When Two Worlds Collide: The Role of Affect in 'Essential' Worker Responses to Shifting Evaluative Norms

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Abstract
Concerns about devaluation and misrecognition are central for understanding the experiences of workers in stigmatised occupations. Yet contemporary approaches have been criticised for over-simplifying workers' responses to mis/recognition. Povinelli's concepts of 'trembling of recognition' and 'social tense' offer a useful starting point for extending existing understandings of mis/recognition by highlighting the contextual importance of temporality. To explore these ideas, we report on an ethnographic study of waste management workers in London, UK. The findings suggest that dirty workers' responses to mis/recognition are a complex mix of discordant cognitive and affective reactions and narrative strategies, shaped by changing normative ideals. The findings suggest that recognition derives not only from workers' encounters, meanings and feelings attached to the past and present but also from the sense that they have a valued part to play in the future.

Keywords
affect, dirty work, Povinelli, recognition, temporality

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Introduction

Until recently, the promotion of contemporary work as 'virtual, clean and value adding' rendered 'dirty work' occupations almost invisible (Bolton and Houlihan, 2009: 3). However, the COVID-19 pandemic dramatically challenged the invisibility of 'dirty work' since those involved in occupations such as waste removal and refuse collection were publicly declared 'key' 'essential' workers by the UK government. This changing social context has raised questions about *what gets recognised* – and by definition, mis-recognised – about work in cities. In this article, we both draw on, and question, theories of recognition, based on an analysis of recognition processes among groups involved in dirty work.

Recognition theory has provided a foundation for numerous formulations of the diverse range of experience of those who suffer stigmatised conditions (Renault, 2019), developing from the Hegelian argument of 'an ideal reciprocal relation between subjects in which one becomes an individual subject only in virtue of recognising, and being recognised, by another subject' (Fraser and Honneth, 2003: 10). Though recognition theory comes in 'many disguises' (Schick, 2015: 90), this sense of relationality, and the desire for the 'approving other', remains central to most approaches to recognition, grounded in the 'normative expectation that others will recognize us, [so that] when we fail to gain recognition, we struggle to attain it' (Honneth, 1996: 44).

Yet recognition theory has recently been criticised for presenting 'hyper-rationalist' accounts that over-simplify recognition processes and responses (Beausoleil, 2020; Schick, 2020). In this article, we aim to address these limitations by drawing upon the work of Elizabeth Povinelli (2011). Following the data collection of the study we describe below, Povinelli's approach appeared particularly insightful since it offers a useful way to extend conventional approaches to mis/recognition by highlighting the importance of affect and temporality. To explore Povinelli's conjecture, we report on an ethnographic study of waste management workers in London, UK. In the sections below, we attend to the limitations of current theorising of recognition, examine how Povinelli's work complements existing frameworks, and discuss how related propositions can inform our understanding of mis/recognition in dirty work.

Recognition Theory, Temporality and Affect

Recognition theory is central to a relational understanding of subjectivity. That is to say, it acknowledges that we are radically dependent on others for the development of our selves (McNay, 2008). In mediating between individual actors and social ethics, the idea of recognition is invested with a strong normative significance – it connects processes of subject formation to normative ideals (Honneth, 1996; McNay, 2008) and makes the social world intelligible (Markell, 2006). In addition, it is the possibility of *misrecognition* that awards the concept of recognition its centrality. If our personhood is moulded by recognition from others, the threat exists that those who are constantly faced with refusal of recognition will suffer a debilitating injury (Honneth, 1996; Laitinen, 2012; Taylor, 1989). In this manner, misrecognition highlights the struggle over the cultural definition of what it is that renders an understanding, a practice or an activity socially necessary and valuable (Honneth, 1996).

The concept of recognition has been considered in multiple contexts, including recognition, belonging and well-being (Sointu, 2006), experiences of non-recognition and misrecognition (Lawler, 2005) and recognition or redistribution (Fraser, 2000; Morrison, 2021). However, some of these analyses incline towards rather rationalist accounts whereby the seeking of recognition appears as a relatively straightforward means to validate the self – a somewhat linear process from misrecognition, through struggle, to recognition (Schick, 2020).

In addition, these conceptualisations tend to adopt a somewhat harmonious view of social worlds (Heins, 2016), based on shared values expressed in 'the appropriate relations of recognition conducive to the self-realisation of all members of that society' (McQueen, 2015: 34). Collective values are supposed to offer a resource for agency by enabling a vision of the future characterised by 'universality and stability' (Beattie and Schick, 2013: 2). They suggest that any potential recognition 'deficit' can be remedied by identifying unfulfilled needs for recognition, and taking constructive steps to address them (McBride, 2013; McQueen, 2015). As such, they assume a relative predictability in aspiration and ambition, formed against a normative ideal of equal recognition.

