [in me] there's that old senior postal official going "sometimes you just got to fix it".'

While experiences of disrespect and alienation from processes of restructuring could serve as moral justifications of restrained effort, a sense of occupational self-respect nevertheless necessitated continuing to apply oneself to the work and service of postal customers, which might also involve going beyond or against official instructions. Returning to Sayer's argument according to which commitments are significant for the formation of dignified self-identity (2005, pp. 39–42), reducing effort involved a difficult reassessment of one's commitment to a previously valued self-identity, in this case the identity of a postal worker bound to a historically and culturally shaped organisational ideal of conscientiousness demonstrated in the conduct of everyday tasks. Between and within interviews, workers varied in the emphasis they gave to restraining effort versus remaining committed to their work, balancing between refusing to 'give 100 percent' while nevertheless sustaining commitments to colleagues, customers, and to their own sense of occupational pride and professionalism. Rather than two neatly separate attitudes, these responses exemplify a dilemma of commitment and dignity in employment relationships saturated by the pressures of intensification, inequality, and insecurity (see also Stacey, 2005; Wieland, 2020).

Beyond adjusting their individual level of effort, workers sought to hold on to dignity in the everyday by maintaining mutually supportive relationships between co-workers and local managers. Insofar as workers were still able to sustain a positive relation to their work, they did so through the way they related to the tasks and people in their immediate workplace environment, as in this sorting worker's account:

'Our work is pretty independent, and we're good at it, and nobody bothers us too much or maybe even knows too much about it. We're a small group [...] we have such lovely people at work [...] The actual workplace where I work, the package sorting, in the end it's the same job it's been, even fun. All these [negative] thoughts and pressures, it's like they're all coming from somewhere out there.' (sorting worker, F, 40s).

The local relationality of the workplace supports both autonomy and competence in the everyday, and focusing on this sense of embedded relationality allows this worker

to sustain a positive relation to work, sharply distinguished from the ‘out there’ of organisational restructuring processes. The distinction between everyday work and organisational restructuring was further sustained through relational practices such as ‘venting’ about reforms with trusted coworkers and striking deals to bend inflexible rules with compliant local managers. Workers who were able to sustain a sense of meaning in postal work all drew on some combination of these crucial elements of autonomy, competence, and everyday relationality. In contrast, workers who were unable to draw on any of these elements were alienated from any sense of meaningful work, pointing to their significance as a minimal foundation of dignity and meaning in the pressures of restructuring.

Organisational Membership: Asserting Competence and Commitment Against Organisational Inequality

While workers were in differing degrees able to sustain a sense of meaning in their work through everyday relationality, it was apparent that injuries to dignity related to restructuring had profoundly reshaped their sense of occupational membership. Earlier research has shown how workers can construct dignity through alternative hierarchies of moral worth (Hamilton et al., 2019). For the long-term workers in this study, the reshaping of their sense of organisational membership was tightly bound to their experiences of lacking power in processes of restructuring. Against the intra-organisational hierarchy of power in relation to which they felt devalued, they posited an alternative hierarchy of occupational competence as the basis of a sense of dignified but threatened organisational membership.

Temporary agency workers and upper managers and planners emerged as significant groups against whom long-term workers sought to establish a sense of their own self-identity. In relation to temporary agency workers, long-term workers often emphasised their lack of both competence and commitment:

‘I mean it’s obvious isn’t it, if you bring someone in from off the street, and they’re here for 2 weeks, they don’t have any motivation to learn everything, they just do whatever [...] they make a mistake, there’s no fingerprint or anything, they just do it.’ (sorting worker, M, 50s).

Evaluations like this were common and stood in contrast with workers’ affirmations of their own sense of occupational commitment, even though this commitment might have become less absolute. Workers nevertheless recognised their own relatively privileged position in relation to temporary agency workers, and temporary workers’ own lack of status and power:

‘There they are next to you, doing the same job on half the wage [...] makes you feel this employer of mine isn’t really legitimate.’ (sorting worker, F, 40s).

