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Department of Sociology

# Exploring Flexibility

- A Study of Cleaning Work in Sweden

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Master Thesis, SIMT21

30 hp

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# Abstract

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In this thesis I have attempted to explore flexibility of work outside the sectors which are most often associated with the concept of flexibility in ‘the new economy’, e.g. work in ICT-sectors. Through a case study of cleaners and cleaning work in Sweden I have attempted to discuss both how flexibility is represented and how consequences of flexibility can be understood in relation to experiences of cleaning work. The thesis explores different aspects of flexibility, mainly in relation to the work process but also flexible time, space and employment flexibility. My theoretical framework is based on debates where flexibility is discussed in relation to control and influence over work. In addition I discuss how flexibility is said to cause a polarisation of the labour market, where some workers constitute a skilled and functionally flexible work force whilst others become increasingly replaceable. I use an intersectional approach to investigate how flexibility can be understood in relation to processes of gendered, racialised and class based subordination of different groups of workers. The empirical material is based on informal interviews with managers in cleaning companies, with cleaners who work for larger cleaning companies and analyses of articles in a union magazine. I have found that cleaners are not represented as flexible, but that cleaners themselves understand flexibility as an important competence in their work. Flexibility in my material can also be understood as an active construction of cleaning work as ‘service’. In the analysis I further argue that the perspective on competence as socially constructed, through gendered and racialised processes, is crucial for how we can understand the notion of workers’ replaceability in relation to both functional and numerical flexibility. I have furthermore found that tendencies point in the direction of a formalisation of flexibility. Through these processes; employers’ control over cleaners’ work can be said to increase and colonizes the spaces of flexibility which were previously understood by cleaners as sources of autonomy and freedom.

Key Words: Flexibility, Cleaning Work, Intersectionality, Work Process, Competence

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# 1. Introduction

Flexibility has become a key concept in attempts to describe changes in the labour market during the last decades. Flexibility is however a problematic concept in these debates because it tends to mean all and nothing, referring to different actors and aspects of work, divisions of labour and organisations. In “Reclaiming the Concept of Flexibility” (2007) Furåker, Håkansson and Carlsson describe how flexibility has come to be used when referring to developments of capitalism, changes in production, labour market adaptations, flexible firms/organizations or flexible employees. They furthermore argue that the concept has been given an extreme variety of overlapping or even contradictory meanings (2007:1). Flexibility can therefore be understood as a way of talking about work, organisations and capitalism. But the representations of flexibility and flexibilisation are also arenas of conflict. What does flexibility really mean? When, and for whom, are different aspects of the economy or work flexible?

To bypass the problems connected to the many diverse uses of flexibility, most authors have chosen to focus on one or a few aspects; mainly including flexible time (see e.g. Grönlund, 2004), work place/spatial flexibility (see e.g. Sennett, 1998), work process flexibility (see e.g. Atkinson, 1987) and employment flexibility (Furåker et. al. 2007).

Critical theorists point out that flexibility and flexibilisation are concepts which do not incorporate historical understandings of the work of women. The emphasis on a new flexible economy therefore risks underplaying continuity in the economy and the development of capitalism. Furthermore theorists who embrace flexibility as part of a new economy have been criticised for shaping their theories through observations only from the economy in ‘the West’ and for not considering a consistent work force of blue collar workers. This causes a bias where the main focus is on work in information and knowledge sectors (see e.g. Sayer&Walker, 1992).

Flexibility and flexibilisation in relation to work which is constructed as feminine or along lines of ethnic/’racial’ stereotypes has been neglected in much previous research (see e.g. Grönlund, 2004). Because flexibility has mainly been studied in relation to work in information, communication and technology (ICT) my intervention in this thesis is to attempt to study flexibility from the perspective of work which is performed primarily by groups of workers who are subordinated in relation to class, gender and ‘race’/ethnicity in the Swedish

labour market. My hope is that this thesis might contribute to the discussions on both definitions and consequences of flexibility.

## 1.1 The Aim of This Study and Problem Formulation

In this thesis representations of flexibility and processes of flexibilisation are explored in relation to a specific group of workers, namely cleaners in Sweden employed by cleaning companies. Cleaning is a profession which is highly dominated by women and has a relatively high share of workers who are 'immigrants'. Focusing on this group of workers offers an entry into aspects of working life which have previously been neglected in many theories of flexibility. It is also my ambition to contribute to a further discussion concerning how work is constructed in relation to gender and 'race'/ethnicity through this case study.

This thesis therefore attempts to do two things. Firstly I want to critically investigate the definitions of flexibility from an intersectional perspective, taking notice of gendered, racialised and class based understandings of work and flexibility. Secondly I want to investigate the impact of flexibility and flexibilisation on experiences of work and power relations between employers and different groups of workers through a case study of cleaners and cleaning work in Sweden.

The main questions which guide this research are:

**How are cleaners and cleaning work represented<sup>1</sup> in relation to flexibility?**

**How can we understand the consequences of flexibility in relation to gendered and/or racialising processes and class subordination within the cleaning profession?**

It is important to note that it is not the flexibility of organisations or the labour market which interests me in this study, but rather the aspects of flexibility which appear in my material as relevant in relation to experiences and representations of work and workers in the cleaning sector. My research questions furthermore put focus on the work process and experiences of

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<sup>1</sup> To study representations of flexibility in relation to cleaning imply an interest in how social actors give symbolic meaning to flexibility through language. Representation can be understood as complex processes of differentiation and hierarchisation, which both include and exclude different meanings (Hall, 2003:15-30).

‘doing cleaning work’. Flexibility in the labour market or in the relation between work and family will therefore not be the main focus in this thesis.

## 1.2 The structure of this thesis/Disposition

In order to structure an analysis concerning flexibility in cleaning work I have taken influence from previous research concerning flexibility which is, as mentioned above, mainly centred around concepts such as flexible time, spatial flexibility, work process flexibility and employment flexibility.

Some of these aspects of flexibility are more central in my material than others. Work process flexibility is an especially prominent theme and illustrates ongoing discussions and conflicts in cleaning work. These discussions also incorporate aspects of time and space. Employment flexibility, which has previously mainly been analysed in macro studies in the social sciences, is presented where it appears in my material as important for representations of cleaners and their position in the labour market. The different aspects of flexibility are generally difficult to separate conceptually although I have, to a certain extent, attempted to structure my analysis in relation to these different theoretical debates.

Chapter 2 contains a short introduction to intersectional perspectives and how these can be used as a framework to analyse labour and flexibility. In chapter 3 debates concerning work and flexibility are introduced as a background for the case study on cleaning work. These debates also specify the analytic approach to the concept of flexibility. I will thereafter attempt to contextualise the case study by presenting earlier studies on cleaning work in chapter 4. In chapter 5 I will elaborate on methodological questions concerning both intersectional studies and the problematic of approaching flexibility. I will also present my material and methods in relation to interviews with managers of cleaning companies, interviews with cleaners and articles in a union magazine. The first part of the analysis in chapter 6 is focused on work process flexibility and how this can be understood in relation to my material. I will thereafter discuss how time, space and employment flexibility can be understood in relation to cleaning work and structuring power relations within the profession and between employers and workers. The last chapter consist of concluding discussions.