Criticism of this overly rationalistic depiction of recognition has been expressed by a number of scholars (Butler, 2004; McNay, 2008; Markell, 2006). For example, Markell (2006) and Schick (2020) suggest that the very process of adopting ideals of equal recognition acts to perpetuate further misrecognition by radically misunderstanding social, historical, material and political forces that foster misrecognition (Markell, 2006; Schick, 2020). In addition, Markell (2006) criticises recognition theories because they lack attention to issues of temporality. For Markell, overemphasis on spatial organisation disguises the neglect of temporal displacement. He maintains that struggles for recognition cannot be understood without paying attention to connections among an agent's past, present and future.

Related critique of 'hyper-rationalist' approaches argues that addressing the cognitive strategies of recognition is insufficient since we also need to consider the role that embodied practices play (Beausoleil, 2020; Schick, 2015, 2020). For instance, Young (2011) refers to the way in which those with marginalised positions tend to rely on emotional tone and affect since they lack an adequate language for expression. Similarly, though the relational treatment of subjectivity implicitly considers the psychological dynamics surrounding emotion and affect (Honneth, 1996; Mead, 1934), there remains a need to further explore how social processes condition effects upon the psyche (McNay, 2008).

Drawing on the work of Elizabeth Povinelli (2011), this article contributes to the growing scepticism vis-a-vis 'hyper-rationalist' understanding of the ideal of recognition. In particular, we wish to question what happens when the identities we have been relying on do not easily cohere with an emerging normative order. How do struggles for recognition play out in this context (Connolly, 1991)? What transpires if one finds oneself unable to identify with changing norms? By considering such questions, the present study will draw attention to issues of temporality as well as the situated, somatic, nature of struggles for recognition.

Povinelli

Povinelli challenges moral rationalism, which relies on an ideal type of social life characterised by 'universality and stability', by tracing how the social worlds we reside in

continuously produce new forms of sensibility, new social ideals as well as novel forms of adjustment or alteration to historically practised norms. Although these new sensibilities frequently promise a future of positive potentiality (Povinelli, 2011), their advent nevertheless entails 'experiencing internally incommensurate social, political and economic logics, practices and affects, and the competing fields of power in which they are embedded' (Povinelli, 2011: 86). Povinelli explores how these multiple sets of logics and associated modes of recognition serve to position subjects in social worlds that are at once incommensurate and connected. Being located in these potentially discordant sites results in embodied affective states that may reflect both debilitating and liberating adjustments, creating conditions for inclusion and abandonment, or belonging and estrangement.

These contrasting modes of recognition and shifts in hegemonic normativity yield a variety of social reactions and affective interpretations that may occasion a 'trembling of recognition' – that is, a visceral reaction that a subject may feel as a result of being faced by competing and often conflicting normative claims, such as that resulting from attempts to align present knowledge of oneself to expectations of the future. Povinelli is particular in her incisive attention to the affective landscape that arises from the mismatch between the ideal of recognition and the lived experiences of those who struggle for it. Every such occasion of discord tests our tolerance and intolerance, positing moments of indeterminacy, or tremors, that are experienced as much through our bodily response as our cognitive awareness. Not only does Povinelli depart from a more rationalist treatment of recognition, but she also suggests that recognition links our past and present to the future, and that struggles for recognition involve a distinctive kind of practical (embodied) relation to these different horizons of temporality.

These moments of indeterminacy (tremors) do not designate particular meanings, they only acquire meaning through the process of interpreting. Such interpretations are anchored in multiple, intertwined grounds – 'affective, energetic, logical-symbolic and linguistic' (Povinelli, 2011: 87). As language is one of the media through which we experience the weight of history (Elias, 1991; Newton, 2007), subjects find themselves grappling with a determinate range of possibilities (interpretations) that they cannot simply transform at will (Markell, 2006). Individual appropriation of meanings is fashioned by the sum of pragmatic and affective relationships that echo subjects' status positions, symptomatic of their past histories and future potentialities. Interpretations could be precast by a search for continuity and permanency, by anxiety or fear, by perseverance or resistance, as they are secured in historically constituted narrative templates. In sum, interpretations, as Povinelli (2011: 88) stresses, are 'a complex typology that interdigitates the internal and the external, subject and object, affect and reason'.