This ambiguity in relation to temporary workers stood in contrast with workers’ relation to upper managers and planners, whom many workers viewed with a straightforward hostility, portraying them as lacking in a fundamental understanding of postal work necessary to successfully run operations:

‘All managers with experience of actual delivery work have been let go. That’s why it’s gone so bad [...] I’m the one who trains my own managers now [...] The attitude is like “oh, you’re just mail carriers” [...] They brought in incompetent people.’ (delivery supervisor, F, 50s).

Workers’ sense of managers and planners lack of practical knowledge of postal work generated resentment towards processes of restructuring implemented by these managers and planners, in relation to which workers experienced neither agency nor membership:

‘At first there were these changes, trying to figure out if we do this, whether it would make sense to do that. Well, it turned out these changes were never-ending, there would always be a new planner who had to justify their own job with another plan. After a while, nobody cares any more, it’s just yeah yeah, whatever.’ (mail carrier, M, 60 s).

Positioning themselves between temporary workers below and managers above them in an organisational hierarchy of power, long-term workers thus also asserted an alternative hierarchy of grounded competence and commitment, in which it was they who held superiority in relation to both temporary workers and upper managers. This assertion of competence and commitment in contrast to uncaring and inexperienced managers and unskilled temporary agency workers formed the core of long-term workers’ sense of collective dignity in relation to the pressures of organisational restructuring.

Social Status and Organisational Exit

Workers’ perceptions of their social status were commonly connected to considerations involving their occupational future and possibilities for organisational exit. Devalued social status was one factor pushing workers towards seeking organisational exit, alongside other factors such as overwork, health concerns, insecurity, and experiences of the devaluation of their occupational competence. Younger workers saw planning for organisational exit as a means of reclaiming

dignity in relation to work. In contrast, older workers tended towards a sense of constraint regarding their options:

'All my life I've been in a situation where I need money, and so I need to work. I've never had a feeling of, "alright, this I want to do in my life". [...] It's like this with everything I'd like to do: if you don't have economic security, you can forget about it. This job is so hard that you can't really do [studies] on the side. [...] These are things I've wrestled with forever. That's what's depressing, to hit the same wall again and again, to always find yourself in the same place, always with this same problem.' (sorting worker, F, 50s).

As this account shows, difficulties in finding alternative employment were related both to limited resources as well as the difficulty of reinventing one's commitments. The sense of constraint which was evident in many workers' narratives of entering the postal service re-emerged in their narratives of attempting to leave it. Workers identified old age, lack of savings, and educational qualifications as factors limiting their capacities to pursue dignified forms of employment beyond the postal service, leaving many of the oldest in particular to conclude that they had no options but to continue to bear the organisational indignities of restructuring. For the oldest postal workers, their expectations of being rejected by other employers constituted an anticipated form of social indignity discouraging them from seeking alternate employment.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study has used workplace dignity as a theoretical lens to examine an ongoing process of organisational restructuring in order to contribute to developing a better understanding of such processes from the workers' point of view (Harney et al., 2017). In doing so, the study has considered the interplay of subjective and objective dimensions (Laaser & Karlsson, 2022) while developing an analytical framework of everyday, organisational, and social dignity to generate new insights.

Previous research has noted how restructuring directed by organisational elites can sideline workers' agency and aggravate tendencies toward coercion and instrumentality in the labour process (Crowley & Hodson, 2014). Postal workers found that organisational decisions taken without their input were being implemented in everyday work in ways which constrained their autonomy, devalued their competence, and subjected them to overwork. While intra-organisational inequality is always liable to become a threat to dignity due to the instrumentality inherent in employment relationships

(Lucas, 2015), restructuring was carried out in a way that aggravated these problems, deepening inequalities between temporary workers, long-term workers, and upper managers.