## 2. Intersectionality as Theoretical Framework

I am approaching the project of analysing different representations of flexibility from a theoretical perspective inspired by Marxist theory where divisions of labour have been seen as central in processes of subordination and exploitation. The feminist professor of Sociology, Joan Acker, argues that; ‘class analyses, at least since Harry Braverman’s 1974 dissection of Labour and Monopoly Capital have examined the doing of work, the labour process, to understand how class inequalities are produced and perpetuated’ (Acker, 2006a:441). Central here is that the work process becomes an important perspective in order to understand the production and reproduction of inequalities in cleaning work.

Marxist theories have been criticised for neglecting the work performed by women. Marxist feminists have argued that unpaid reproductive work, mainly performed by women, can be understood within the frames of capitalist exploitation and patriarchal structures working together (Hartman, 1986, Hartsock, 1997). The post-colonial authors Robert Miles is amongst those who have further showed how capitalist processes also construct ‘racial’ or ethnic ‘Others’ and how the subordination of racialised groups of workers also have material dimensions and are interrelated with capitalist structures (Miles, 1993). In relation to feminist understandings of the category ‘women’, black feminists have furthermore pointed at how experiences of ‘women’ have often been defined by White middle-class women (hooks, 1984, Collins, 1990).

An intersectional approach to the study of work implies that processes of gendering and racialisation are seen as interrelated with the production and re-production of class based inequalities. Joan Acker argues that we must take feminist criticism concerning the masculine bias in “class” seriously. Paid work, mainly performed by men in “industrialised” parts of the world, has been privileged in theories of labour according to her. Joan Acker claims that although class may be viewed as lived experience, as an identity of (mis)recognition and as a certain status position in a hierarchy, the economic processes that underlie these positions and experiences should not be left unexplained (Acker, 2006:35). According to Acker gendering structures should not be separated from capitalism and we need to acknowledge that *class is gendered and racialised*. This also implies a commitment to investigate *different* class experiences, i.e. how inequalities which are not dependent on class persist and also how these are explained and justified (Acker, 2006:9).



Although many scholars have agreed that intersectional perspectives are relevant Joan Acker further argues that:

‘Most studies of the production of class, gender and racial inequalities in organizations have focused on one or another of these categories, rarely attempting to study them as complex, mutually reinforcing or contradicting processes.’ (Acker, 2006a:442.)

To study flexibility and flexibilisation in cleaning work can thereby be understood as having a perspective on how work might be constructed also through notions of femininity, (hetero) sexuality, and cultural and racial stereotypes as well as class (Mohanty, 2006:166).

Racialising processes should also be understood as complex and multi-faceted. In her research on service workers in Sweden Paula Mulinari argues in line with Yuval-Davis and Anthias (1992) that different types of racism can not be easily separated and therefore ‘race’/ethnicity has been used in this tradition as a way of talking about religious/cultural notions of which often interact with notions of looks and the body (Mulinari, 2007:76). In my material, like in that of Mulinari, racialisation is mostly visible in the construction of certain workers as ‘immigrants’ and others as ‘Swedish’<sup>2</sup>.

### **3. Flexibility**

#### **3.1 Flexibility and the Post-Industrial Society**

Flexibility and the idea of changing organisations are closely associated with other images of a new labour market and a new society. Included in these images are often the suggested increased importance of specialisation, information, networks and an increasing qualification of work. These descriptions of a changing world under globalisation, a world which might have entered a phase beyond modernity, have been debated in the social sciences from the 1970’s and onward. In 1973 the sociologist Daniel Bell published *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society*, a book which attempted to analyse the fundamental changes Western societies were going through economically, socially and culturally. Time and space, Bell argues, is revolutionised by information technology and made free from the mechanic and bureaucratic organisation of industrialism.

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<sup>2</sup> I choose to use quotation marks here in order to emphasise that these categories are not to be seen as stable, but rather in relation to the different relations of power in which these divisions are constructed.

The sociologist Manuel Castells develops the idea of a new society in relation to flexibility in his theory about a new information age. He mainly emphasizes the importance of flows of information through networks, the increasing need for knowledge and the rise of global cities in the last decades (Castells, 2000). Castells argues that in times of increased insecurity and faster flows, organisations need to be able to faster adapt to changing situations. Internally organisations may adapt to a just-in-time production and become more decentralised. The decentralisation and flexibility that Castells describes also requires new practices of work. Employees in these types of organisations need a broad competence and jobs are upgraded, he suggests. In this sense the influence of the workers also increase as the firm's dependency on their competence increases (Castells, as presented in Grönlund, 2004:22-23).

### 3.2 Critique of the post-industrial society and flexibility

According to Anne Grönlund in her book 'Flexibilitetens Gränser'<sup>3</sup> (2004); flexibility is a problematic concept to study, not only because of the many definitions and debates. The existence of a revolutionary flexibilisation of society which is made explicit in Castell's theory has not been shown empirically and is criticised by many researchers (2004:25). Furåker et. al. are amongst those who argue that not only are there problems of definitions connected to flexibility; flexibility is also an ideological concept. According to the authors every use of the term flexibility has positive connotations because the opposite standpoint is constructed as rigidity. Instead Furåker et. al. wish to talk about flexibility in relation to stability (2007:3).

The notion of a post-industrial society has further been associated with the concept service society. To talk about a service society implies an increase in private production of services and a relative loss of jobs in industrial production, i.e. a move from fordism to post-fordism (see e.g. Mulinari, 2007:52).

Andrew Sayer and Richard Walker (1992) put forward a critique of the idea of a post-industrial/service society. They argue that a post industrial society/service society should not be understood as qualitatively new. Instead they argue in line with a Marxist critique that these changes are results of the capitalist mechanisms of increased specialisation and

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<sup>3</sup> ['Limits to Flexibility', my translation]

increased divisions of labour. Such specialisation, Sayer & Walker furthermore suggest, also results in a higher complexity (1992).

Sayer & Walker also adopt a geographical perspective and make visible that whilst the production of services may be increasing in ‘the West’, this happens at the same time that the production of goods is increasing in so called developing countries. Critiques of theories of a post-industrial society also question the dualism between service/industrial production, flexible/inflexible production and a linear development from ‘old’ to ‘new’. Sayer & Walker also challenge a dualistic thinking about industrial and service jobs where the latter are most often associated with flexibility. They argue that many jobs in service can also be monotonous and routinised/industrialised. Sayer & Walker furthermore point out that there is an increasing polarisation of jobs based on class difference and exploitation of workers (1992).