Finally, underpinning all of the above is the complex temporal nature of recognition – in other words, Povinelli (2011) proposes that recognition politics works through the mechanism of temporal spacing, or 'social tense'. Povinelli theorises social tense as a set of temporal logics within contemporary liberal societies that can legitimate everyday forms of (mis)recognition by interpreting disparity only *through a future viewpoint that may understand particular social groups' abandonment as a functional necessity* (Rosa, 2016). She constructs a framework with which to analyse these 'present–future relations' as social tenses, which are expressed in the process of narration (Merlan, 2013). The

attribution of social tense to a group serves to *legitimate contemporary circumstances (i.e. the 'now') by implicating them in relation to other past, present and/or future circumstances*. Attending to temporality reveals how seemingly hopeful and esteem-assertive narratives about the future may become linked to the perpetual suspension of social inclusion for particular groups.

'Managing' Dirt

Research on physically tainted occupations closely engages with a number of concepts that are particularly salient to the examination of recognition: its focus on workers' identity; the concern with inclusion (as the groups that demand recognition may feel inaudible and invisible); the strong sense of being marginalised, left out (Thompson, 2006). Much existing research on dirty work explores the symbolic management of physical taint, as reflected in the normalisation strategies and occupational sensibilities that may foster a positive sense of self (Johnston and Hodge, 2014; Simpson et al., 2014). Such studies have noted that groups doing dirty work tend to rely on the usefulness of their jobs as a vital source of self-esteem. For example, refuse collectors and litter pickers described their jobs as socially required and therefore important and rewarding (Hughes et al., 2017). Other studies report that workers draw attention to their willingness and ability to complete gruelling, physically demanding and unpleasant tasks in their efforts to improve the lives of others (Johnston and Hodge, 2014; Simpson et al., 2014; Tracy and Scott, 2007). Where dirty work is largely undertaken by men, as is the case with on-street refuse collection, working-class masculinity also often draws on notions of strength and physicality (Johnston and Hodge, 2014; Simpson et al., 2014; Tracy and Scott, 2007). Yet such studies of dirty work tend to present hyper-rationalist accounts that identify sources of stigmatisation and disrespect, and then, examine constructive practices workers might adopt to overcome them (Schick, 2015). Two assumptions underpin this approach: first, it presumes that the route from misrecognition to recognition is fairly linear and direct; second, that responses to the strategies mobilised by workers are rather predictable as certain dimensions of social life are characterised by some degree of stability across time and space.

In addition, absent from the existing literature is an examination of how the efficacy of such resources might be affected if workers' traditional 'reference points' erode or change. What practices for mitigating taint will workers adhere to if there is a changed social landscape with emergent and unfamiliar modes of evaluation and recognition? We argue that understanding such issues necessitates looking beyond merely the content and deployment of narrative strategies to include the socio-temporal context and affective dimensions shaping workers' experiences.

The Study

A two-stage study was conducted using an ethnographic methodology that combined participant observation and in situ interviews with additional follow-up interviews. Fifty-three key workers employed as refuse collectors, road sweepers, litter pickers and graffiti removers, who were based in three London boroughs, participated in the project.

Once observations were underway, participants were recruited to interviews by invitation of the lead researcher (Author A). Ethical approval was also gained from the lead author's institution prior to the commencement of the project. In accordance with research ethics protocol, all potential interviewees were informed about the purpose of the research, that participation was voluntary, and that all data would be anonymised.

In the UK, 97.4% of people working in on-street refuse and salvage are men (ONS, 2018), the majority of workers are white (95.4%) (ONS, 2020a), aged 30–49 (46.7%), followed by those aged 50–69 (39.4%) (ONS, 2020b). Reflecting this gender composition, all participants were male. Additionally, all were white, born in the UK and aged between 18 and 64 (skewed towards the 40–55 age group). Though we did not find that older workers were more nostalgic for the past than younger workers, it is possible that these slight demographic differences, as well as other socio-cultural issues specific to London, may affect the likelihood of observing similar findings elsewhere.

Data Collection and Analysis

We adopted a psychosocial approach to data collection and analysis to facilitate capturing affective dimensions of normative change. Drawing on Walkerdine and Jimenez (2012), affect is understood as a response that unfolds relatively automatically with little conscious monitoring. Though it can be difficult to separate discrete aspects of affect and emotion (Probyn, 2005), it can be useful to attempt such analysis as it enables investigation of how affective responses might become grounds for judgement – a key 'device' in establishing 'person-value' (Skeggs, 2010) and 'person-deficit' (Loveday, 2016).