Workers nevertheless found ways to sustain their dignity, particularly on the level of everyday work where they sought to adjust their efforts while seeking meaning in mutually supportive everyday relationality. In contrast, dignity in relation to the organisation was marked by workers' responses to the problem of increasing intra-organisational inequality. In a similar manner to other workers facing devaluation (Hamilton et al., 2019; Noronha et al., 2020), workers sustained dignity by asserting a hierarchy of competence founded on commitment and work ethic. They did this not only in relation to other workers, but also in relation to upper management, in opposition to a hierarchy of organisational power which they experienced as increasingly unjust. Taken together, adjustment and relationality on the everyday level and oppositional differentiation in relation to the organisation allowed workers to present a positive discursive construction of their dignity (Buzanell & Lucas, 2013) together with a critique of the way they were being treated. The study demonstrates how intra-organisational differentiation can serve workers to defend their dignity, particularly when it is supported by commitment to violated moral norms shared by others (see also Bolton & Laaser, 2013). The analytical distinction between workers' everyday and organisational experience adds a further dimension to earlier research emphasising the complexity of dignity.

While earlier research has noted the importance of consultation in protecting workers' well-being in restructuring (Harney et al., 2017), the distinction between organisational and everyday levels of dignity can clarify processes through which consultation matters. Regarding the transformation of everyday work, the manner in which new technologies and redesigned work processes were implemented emerged as a significant issue for workers' occupational dignity (see also Mackenzie et al., 2017). For mail carriers in particular, the technological redesign of work processes increased the coercive methods of control identified by Crowley (2014) as prevalent in manual and service work. Postal workers were sidelined from the organisational redesign of work processes in relation to which they previously felt themselves to be committed and competent, generating injuries to dignity on both the everyday level through constrained autonomy and intensified work, and in relation to the organisation where injury stemmed from the lack of consultation in itself. Further injuries to dignity were produced by the pervasive insecurity generated by the increasing use of temporary workers together with labour shedding. Being denied the capacity to imagine a positive, organisationally supported occupational future marked a significant change in workers' relationships to the postal service and can itself be understood as a form of organisational indignity (see Smith, 2016, pp.

47–51). Restructuring geared towards dignity would involve the exercise of ‘management citizenship’ (Hodson, 2001, pp. 273) in recognising and valuing the moral orders underpinning workers’ commitment to their work and acknowledging this commitment in the redesign of work processes through consultation. Further research could attempt to clarify the conditions in which workers are able to exert influence in processes of restructuring.

Workers’ senses of dignity were formed not only in relation to everyday work and the organisation, but in the broader social representation of their work and their anticipated opportunities for occupational mobility in the labour market. Earlier research has shown that workers in precarious circumstances can sometimes exercise mobility to mitigate against exploitation and sustain their dignity (Alberti, 2014; Noronha et al., 2020). In this study, organisational exit appeared as a potential means for reclaiming dignity, but for many workers this option seemed unattainable due to old age or limited educational credentials, reinforcing the significance of economic, cultural, and social capital (Atkinson, 2010) in shaping opportunities for laying claim to dignity at work. Comparative research would be useful to deepen understanding of the conditions in which workers in different occupational and national contexts can make use of mobility to defend their occupational dignity, with the dignity of aged workers in restructuring emerging as a particularly significant issue on the basis of this study.

This study has related workers’ abilities to lay to claim to occupational dignity to the transformation of established configurations of work. Postal workers’ dignity was constructed in the intertwined development of occupational biographies, organisational practices and values, and emotional and moral commitments, in relation to a public service employer in which a collective sense of dignity has been supported organisationally by employment security and socially through work contributing to the common good. This dignity-enabling configuration allowed workers with otherwise limited credentials and resources in the labour market to construct a sense of self-worth through the commitments they formed through working for the postal service (Sayer, 2005, pp. 39–42). Workers’ experiences demonstrate both the significance of organisational support for dignity as well as its fragility in the face of organisational restructuring driven by cost-cutting and neo-Taylorist forms of management. As organisations adopt processes of restructuring in response to the pressures of technological change and market competition, a crucial ethical issue is raised by workers’ experiences of ownership and alienation in relation to such processes. Experiences of restructuring represent an important aspect of the lived experience of social class across different national contexts, both within workplaces and in relation to the broader labour market.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest There are no potential conflict of interest to report in relation to this study.

Ethical Approval The study has been conducted with the informed consent of the participating workers.

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