### 3.3 Flexibility and Inequality - A Polarization of the Labour Market?

Grönlund (2004:21-24) points out that although Castells emphasizes the upgrading of jobs in organisations which no longer follow a Fordist bureaucratic logic, he also argues that there is an increasing division of the work force. Some workers constitute a so called “core workforce”, i.e. those whose skills and broad competence are needed in decentralised organisations, whilst other workers perform low-qualified work and become increasingly replaceable. John Atkinson develops this argument further by separating functional flexibility from numerical flexibility. The former refers to internal flexibility where employees have broad skills and can be shifted within the organization whilst the latter refers to external flexibility where the organizations shift the number of employees according to how much work there is to do. The work force which is used in functional flexibility becomes increasingly difficult to replace whilst numerically flexible workers hold unqualified jobs with insecure conditions (Atkinson,1988).

Polarization of jobs has been an important aspect of the discussion concerning flexibilization in the labour market, both in regards to continuity and new processes. When stability, wages and working time are put out on the market; flexibility can also lead to a recommodification of employment conditions. In opposition to what neoclassic economist theories describe as a perfect market critical working life researchers suggest that this may

result in a widening gap between different groups of workers (Grönlund, 2004:27). Feminist researchers have for example pointed towards an increasing feminisation of labour where women, entering the labour market on a larger scale, have come to constitute a cheap and flexible labour force (Acker, 2006b).

In relation to this division between a 'core' work force and numerical flexibility it has been argued that the labour market is characterized by a large increase in low-paid jobs. Saskia Sassen (1998) has for example shown how the construction of a 'Knowledge City' with focus on information, technology etc. also brings with it low paid insecure jobs with bad working conditions, in for example restaurants or hotels. An example from Sweden in relation to the notion of a new economy shows how the construction of Kista (an area in greater Stockholm) as a Science City has excluded most of the people who live there, of whom many are 'immigrants'. Instead of living in Kista 'the Science City' immigrants live in Kista 'the ghetto'; they are constructed as 'the Other' to those who are part of the information society and who are offered jobs in the Science City (Barinaga, 2006).

Other researchers argue that a polarization of the labour market in Sweden should not be understood as an increase in low-paid jobs. Rune Åberg has studied which types of jobs increased its share on the labour market in Sweden from the 1960's until 2001 and finds that the most well-paid jobs have increased the most during all decades included in his study. Compared to the USA, where there is evidence of a polarisation on the labour market where both the highest and lowest paid jobs increased their shares, the lowest paid jobs in Sweden are pressed back (Åberg, 2004:39). Many researchers argue that the relatively strong positions of unions in Sweden in combination with other institutional conditions prevent the gaps between different groups from widening too much in the labour market. These differences are often emphasised in comparative studies (where both Britain and the US have much lower employment protection legislation etc.)(see e.g. Furåker et. al. 2007:10).

Although empirical studies do not give evidence for a large increase in low-paid jobs we can see that the wage dispersion in Sweden has increased during the last decades (SCB). Hence, although the polarization of the Swedish labour market is of a different nature than that of for example the US, trends point at a similar direction. The Swedish labour market can furthermore be described as segmented along the lines of class, gender and 'race'/ethnicity. This segmentation of the labour market is in turn linked to discrimination and marginalisation of different groups of workers. Depending on which social processes are in focus in research and studies different patterns of discrimination on the labour market between different groups

appear (Gonäs, 1991:70-71). Lena Gonäs amongst others suggest that a geographical perspective and a localised understanding are necessary when we wish to study the implications of a changing economy and labour market for different groups of workers. Because my material does not allow for localised studies on flexibility and cleaning work I attempt to problematise this in my analysis.

### 3.4 Influence, Control and Replaceability

As I have presented above, functional flexibility is most often described in positive terms in the literature – for employees and organisations alike. The suggestion is made that when the work of employees is varied and competence is broadened work satisfaction increases (Grönlund, 2004:119).

In relation to workers' positions on the labour market, Robert Erikson and John H Goldthorpe make a distinction between 'work contract' and 'service contract'. The service contract is mostly associated with white collar workers in middle or higher positions whose jobs are characterised by rather diffuse definitions of work and high levels of own responsibility. Work contracts on the other hand imply a more direct employment relation where wages are received for more specified work performed in a certain time (Erikson & Goldthorpe, 1992). Influence over work, which has often been understood as based on class position, is suggested to be important for how flexibility can be interpreted. Dan Jonsson elaborates on different types of flexibility presented by Furåker et.al in relation to stability (2007). He argues that work process flexibility is often understood as flexible for employers and employees alike. The initiation of variations in work is however crucial for the experienced stability of employees, he argues (2007:38-39).

Functional flexibility is associated with an upgrading of jobs where skills, competencies and responsibility become increasingly important (see e.g. Piore & Sabel, 1984). Functional flexibility is, as I presented earlier, therefore associated with a decreased replaceability of workers. There are few empirical studies which investigate gender patterns concerning functional flexibility and replaceability (Grönlund, 2004:128). However, as I presented earlier, women have been understood to perform numerical flexibility, i.e. employment flexibility, through processes of feminisation of certain labour intensive work. There is often a feminist critique of studies where the replaceability of female workers is assumed and the processes behind this are left unexplained. Such studies namely leave the impression that

work performed by a majority of women is unavoidably low-skilled, low-status work. Paula Mulinari also points out how studies with a clear gender focus have left the presence of racialised men in female work unexplained, with the result that ethnicity or racialising processes are treated as constant exceptions (2007:65).

Time and space are often interrelated aspects of flexibility, especially in the suggested conflict between work and home. It has been argued in previous research that flexible working time might have a positive effect on gender roles where women do more work in the home than men (Grönlund, 2004:34-35). Similarly it has been argued that workplace flexibility might have the same effect on women's time and reduce problems of stress and burn-outs (see e.g. Everingham, 2002). Other theorists however point at the possible draining effects of boundlessness without fixed working time. In his book *The Corrosion of Character* (1998) Richard Sennett shows how flexibility in working life has been negative for employees and also how demands of late capitalism have resulted in a form of rootlessness for individuals. Arlie Russell Hochschild (1997) has focused on work-family conflict in her work *The Time Bind: When Work Becomes Home and Home Becomes Work*. She argues that work tends to take over in these struggles, but also that blue collar workers find greater refuge in the home than white collar workers (Hochschild, 1997:77). To investigate many of these aspects of time and space demand a relational perspective where both time at home and at work are analysed (Hochschild, 1997). In this thesis I touch upon these themes as they appear in my material, although my main focus, and hence my main basis for the analysis, is time which is spent at work.