Researchers have highlighted the importance of context to the understanding of affective content (Cowie et al., 2005). Participant observations enabled a fuller articulation of affective reactions that might otherwise have gone unexplored. The observational notes documented movement between locations, interactional episodes, types and frequency of greetings, unstructured conversations in the refuse vans and the manners and feedback of the public. Author A and Author C were both engaged in participant observation and the conducting of interviews, though following different routines. For example, one of us might be participating in work activities (e.g. refuse collection, road sweeping, litter picking) while the other interviewed workers, or both would be interviewing but with different teams, or on different sites. Interviews were recorded with consent and lasted from 20 to 35 minutes. The themes that emerged from each interview were discussed among the researchers to identify how certain normative pressures might have played out; for example, how gender might have influenced the responses.

Interviews can be very linguistically based, making affect difficult to identify. To overcome this, we followed Hollway and Jefferson's (2000) recommendations on interview protocol. In particular, we used open-ended questions and elicited stories designed to allow participants to explore their affective as well as cognitive experience. For example, instead of asking participants 'why' questions that encourage rationalisation, we asked them to compare the past and the present, to consider what the future might look like.

The main goal of the second stage (follow-up) interviews was to further elaborate participants' affective responses to change. At this stage, both researchers (Authors A and C) were present for all interviews. To assist in capturing affect, the researchers

worked together – one as the primary interviewer asking questions, the other unobtrusively taking notes registering changes in participants' tone of voice, signs of frustration (e.g. repeating the same word multiple times) or lack of conviction (e.g. comments that end with tag questions).

Conducting these follow-up interviews also allowed additional examination of contradictions (e.g. workers being happy to do their job, yet, not wanting to be seen by significant others to be doing it), inconsistencies (e.g. workers stating that the physicality of work opens up opportunities for enjoyment and pride while at the same time suggesting that physical labour is 'looked down upon') and avoidances (e.g. unwillingness to discuss future plans), hesitations (e.g. lack of confidence relating to job insecurity).

Analysis took place iteratively throughout data collection. In addition to reviewing notes as soon as possible after observational shifts, a preliminary analysis of the observational notes and interview transcripts from Stage 1 informed the focus of the Stage 2 follow-up interviews. Further analysis was then conducted to combine the insights of all stages of the research with a thematic approach being adopted. Hence, the aim was to elicit categories or themes that summarised the main commonalities and disparities among participants' accounts and researchers' observational notes in relation to our research question. Through careful reading and re-reading of the transcripts, and iterative comparison across emergent themes, we sought to move from a preliminary larger set of descriptive themes that were close to the data towards a smaller set of interpretive and overarching themes (Guest et al., 2012).

Findings

Three overarching themes were identified: (1) change and the struggle for recognition; (2) temporal discordance and the trembling of recognition; (3) temporality and the bracketing of recognition. Each theme is elaborated below with illustrative extracts from the interviews and observations. Most themes were not specific to occupational groups. In general, our participants' accounts were remarkably similar, although those who interacted directly with the public tended to report stronger experiences of disrespect.

Change and Struggle for Recognition

In what follows, we first discuss participants' occupational histories, and then examine how workers perceived and experienced the structural transformations in their work, as well as changes in normative expectations.

Participants' occupational histories were revealing of the ways in which they were grappling with changing market demands and how multiple sets of logics often guided their life choices. Workers' life experiences were often characterised by long-term uncertainty and chronic job insecurity. Most participants were directly affected by the decline in heavy manufacturing. For many, the strong adherence to a traditional preference 'to have a job for life' and aspirations for more stable and secure employment fashioned the decision to join the local councils as jobs in the public sector were perceived by workers as a solution to economic insecurity. However, the funding cuts of local authorities and the continuous introduction of 'market discipline' through commercialisation and

privatisation undermined the security of public sector jobs. In very broad terms, such changes can be seen as part of a neoliberal landscape, though we are aware that labels such as neoliberalism, advanced/late liberalism, marketisation and so on, can reflect an array of socio-political and economic practices that may bear no simple or straightforward relation to subjectivity (Watts, 2021), whether we perceive them as predominantly historically or performatively conditioned (Newton, 2019). In the specific case of the waste management industry, marketisation and privatisation resulted in widespread competitive tendering and contracting out. Such economic changes meant that there were fewer long-term workplaces in public sector utilities and services, and more than 50% of participants found themselves on agency contracts.