Individualisation of work is one aspect of flexibilisation which is discussed by academic writers and associated with more freedom for the individual to take responsibility for ones own life (see e.g. Beck, 1992). Critiques of this perspective on late modernity and individualization argue that social categories such as class are still important aspects for the opportunities of different people (see e.g. Mulinari & Sandell, 2006). I find this critique central to how we can understand intersections of gendering, racialisation and class based subordination of different groups of workers. Processes of individualisation, to the extent that they can be understood empirically, can also imply advantages for employer strategies to act on discriminatory or prejudice norms and values (Gonäs, 1999:13). To attempt to analyse work from an intersectional perspective does not mean that spaces of agency and negotiation are lost. Agency however also needs to be understood in relation to power relations which structure the work of cleaners.

## 4. The Changing Character of Cleaning Jobs

Cleaning work has been discussed in feminist theory from many different perspectives. In a Swedish political context “the Maid Debate” has been a topic of debate where liberal feminists have argued the benefits of women to hire help with the household in the name of increased equality (see e.g. Ohlsson, 2005). Other feminist authors have argued however that this leaves the household work of the middle class, both men and women, to an often gendered and racialised working class. Several studies have been carried out on this subject, many of them being historical studies (see e.g. Hall, 1992, McClintock, 1995) but also more journalistic descriptions of the practice of labour within the household sector (see e.g. Fredholm, 2005, Ehrenreich, 2001). Arlie Russel Hochschild has further placed these relations in a global context though theorising around what she calls ‘the care chain’; when women from third world countries pay local women to take care of their children in order to earn money in western countries where they work as nannies or housekeepers (referred to in Perrons, 2004:105ff). In this thesis I only investigate cleaning work in non-domestic environments, but the relations of power are interesting for how gendered and racialised work can be understood also in other contexts. I will continue this presentation with a background on ‘public’ cleaning work in Sweden.

### 4.1 A Historic Account

On the initiative of trade unions and cultural institutions, several cleaners wrote biographies about their lives in the anthology ‘Utan Städare Stannar Sverige’<sup>4</sup>(Runfors, 1992). The absolute majority of these texts were written by women, mostly ‘Swedish’ or ‘Scandinavian’. The anthology brings up many themes which have been important for cleaners during the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Sweden. Cleaning was at first seen as a job on the side, which could be combined with household duties or responsibility for children according to many cleaners in the anthology (1992).

Many cleaners in the anthology report that an important change took place in the profession in the 1980’s when the work was restructured from night- to day-time cleaning. In her

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<sup>4</sup> [Without Cleaners Sweden Stops, my translation]

dissertation of 2004 Marie Aurell suggests that the reason for this restructuring of cleaning work was partly to tackle the low-status of the profession and make cleaners more 'visible', for example by offering an important presence of adults in school environments. Many cleaners themselves argue however that economic reasons were most central in this decision because employers no longer needed to compensate for late hours etc. (Aurell, 2004:60).

## 4.2 Privatization in the 1990's

An aspect of special interest for this thesis is outsourcing as another strategy of increased flexibility in firms and organisations. Although outsourcing has doubled its shares on European markets during the 1990's it still constitutes a very small share of the Swedish market (Grönlund, 2004:30). In relation to cleaning work outsourcing has however been a prominent strategy of firms during the last decades. According to a report performed in June 2008 by the employer organisation for service companies, Almega, there are 1662 cleaning companies in Sweden and since 2004 these companies increased their turn over with 67% (Almega, 2008).

Elisabeth Sundin and Gunilla Rapp (2006) have studied the privatization of the cleaning sector in the 1990's. The background for the new strategies of decentralisation and privatisation was political and was strengthened further during the times of economic crises in the 1990's, Sundin & Rapp suggest (2006).

The most important aspect taken up in the literature is the problem of the low status of cleaning work, especially because of the association to cleaners' bad working conditions. Union representatives, cleaners and employers argue that customers are not prepared to pay sufficient for good quality cleaning and that this results in worsened quality and worsened conditions of work for cleaners. When Swedish municipalities needed to reduce their costs drastically in the 1990's cleaning was seen as one of the parts of the municipal organisations where reductions could be made most easily, according to Sundin & Rapp (2006:28-29).

With increased privatization, competition in the cleaning business also increased drastically. Small companies lowered their prices to be able to enter the market and larger companies were able to keep costs down in order to secure their positions. This resulted in a 'race to the bottom' when it came to offering the cheapest possible alternatives for cleaning (Sundin & Rapp, 2006:32).



Furthermore, claims are made that the cleaning business also consists of a large 'black sector' with unserious employers, something which is thought to affect competition. This 'black sector' does however not only contribute to the low prizes for consumption of cleaning services but because the focus on equipment, environment and working environment are generally low in comparison to other cleaning companies they contribute to lowering the status of cleaning work. The reason for the spread of a 'black sector' is partly that a cleaning business does not require large investments and is therefore relatively easy to set up (Aurell, 2004:58). Research also shows that the heightened competition in the 1990's resulted in worse quality of cleaning, something which the cleaners objected to and furthermore often led to complaints by other staff (see e.g. Sundin & Rapp, 2006).

### 4.3 Gender, Class and Cleaning Work

These descriptions and analyses of cleaning work which I have presented so far also tell us something about gender and class. Much research has emphasised the bad working conditions in cleaning. Such conditions of work are also found in other professions dominated by women such as the lowest positions within health care, according to Sundin & Rapp (2006). Sundin & Rapp further emphasise the importance of class for the negative experiences of many women in relation to stress, physical injuries, failures to achieve enough at work, type of employment and lack of influence over their work etc. Further, women in working class jobs often find themselves in environments more segregated by gender than middle class women (2006:17).

Marie Aurell (2006) investigates gender as important in the identity production of cleaners. The gendered segregation within the profession is very obvious according to Aurell. Men work in so called 'special cleaning', which includes floor care or window cleaning etc. while women work in so called 'ordinary cleaning' or (as my informants have called it) 'daily cleaning'. Aurell argues that this division of work appears natural but should be understood as socially constructed and that there is a clear hierarchisation. 'Special cleaning' is thought of as much 'heavier' work, although this is sometimes questioned by female cleaners (Aurell, 2004:81). Also the more frequent use of machines raises the status of men's work in 'special cleaning', although not always in a straight forward way. Sometimes the manual labour and practical skills are more important for this hierarchisation than technology (Aurell, 2004:110).

Boundaries between ‘male’ and ‘female’ jobs also affected cleaning work in a different way during the 1990’s. Functional flexibility was introduced in order to reduce costs for organisations and to make the working conditions better for cleaners. The work of the ‘ordinary cleaners’ was combined with tasks previously performed by (mainly male) care takers. When the work of male workers also came to include ‘ordinary cleaning’ it caused conflicts, because the male workers did not think of themselves as employed ‘to clean’. Similarly there was much resistance among the male caretakers to accept the female workers who performed tasks which had previously been coded as ‘male’ (Andersdottir, 1994).

Most men who worked within the organisation researched by Sundin & Rapp (2006) did not stay in the profession for very long. Aurell finds that men in the profession are often young and work in cleaning to make an extra income, for example on the side of their studies (Aurell, 2004:62). Many of the women however could be categorised as being in ‘permanent temporality’ even though they did not see cleaning as a lifelong profession (Gonäs, 1989, Sundin & Rapp, 2006:95).

Gender has been a focus for many analyses of cleaning work, but other differences among cleaners often seem to be neglected in scientific studies. Sundin & Rapp (2006) comment on the different educational backgrounds among cleaners – where some have a higher class position due to their husbands, some have university degrees (often the younger cleaners) and some have no training at all. But they do not analyse how this may affect work and power relations among cleaners. Sundin & Rapp also mention that of the cleaners they studied the only man who worked in cleaning during a long time was an ‘immigrated’ man (2006:94), although they do not comment further on this. Aurell describes how differences are especially apparent between large cities, where a relatively high proportion of employed cleaners are ‘immigrants’, and the rest of the country where the situation looks different (Aurell, 2004:62). In her descriptions of the organisation she studies we are however not told of any differences between cleaners along the lines of ethnicity.

We can however find intersectional analyses of cleaning work from the context of the US. Mignon Duffy (2007) has done a historical statistical study of workers in paid reproductive work and has especially focused on non-nurturing labour such as cleaning and cooking. She argues in this article that an intersectional approach is crucial for understanding occupational segregation and especially a deepened understanding of paid reproductive labour. Through her analysis she contributes with an understanding of the gendered and racialised nature of different kinds of service work, i.e. that white women more often perform public reproductive

work (such as nurses etc.) while racial-ethnic women perform so called back-door jobs. Duffy also questions earlier research which has not managed to show how also racial-ethnic men have become a large part of reproductive labour. She connects this to the increase in public institutional reproductive work (i.e. cleaning institutional buildings etc. in contrast to private cleaning in homes where racial-ethnic women are still in a great majority). How far this could be said to match the Swedish service sector is difficult to say without more detailed material. Aurell partly describes these gendered differences when she observes that the work of ‘special cleaners’, although it is often performed in people’s houses (sometimes ‘black’ work on own initiatives), is not considered to be private or household-related to the same extent as ordinary cleaning performed by women (Aurell, 2001).

I have not found any Swedish studies which account for differences along lines of ethnicity in cleaning work. The journalist Åsa Hammar (2000) has however written a report on cleaners employed by a particular cleaning company in Stockholm, and she describes conflicts as well as racism, discrimination and sexual harassment of cleaners. This book contains many interesting interviews and descriptions but there is no analysis on racist and patriarchal hierarchies in the cleaning business.

## **5. Methodological Reflections**

To approach the topic of flexibility empirically was initially very difficult. The elusive character of the concept made it problematic to narrow down and specify. As I have previously described, flexibility can be seen both as a discourse and as processes of flexibilisation with different consequences for different actors in the labour market. In order to capture also ambiguities in relation to flexibility and flexibilisation my study will have an explorative character. I make use of qualitative methods and attempt to hold a pragmatic approach to the collection of data (see e.g. Flick, 2006:25). I have chosen to analyse the problematic<sup>5</sup> (see Smith, 2005) of flexibility and power as represented in three different studies – through interviews with managers in cleaning companies, interviews with cleaners and through texts in a magazine which is published by the union.

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<sup>5</sup>Dorothy Smith argues for a research which takes the everyday experiences of people as its problematic. This furthermore implies that scientific claims to objective truth are not imposed on these experiences, but that the researcher should instead attempt to explicate the knowledge of its subjects.

When analysing the problematic of flexibility and power I have mainly been inspired by feminist methodological discussions in gender studies (see e.g. Mulinari 2005, Smith, 2005). Experiences and different knowledges about flexibility in the labour market should be studied with respect to contexts and localised knowledge, i.e. *from where* the informants I have interviewed are speaking. This approach allows for a further investigation of ambiguities and tensions in these representations and experiences but does not imply a relativistic stance to research. In defence of scientific objectivity through situatedness rather than the illusory disembodied knowledge and vision of the researcher, or of a privileged ethnocentric masculinity, Donna Haraway writes:

‘But, of course, that view of infinite vision is an illusion, a god trick. I would like to suggest how our insisting metaphorically on the particularity and embodiment of all vision [...]and not giving in to the tempting myths of vision as a route to disembodiment and second-birthing allows us to construct a usable, but not an innocent, doctrine of objectivity.’ (Haraway, 1988:582).

The researcher does not see from nowhere; what Haraway refers to as ‘a god trick’. Instead research should be performed with sensitivity to the contexts, in the case of my objectives; *from where* flexibility is seen and experienced in cleaning work<sup>6</sup>. This requires a reflexive position of the researcher both in the collection of material and in the ways the material is analysed and presented (see also Esseveld, 2008).

Because ‘flexibility’ can be understood as a concept which has different meanings for different actors it is a difficult concept to analyse and compare in relation to data collected from different sources. Trade unions and other actors on the labour market are for example unlikely to use the term ‘flexibility’ in positive terms. Other actors might have become more cynical about the overuse of the expression and therefore not talk about it at all. This means that I have not searched for specific usages of the concept ‘flexibility’ in the written material or in the interviews. Instead I have used theoretical discussions concerning flexibility and flexibilisation to investigate how flexibility is talked about and experienced. My systematic readings and deconstruction of the texts and of the informants’ ways of representing flexibility have therefore been informed by previous research as presented in the chapter above, i.e. in relation to the work process, time, space and employment flexibility. To use such theoretical themes as categories both in the collection of data and further in the coding

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<sup>6</sup> I have chosen to present the empirical material in longer quotes and descriptions in order for the reader to be able to see from where flexibility is represented. For this reason I have slightly exceeded the page limitation for this thesis.

and analysis of the material is often used in qualitative method (Flick, 2006:312). As is often the case in qualitative method I have practiced gradual selection when collecting data (see Liedholm, 1999). I have reflected upon the representativeness of the texts and informants I have selected (Flick, 2006:128) and I have further problematised this selection below.

The interviews with the managers contribute with representations of cleaning work from a particular perspective. These managers are themselves positioned within organisations and their knowledge needs to be understood from this perspective. There are of course many different cleaning companies who market themselves and represent cleaning work very differently. Furthermore these companies are likely to act in different conditions and have different strategies and attitudes toward the organisation of cleaning work. In her study about gender patterns and changes in work organisations Lena Abrahamsson (2000) points out how organisational strategies are often contradictory and need to be understood in their specific contexts. Such analyses concerning the relations of power within specific organisations cannot be made from my material. In this study organisational processes are instead discussed where they are mentioned by managers as important in relation to flexibility, and although specific organisational outcomes or results cannot be analysed the representation of flexibility in these strategies can be discussed.