Yet work, in particular physical work, still appeared to constitute a central pivot around which self-respect was achieved. Adhering to the notion of traditional working-class masculinity, workers repeatedly emphasised the gruelling and arduous nature of their tasks, and the pride that was taken in physical strength, and physicality. The longevity of their occupational journeys was also a source of gratification.

However, participants concomitantly felt disillusioned that there was no 'return to the skills valued in the past' (Sennett, 2008), as well as mourning the move that some had experienced from skilled to unskilled/low skilled service work (see Walkerdine and Jimenez, 2012). Nevertheless, the sense of contributing to the common good still tended to render their work valuable in their own eyes, while often regarding their 'contribution to common good' to be of universal worth. In this way, workers trusted, at least partially, the stability and predictability of shared norms of hard work as merit. In interviews, a comparison was drawn with other jobs, such as banking, where workers felt that the value of their work was superior to financial services as they were contributing to the collective good. Similarly, the participants established hierarchies on the employed/ unemployed distinction. The men endeavoured to gain moral self-worth and continuity of their identity through appealing to 'respect for a working man':

> I'm doing what I'm doing . . . I will appreciate it if you appreciate me, but I'm still going to do the job because actually I know it's an important job, I get a lot of self-satisfaction out of it, I get satisfaction out of doing a good job actually . . . I don't put myself down as poor or whatever, I'm just a normal working person. (litter picker)

That is not to say that workers never favoured the idea of remaking themselves. More in-depth discussions with participants revealed complex dynamics between the inner desire to free oneself from familiar established patterns, and the foreseeable resignation to limited future potentialities. In managing these contradictions, participants' stories could be punctuated with attempts to reverse the trajectory of increasing insecurity and necessity by turning to more entrepreneurial activities. However, this appeal would often fade at the discovery of existing constraints:

> I used to work for the Council years ago but I always aspired to have my own business . . . later I used to sell furniture, new and used, yeah, furniture, done that for six years . . . because of the recession and rent and business rates just got too much for me, you know, so it just . . . Six, seven, eight years ago when I first started dabbling with it, really good and then as the time went on, times just got too hard . . . Now I am back here. (road sweeper)

Other participants made similar references to the notion of self-advancement. However, in spite of such intentions, labour market constraints often interfered and forced practical problems upon workers. For many participants, the first step towards any advancement would mean being able to get a permanent job, though cuts in the public sector were making that goal increasingly unrealistic:

> I'm planning to work my way up in the job (everybody is planning to work their way up, aren't they?), that's the plan, not to stay doing what I'm doing all the time, I want to work up the ladder, which I think most people should want to, progress in things that they do. But it would be difficult (to advance), it's just waiting for the right opportunity . . . For now, I'd love a full-time permanent job here, I'd snap it up tomorrow. (litter picker)

In this quote, a litter picker simultaneously incorporates narratives of advancement along with the constraints that recognise the gap between 'I am willing' and 'I am able'.

As workers' present was contracting, participants tended to draw on more future-oriented identity-affirming practices. Yet, at the same time, material constraints such as the economic downturn of 2009, shrinking job opportunities and the commercialisation of public service provision, meant that it was often difficult to comfortably invoke positive future scenarios. The tension between the conditions of the past and the promise of the future could trigger a recourse to less contingent, and more stable, elements of their identity (Connolly, 1991). For instance, interviews revealed desires for a stability in normative expectation, such as through the reliance on the traditional 'usefulness' and 'hard work' entailed in their labour.

Temporal Discordance and the Trembling of Recognition

Workers' feelings could often appear double-sided. Most participants found themselves in a space of *undecidability* with respect to which of the senses should have the upper hand in their apprehension of the world around them. These moments of *undecidability* constituted an *affective reaction* to attempts to keep the present and the future in view against a still strongly felt past, resulting in an observable discord between embodied pre-disposition and the sensibilities that it now seemed appropriate to develop. For example, stories of work satisfaction were often accompanied by an acknowledgement that their work could be seen by others as lacking in aspiration, as well as in the skills necessary for future advancement. There were reports of 'being stuck at the bottom', being trapped 'in their circumstances', as '*you're not going to get anywhere if you do this work*'. A comment from a litter picker further illustrates how the value of seemingly 'non-aspirational' employment was felt to have been eroded: 'It (this job) doesn't pretend to be anything it isn't. It's what I do every day. I know it is going nowhere but we are expected to be going somewhere.'