I have interviewed three managers, all located in a large city, who work for two of the largest cleaning companies in Sweden. The managers speak both from own experiences but they also represent their companies and company policies. Although these interviews cannot be said to represent all employers and managers in the cleaning business, these companies are both members of the employer organisation Almega, which, amongst other things certifies cleaning companies in line with set criteria. In my analysis I have also used printed material from Almega to further illustrate representations of cleaning work.

I have also analysed representations of flexibility in cleaning work in the magazine *Fastighetsfolket*, published by *Fastighetsanställdas Förbund*, one of the Swedish trade unions that organises cleaners. A union magazine is a way for a union to communicate, in particular with its members. The articles in the union magazine bring up themes which are currently debated in relation to cleaning work but they do not always represent a particular standpoint of the union. I use these articles in my analysis to illustrate discussions concerning cleaning work and different positions in relation to flexibility and flexibilisation.

In order to better understand experiences and representations of flexibility in the work process I have also interviewed two cleaners, F and E. These informants live and work in

different parts of Sweden, they are female and about 45 and 55 years old respectively. Both cleaners are born in former Yugoslavia and have lived in Sweden for approximately 15-20 years. Although I have as a primary source of information only two informants who speak about their work as cleaners, their perspectives are important for the problematisation of power relations in relation to flexibility. The experiences of F and E should however not be seen as representative of cleaners in Sweden, neither of positions of certain ethnicity, class or gender. Their experiences can however be used in order to problematise notions of work and flexibility where their positions as immigrated, female cleaners in different parts of Sweden can be understood as relevant from this material.

Several previous studies concerning cleaning work also contain a large amount of empirical findings through interviews with cleaners, union representatives and managers. Strauss & Corbin (1998:49-52) have listed several ways to make use of previous empirical studies in qualitative research. Descriptive studies can for example be used in order to give a background for the own material and literature can also be used as a secondary source of data, for example where quotations or interviews are being presented (as presented in Flick, 2006:61). The studies which have contributed to my understanding of cleaning work have been presented in previous chapters and throughout my analysis I will refer to the empirical examples in these studies in order to problematise my own material.

## 5.1 Representing employer strategies - Interviewing the managers

I started out contacting larger cleaning companies and asked to have interviews with managers who worked close to members of staff and therefore had insight and knowledge about the work process in cleaning. L, a manager at one of the largest cleaning companies in Sweden, agreed to an interview and she recommended me to talk to M, who is the manager at a hospital in the region where the same company has a contract. I also contacted B, who is a manager at another large cleaning company. The selection of informants was here gradual and both directed by reflections on representativeness as well as by chance. To choose M as an informant is partly a selection of convenience and chance (see e.g. Liedholm, 1999:169), but the recommendation also gave further insight in how L thinks that the cleaning work should

be represented. M is a popular manager and she works at a hospital where, as I will return to in my analysis, the conditions of work are often thought to be better than at other places.

The three interviews with the managers were carried out at their offices and lasted between 1- 1.5 hours. Two interviews were recorded and transcribed. Due to technical problems I instead had to take notes during the interview with M, which is also why I have not used any quotes from this interview in my analysis. The interviews were all carried out during working hours and the managers reserved time for this a few weeks before our meetings.

The interviews were informal interviews where I had prepared to discuss themes which were related to my questions about flexibility and flexibilisation. All three managers had good insight in how cleaning work is organised and performed at their respective companies, which was important for how the themes could be discussed. Only one of the managers, M, had previously worked as a cleaner however. All three managers had been working as managers for more than ten years and had been at their respective companies for more than 8 years.

The managers all talked in very similar ways about the company strategies and cleaning work in general. During my interview with B she had also prepared to give me a book about cleaning work (Bejram, 2005) which is used in certification training for cleaners and published by the employer organisation, Almega. Many of the themes in this book also returned in my interviews with the managers. After I interviewed three managers I found that they mostly spoke as representatives of their companies and I mostly use these interviews as such in my analysis. Leaving the field and deciding when enough material is collected is always difficult, but the similar answers the managers gave contributed to me not contacting more informants after these interviews had been made (compare to Taylor (1991) about saturation of data and leaving the field). Where the managers give different answers I also problematise this. All three managers were women, around 45-55 years old, both L and M have a 'Swedish background' while B is born in a country outside Western Europe but has lived in Sweden for almost 25 years.

## 5.2 A forum for discussing labour – reading the union magazine

The articles in the union magazine, *Fastighetsfolket*, contain many detailed descriptions of cleaning work both through observations by the reporters and through interviews with cleaners. I have used such descriptions to illustrate debates concerning flexibility and flexibilisation in cleaning work, often in relation to what is said in my interviews or themes

which can be found in other previous studies. The articles have been selected during the years 2006 - mid 2008 on the criteria that they should partly contain reports from work places and represent the work of 'ordinary cleaners' employed by cleaning companies. Many articles in this magazine bring up the work of for example maintenance workers or window cleaners, who are mostly male, or contain information or interviews with union representatives. Two articles also represented cleaners who were not employed by cleaning companies. The articles I used in the study illustrate discussions concerning the themes I had defined in relation to flexibility, namely flexibility in the work process, time, space and employment.

The descriptions of work and work-related debates in the union magazine are communicated and interpreted by reporters at the magazine and can therefore not be said to be representative of a specific standpoint. Sometimes the articles can however reflect union strategies and policies in a more obvious way. Monica Edgren (2006) has for example analysed articles in a union magazine and illustrates how union campaigns and politics affect representations of work and workers. I attempt to further problematise these different perspectives on the articles in my analysis.

The union should furthermore not be seen as representative of all cleaners. Although Fastighetsanställdas Förbund is the largest union which organises cleaners employed by cleaning companies, some workers are organised by other unions and many cleaners are not members of any union. There is also a differentiation between workers included in the union. Diana Mulinari and Anders Neergaard (2004) show how immigrants in the union are subordinated through different processes whilst several studies have also shown that women have been marginalised in the union historically (see e.g. Hirdman, 2001).

### 5.3 Talking about work – Interviewing the cleaners

I had the ambition of interviewing several cleaners from different backgrounds for this study. The reason was mainly to be able to discuss the intersections of gender and 'race'/ethnicity in relation to work and flexibility because I felt that such empirical material was lacking from previous studies. It proved however to be very difficult to find cleaners who were willing to participate in interviews.

I searched for cleaners who were working with 'ordinary cleaning' and who were employed by larger cleaning companies. I started searching through the union and called two regional offices. It seemed however that the union did not have much local activity and I was able to



get the number to only three cleaners who were engaged in union activities at the largest cleaning companies. Two of these were men who worked with 'special cleaning'. One of these men was willing to ask his colleagues but no one returned my calls. The third union representative was a woman who worked with 'ordinary cleaning'. I presented my project to her and said that I was willing to adapt to any preference concerning time or place to have the interview. She told me that she wanted to be honest; working eight hours a day and then taking care of everything else really left no time to do interviews, she said. She also said that she doubted anyone else was willing to participate. Through friends and acquaintances I also got in touch with three other cleaners who did not feel they had the time to meet for an interview.

These difficulties to find informants also tell something about time and flexibility. The managers were all able to reserve time for the interview during paid work hours. The cleaners were too tired and too stressed to feel that they wanted to do an interview, because they had to do this during their spare time. I have also reflected upon whether these cleaners could take an interest in my study, which I presented as being about 'time and conditions of work'. During my work with this thesis I have understood that conditions of work are often discussed but cleaners often feel that nothing is being improved.

To talk about work conditions in a service sector which is often coloured by conflicts and insecure conditions (see above and also Hammar, 2000) could furthermore be understood as sensitive. Because I felt that there was a risk of informants 'getting in trouble' I chose not to contact cleaners through their employers or the organisations where they work, which has been done in several previous studies (for example Aurell, 2001, Sundin & Rapp, 2006, Hammar, 2000). My choice not use employers or managers as gatekeepers limited my opportunities to get access to informants but it also allowed more freedom in relation to the interviews and the analysis (see Seidman, 1998:39).

Two cleaners have however been willing to participate in this study. F is active in another union, through which I came in contact with her, and she also found it interesting to talk about the work conditions at her work place. We met at a shopping centre close to the town where she lives and the interview was done at a café. I came in contact with E, who is not member of any union, through a friend of mine and the interview was done at her home.

These two interviews were also done informally following certain themes which I had prepared, concerning time, variation of work and control over ones labour. The interviews were recorded and transcribed and lasted for approximately two hours each. Although there

are only two informants who describe their experiences of cleaning work in this study, these interviews were very in depth and together with reflections found in previous studies they contribute with important perspectives on flexibility and flexibilisation.

Both F and E made sure that they would be anonymous in my study, but although the themes were sometimes sensitive I also experienced a large interest and engagement from both E and F when they told me about their work as a cleaner.

When I performed the interviews and analysed the material I was primarily inspired by the vivid feminist debates in relation to methodology. These feminist interventions have contributed with the perspective of situated or localised knowledge, where the researcher does not objectively produce knowledge but has instead a responsibility to reflect upon his/her own subjectivity (Haraway, 1988). Feminist research should also have the ambition of being emancipatory, of producing knowledge which can be used by women themselves. This also demands recognition of the informants as subjects and of their knowledge (Acker, Barry, Esseveld, 1983). In the interviews with both E and F we returned to questions concerning our different positions in relation to work in general and cleaning work especially and I also attempted to keep reflexive in relation to my own understanding of what was being said.

I have also attempted to reflect on my standpoint, in relation to theory developed by feminist and post-colonial authors, during my research. To understand the social position of subjects and the specific and privileged knowledge about relations of power which a marginalise position can imply is inspiring in studies concerning women and work, in a profession which is also strongly ethnified. Both F and E have immigrated to Sweden from countries outside Western Europe and can in some perspectives experience the Swedish labour market from the perspective of 'the Other' to Swedish workers. The relations of power and processes of racialisation are however often more complex. Hammar (2000) for example points out that those immigrants who have arrived in Sweden earlier, often Yugoslavian immigrants for example, often have a privileged position in relation to for example immigrants from African countries. In relation to both F and E the Swedish language, on which the interviews were done, was a potential source of subordination, because I, in contrast to F and E, have been brought up speaking Swedish and might therefore risk using words and the discourse of language (see de los Reyes, 2007) as legitimating of certain power relations. During the interviews we discussed the issue of language and I attempted to keep sensitive to these situations.

## 6. Work Process Flexibility

Work process flexibility is a prominent theme in my interviews and in the articles, especially when it comes to discussions concerning influence and competence among cleaners. The low status of cleaning and its coding as female and ‘women’s work’ has been an ongoing discussion for decades. One of the measures taken has been to represent the cleaning profession through different titles such as environment collaborator and the more spread cleaning technician. The low status of the profession has often been associated with the coding of cleaning as female, as ‘women’s work’. To put focus on concepts such as ‘environment’ or ‘technician’ have been thought to weaken the female coding and represent cleaning work as more professional. These attempts point out that gender, i.e. a female coding of work and a female majority of workers, is important for the status of cleaning and also for how professionalism is perceived more generally.

In the beginning of my interview with manager L she comments on how I introduced my research as ‘an interest in the cleaning profession and changing working conditions’;

K: What do you call...cleaner...cleaning technician...

L: No, we don’t say that. We say ‘service collaborator’ because we want to emphasise ‘service’. We are one of the leading companies so of course we have to bring up service. You focus on cleaning [in your research] but we focus on many different things.

Apart from introducing the title service collaborator to me L also interprets my question as misguided in general. According to L my focus is wrong because it’s not relevant to talk about ‘just’ cleaning. Cleaning, according to L, doesn’t really exist in a pure form because the company can do many different things for their customers. I find L’s specific emphasis on ‘service’ interesting in relation to changes which are happening in the cleaning profession. In this chapter I will return to some discussions concerning service in cleaning.

### 6.1 Introducing varied jobs and associated services

Service can mean different things. What L firstly refers to is the many different services offered by cleaning companies, for example food service or administrative service. In my interviews all managers emphasise that more companies should have cleaning on a contract so that they are able to focus only on their ‘core activities’, but this argument is also expanded to these other services. The different services offered by the cleaning companies fit into the

notion of flexibility because they contribute to further specialisation of work at the customers' firms. The customers' employees do not have to focus on watering the flowers, order catering etc. These different services can be performed by different workers within the cleaning company, for example by window cleaners, receptionists or so called special cleaners who do floor care. But in relation to the interviews with the managers, these services were mostly used to emphasise variations in cleaning, i.e. that cleaning work is not 'just cleaning'. It is becoming more common that cleaners within these cleaning companies perform other tasks besides cleaning, so called 'associated services', according to the managers I interviewed. For L it is very important to point out that her company is not a *cleaning* company. These companies, L's included, furthermore present themselves as firms in the business of *service management* on their web pages. Although cleaning represents their largest income, other services such as office services and catering are often presented as equally important on their web pages.

Flexibility of work and services are hence part of the marketing strategies of these larger cleaning companies. But in addition to being marketed by the cleaning companies the managers also argue that these associated services have positive implications for cleaning work. Manager B uses the term 'cleaner' when she talks about workers within her company. Also the cleaners in my material, both my informants and cleaners in articles etc. refer to themselves as cleaners. B is generally very engaged in the aspects which concern cleaning, for example ergonomic aspects and improved working environment, and uses the titles which underlie the cleaners' identification. B is however careful to point out that her company offers many other services besides cleaning. She explains that this is experienced as very positive by the cleaners;

B: She [one of the cleaners] works in the reception there when the ordinary receptionist leaves for the day. And she really loves it; she thinks it's great to meet all these people. And many of our cleaners might be making coffee for the office and sometimes we do catering. And it's really nice to be able to do different things during the working days.