Workers' responses also showed hesitation in choosing what logic to appeal to, what might afford respectability:

> I think I have a great deal of respect for people who are actually happy with what they do and they've no aspirations to change . . . they're quite happy with what they're paid, they're quite

> happy with the place that they work in. The only issue you've got with that is actually whatever you're doing, things do change so whilst you want to 'stand still', in inverted commas, you've still got to be up-to-date . . . otherwise you do become obsolete. (road sweeper)

Researchers' observational notes remarked on the kind of discordance that could be registered in the hesitancy of participants' responses, as well as in the lack of conviction or mistrust about the conceivable forms of adjustment and alteration available to them.

Contention was also noted in the way participants felt that 'public servants' were perceived in a marketised public sector economy. Most participants (especially those who had closer interactions with the public; for example, litter pickers and refuse collectors) made references to how the role and ethos of working for a local authority had changed. Participants believed they were no longer viewed as working hard to provide a valued service to society. Instead, as the last quote below by a dustcart driver suggests, the 'Council worker' role is perceived in derogatory terms as employment undertaken only by those who are not 'fit' for other (e.g. more intellectual or knowledge based) work:

> I mean I'm an old-fashioned sort of, in inverted commas, 'public servant', you know public servants used to be at one time regarded as really, really important jobs. I'm afraid that attitude doesn't exist anymore with a large proportion of people. (dustcart driver)

> Well people will say, an issue, we can be arguing over something, . . . maybe we're right, maybe we're wrong, it doesn't really matter, but they will finish off with 'That's why you're a Council worker, that's why you just work for the Council. You're only fit to be a Council worker.' (dustcart driver)

The above quotations gesture towards a breach between the ideal of equal recognition and its lived experience, such that it seemed to be increasingly difficult for workers to tell which option/resource/practice could be deemed useful for their future identity. For participants, trembling (a moment of hesitation and an embodied sense of undecidability) appeared to be produced 'by lack of frame and horizon within which things can take on a stable significance, within which some life possibilities can be seen as good or meaningful, others as bad or trivial' (Taylor, 1989: 27).

Temporality and the Bracketing of Recognition

Every respondent in the study recalled multiple examples of disrespect including experiences of invisibility, rudeness and physical abuse. Workers explained this lack of recognition by increasing individualisation, disruption of communities and a growing preoccupation with individual wealth. In relation to recognition, most respondents commented that the break between 'what I think' and 'what they think', 'what I feel' and 'what they feel' was mounting. Participants talked about how their thoughts and feelings were rendered outmoded and out of sync, and less useful and important for future advancement. Litter pickers and road sweepers talked about the hierarchies that they felt, especially working in the City:

> I find it worse on Tooley Street, it's obviously because of like the mess it gets into but it's the people as well . . . You know like you're walking up and down Tooley Street with the barrow and all you see, they're walking along with their suits, they're all office workers and they don't look at you, they don't see you . . . But then, you know, a job's a job to me, I'm there to do a job like they are there to do a job but they obviously feel as if they're up there and you're sort of at the bottom of the ladder sort of thing, you know what I'm saying, don't you? (road sweeper)

In relation to a more generalised other, most participants repeatedly labelled themselves as *obsolete*, '*a dying breed*', and talked about themselves as a group that others want 'to dispose of':

> I find now that people like us, I believe personally, are being dispersed to make it an area for extremely rich people . . . etc., etc. (litter picker)

> we seem to be on the bottom, invisible, outmoded . . . No point in getting angry because no one's going to do anything about it. (litter picker)

Workers could almost feel that they were 'the part that has no part' in the emerging future (Povinelli, 2011: 78). The sense of being 'left behind' drove participants to further contrast the present with the past. The positive mobilisation of the past was pertinent to both older and younger participants, though not necessarily reflecting their direct lived experience. That is not to say that the past was always romanticised since some workers reminisced about the crowded houses, basic food and the shortage of money that their parents had experienced. Nevertheless, the past was generally recalled as much easier, less precarious, safer and more law-abiding, with more cohesive communities. It was also seen as less stressful and more fulfilling in the participants' own terms. In the quote below, one of the refuse collectors explains his preference of the past in terms of job availability: 'Yeah, a lot easier (in the past), a hell of a lot easier, you could leave one job, go straight onto the next one, start the next day' (litter picker). The appeal of the past was related to the presence of social links. The present was seen by the same respondent as less welcoming and more dangerous: 'They're (the public) way less friendly, way less friendly, I wouldn't work night shifts now . . . you don't know now if people have got a knife, a gun, a cosh, you know' (litter picker).

Workers also talked about another time and place where the job afforded a degree of respectability now perceived as lacking:

> Well, everyone used to say hello to you and we used to have the children, you know if you were on a dust cart, pressing the buttons and things like that and some people in the street would help you, you know they'd come out and put a couple of bags and empty their bins theirselves, now they don't care. I mean at Christmas we used to get people coming out, you know giving us presents and cards.

> Now, you know, they walk up to you, they throw litter on the floor, you'll ask them to pick it up and they look at you as if, well, why should I, I've had people say to me, 'Don't speak to me.' (road sweeper)

yeah there is pressure yeah and obviously it's harder, you just try and do your best but it's us that have been here a very long time that noticed things have changed . . . The public, they won't move out the way they won't, they moan at you if you empty a bin near them, or if you're sweeping, they say don't sweep you're sweeping dust all over my shoes. (road sweeper)

Participants were sometimes alarmed by changes happening around them. The observational notes contain stories of shut pubs, the arrival of new expensive restaurants and 'posh' sandwich bars, which participants felt they could not afford. Instead of the latter, Author A and Author C were generally taken to local, and cheaper, coffee shops with instant coffee, tea and fried breakfast. Workers felt that there were fewer and fewer places where they were still welcome.

Thus, participants' return to the past appeared to be driven by the allure of proximity to the times in which the value of their lives was accorded more recognition. For our participants, their revisiting of the past could represent an expression of their endurance, their drive for continuity and cohesion of the self and their search for positive evaluation. Such observations are in keeping with Povinelli's (2011) argument that when traditional sensibilities get squeezed out of the dominant normative way of being, they do not simply disappear, but instead tend to endure and persist. However, this very stance could mean that such groups become 'out of time' with present norms, as well as finding no place in future scenarios.

Yet Wendy Brown offers a different reading of the idea of endurance. She warns us against dangers of close attachment to one's past identity. Brown's discussion shows how excessive drawing on such a resource as the past could lead to exacerbation of injuries and production of further vulnerabilities. When the link between the past, the present and the future fails, it produces a greater need for coherence (May, 2008). For Brown, the force of history and the role of the past gets multiplied at precisely the moment that history's narrative coherence and rationalist foundation is refuted. The multiplication produces attachments that Brown describes as wounded: 'As the presumed continuity of history is replaced with a sense of its violent, contingent force – the past becomes that which has weight but no trajectory, force but no direction, mass but no coherence' (Brown, 1995: 87).

Following this argument, the 'wounded attachment' that could be a necessary condition for maintaining self-continuity, might potentially lead to a 'bracketing' of social groups that works through the assignment of a particular 'social tense' to them. As Povinelli suggests, some groups can be normatively described as invoking the 'future perfect' tense as they draw on multiple discourses and practices that summon the feeling of future promise and advancement. In contrast, other groups may summon the 'past perfect' tense since they are perceived as struggling to project themselves forward into the future and overly relying on the past as a source of their identity coherence. In our study, participants' accounts of themselves were more reminiscent of this sense of the past perfect social tense. In particular, the discursive practices participants employed in their struggle still led to a 'bracketing' of their recognition by others.

Discussion

Our study questions the hyper-rationalist and problem-solving approach (Cox, 1981) that is often present in the contemporary treatment of both recognition and dirty work. In so

doing, the article builds on and extends the literature on recognition by emphasising the production of vulnerabilities in the struggle for recognition (Rose, 1981; Schick, 2015, 2020), responding to Markell's (2006) call to consider how temporality shapes historically fluctuating accounts of agency, mobility and merit.

Our analysis suggests that the experience of misrecognition does not always lead to conscious opposition, or the rational appropriation of cognitive strategies to overcome disrespect. Instead, misrecognition may simultaneously produce a range of mixed cognitive and affective responses and defences. In other words, individuals respond to the experiences of misrecognition and intersubjective vulnerability in discordant ways. We found that workers combined a range of narrative resources, sometimes citing nostalgic accounts of the past that appeared at variance with their hope for the future. Their efforts were simultaneously accompanied by an 'unthought known' (Wetherell, 2014), a sensation that these resources may or may not gain them recognition, since the strategies and adjustments that are available for other occupational groups might not be accessible to those involved in dirty work. In Povinelli's sense, they trembled in the face of the unpredictability and uncertainty of normative demands and the instability of an ideal of equal recognition – they often found themselves in a place of undecidability with regard to which strategies might be effective, and how they could align their experience to changing normative expectations. Trembling in our case does not necessarily register the internally incommensurate logics or practices, referred to by Povinelli (2011), but instead refers to the affective responses occasioned by attempts to keep the present and the future in view against a still strongly felt past, a process that could result in responses as varied as persistence, or hesitancy.

It is not the rejection of reason or cognitive response that is captured by trembling, but instead the impossibility of drawing a neat divide between affective and cognitive (Wetherell, 2014), reflecting the complex feedback that often occurs between accounts, interpretations and the body (Wetherell, 2014). As importantly, trembling highlights the ambivalence of potentiality. The process of re-cognising tends to produce trembling because recognition may often involve multiple attempts at understanding, as well as the realisation that our traditional tacit knowledge might fail us in the future (Rose, 1981; Schick, 2015, 2020). By incorporating the notion of trembling, we wish to draw attention to the role of such 'peripheral' dimensions in the struggle for recognition – dimensions that are perhaps beyond 'truth-claims' or 'reason-giving' (Hanna, 1979: 47). Though verbal accounts and modes of communication used in the struggle for recognition are undoubtedly crucial in understanding workers' experiences, more interest could be taken in future studies in the complex 'mishmash' between the cognitive and the affective in these struggles.

We also wish to invite more attention to the question of temporality (Newton, 2007). Our study extends work stressing the importance of temporal belonging for positive evaluation (May, 2008) by problematising survival when people feel themselves to be in a 'limbo' – 'a life located somewhere between given and new social positions and roles, between the conditions of the past and the promise of the future' (Povinelli, 2011: 81). Povinelli suggests that survival in a 'limbo land' may produce different degrees of attachment and detachment in relation to various aspects of one's identity. For Povinelli, how recognition works can be understood through temporal spacing – it is not just between me and the other, but 'across time' since the self is not only governed by normative rules and expectations, but also by 'the silent force of temporal norms' (Rosa,

2014: 41). Gaining recognition therefore entails 'a distinctive kind of practical relation to the different horizons of temporality' (Markell, 2006: 10), and Povinelli's approach is particularly apposite to understanding the way that recognition processes are temporally positioned in terms of, say, a 'future tense' of optimism and possibility, or a 'past perfect' tense signalling a potential failure to adjust. Yet as Povinelli (2011) argues, past projects do not disappear but often endure and persist. In a similar fashion, the revisiting of the past by our participants could appear as an expression of what Povinelli coins as endurance project, a drive for continuity and cohesion of the self, as well as a search for positive evaluation.

Nevertheless, as Walkerdine and Jimenez (2012) note, in spite of the tradition of work that underscores a failure to register the nature and the circumstances of one's own sufferings as well as the propensity to reproduce them (e.g. Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; McNay, 2008; Willis, 1977), there is perhaps still a lingering temptation within sociology to be captivated by stories of resistance, resilience and endurance, with less attention paid to how actors may be complicit in reproducing unjust socio-political conditions. Similarly, Brown (2015: 73) is perceptive in her suggestion that the failure to reformulate oneself as a vehicle 'for the future' might further an identity that is 'both bound to the history that produced it and as a reproach to the present that embodies that history'. As we cannot free ourselves from the events of the past, 'some of the elements become impressed into us as second nature, bonded to our first nature and not readily detachable from it' (Connolly, 1991: 119). The weight of our histories may therefore produce what Brown describes as wounded attachment: though we may feel excluded from present or future possibilities, significant aspects of our identity become premised on this very exclusion (Brown, 1995: 73).

Combining Brown's and Povinelli's insights further highlights how such temporal positioning may help us understand the justifications through which recognition could be withheld or bracketed. In the present study, this worked in two distinct ways. First, though pride and honour were not denied to participants, the resources they relied on for battling job-related taint would undermine the very prospect of recognition in the present and in the future. Second, their wounded attachment and investment in the past could serve to legitimate, and sediment, the group's contemporary circumstances by interpreting them as a functional necessity (Rosa, 2016).

Lastly, our study also has implications for understanding key and dirty workers' experiences in a 'post-pandemic' future. While the present research was conducted before the onset of the global coronavirus pandemic, our findings may speak to any context in which observable societal shifts occur in the evaluative norms concerning what constitutes 'worth'. In particular, the findings suggest that the power of recognition derives not only from workers' encounters, meanings and feelings attached to the past and present but also from the sense that they have a valued part to play in the future.

Funding

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