M similarly argues that many of the cleaners at the hospital have jobs with varied tasks. Since her company took over the contract at the hospital they have included more associated services in the contract. Some cleaners help out in the reception or in the restaurant. That the company took over responsibility for the washing made it easier to offer varied services, according to M. This has been good for the cleaners she argues, because their job is more fun if it's varied and their bodies are spared when they are able to switch tasks.

## 6.2 Functional Flexibility as ‘the good work’

My informants, F and E, do not have varied jobs. In fact, although the theme is prominent in my material the majority of cleaners have ‘ordinary cleaning jobs’. The reason why this appears as an important theme in my material is, I think, because this is an aspect of cleaning work which is currently being promoted and expanded, with large consensus. The employers collaborate with the union in making cleaning jobs more varied for example (FF, 2006:7:25). In the union magazine during the past two years two articles explicitly deal with the topic of varied services.

The first article is about Jenny, a younger woman with Swedish background, who was offered another job; sorting and folding laundry at a factory when she got pregnant and her cleaning job got too heavy (FF, 2007:2). The article describes how Jenny interacts with the employees at the factory and how she manages to get new laundry done when the workers at the factory need it, although that means the schedule is suddenly interrupted. When Jenny’s manager is interviewed he says that the company also gains on keeping Jenny as long as possible before she needs to go on parental leave because she is an asset to the company (FF, 2007:2:8).

Competence in the form of flexibility and ability to switch work seems to be an important aspect of varied work in relation to Jenny, both judging by what Jenny’s manager says but also from how she is represented in this article. She takes own initiatives and is service minded and flexible in relation to the needs of the customer.

The other article which discusses varied jobs is about Anncharlotte, a ‘Swedish’ cleaner who works at a warehouse (FF, 2006:7). The headline to this article is “3 Jobs in One”<sup>7</sup> because Anncharlotte doesn’t only clean but also helps out in the cafeteria and in the reception with administrative tasks. She thinks that the variation is fun and stimulating, she says to the reporter, and the article describes how she gets a lot of compliments for her work and is an appreciated member of staff at the warehouse. When she is needed to help out with other tasks she informs her employer, the contractor/cleaning company, and she either changes her own schedule or they send extra help with the cleaning. In the article Anncharlotte argues that customers need to change their idea of cleaners as *only* cleaners, unable to perform other work roles such as that of attendant or receptionist.

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<sup>7</sup> My translation

'I hope that [my company] can stay here and that I can get even greater variation in my job, says Anncharlotte. Service is what we cleaners should do, so if I can and have time to do something else except for cleaning I am happy to. It's fun and sometimes it's a challenge, depending on what I get to do. Getting more responsibility and feeling more needed by the customer improves the joy of working.' (Anncharlotte, FF, 2006:7:24)

Anncharlotte is described as a very competent cleaner in relation to the varied work which she performs. She takes it in her own hands to make her company as irreplaceable as possible at the warehouse because she can help out with so many different things. The cleaning which Anncharlotte performs is not described specifically, instead the focus of the article is how she helps out with the other tasks. She especially works close to the receptionist, a woman who is employed directly by the warehouse (FF, 2006:7:24).

Nobody in these articles talks about these boundaries between different jobs as problematic or difficult to break. Several studies have however shown that in order to protect the idea of their specific professional competence it has been very important for other groups of workers to uphold the boundaries toward cleaning work. Aurell shows how these processes of representing competence are highly gendered (2001). Similarly Andersdottir detected a strong criticism from (male) caretakers to mix their job with the work of cleaners (1994) and Paula Mulinari, in her dissertation on service workers, shows the strong resistances from waiters toward switching tasks, especially when it comes to cleaning (2007:216). In the articles from the union magazine however (FF, 2006:7, 2007:2), no workers who previously had other tasks are forced to clean, which might explain why no conflicts are described. The associated services do not seem to break with the gender coding of work when Anncharlotte works with reception work and Jenny folds laundry. The varied services do however imply a break with the 'dirty work' which cleaning is associated with. We cannot tell from this material whether there would be more conflicts if also other employees, such as the receptionist, were asked/ordered to clean.

When services are included in a contract as 'associated services' situations occur which seem difficult to judge. In the article about Anncharlotte the reporter describes how she cleans the cafeteria in the mornings:

'After breakfast Anncharlotte cleans the area. This morning she also places new paper cloths on the tables. Last week ended with a party and the old cloths went into the bins together with the leftovers. – 'I have to remember to compliment the boys. They cleaned up really well after themselves this time, she says.'" (FF, 2006:7:24)

Because Anncharlotte reacts so positively I think this passage implies that 'the boys' might not clean up very well after themselves every time there have been activities in the cafeteria. Although it is not part of her work instructions Anncharlotte sometimes has to adapt to other workers ('the boys') and their privilege not to see what they leave behind. There are no other

comments surrounding this incident and we cannot read from the article what it ‘normally’ looks like at Anncharlotte’s work place. Instead the adaptation to new situations, the flexibility, is represented as a positive characteristic of Anncharlotte and a positive aspect of her work. But the work also seems to be at risk of being boundless.

### 6.3 The ambivalence of flexibility in ‘ordinary cleaning’

Although the managers emphasize the importance of associated services, these varied jobs are far from available to all cleaners. It is therefore important to understand these associated services and the varied jobs they create in relation to ‘ordinary cleaning’. I ask the managers what individual initiatives might look like when it comes to cleaning work.

K: And then when you have a contract with a customer...how detailed are the work instructions? How standardised is it and how much is up to...

L: Everything is completely written down.

K: So it’s not that you see, now it’s dirty here...

L: Well, it leaves room for how you want to plan it. If you want to start there or there. At a hospital you have to start with the reception rooms because they have to be done ones the patients start arriving. So then we have to adapt. But otherwise it’s nice for the individual to plan and organise their work themselves. We are creatures of habit after all...

L argues that the instructions for cleaners are written down and that cleaning work varies only in the order in which things are done. In ‘ordinary cleaning’, which is what L describes, routines are important. In her journalistic book on the cleaning business Åsa Hammar (2000) however reports that customers have learnt through the negotiations in relation to procurements to make detailed descriptions of how the work is to be carried out, e.g. how to wipe plain surfaces etc. This makes work more monotonous and cleaners are not able to develop and use their competences (2000:119).

When it comes to instructions versus own initiatives, both M and B give a bit different answers from L however. M explains that the cleaners at the hospital have specific instructions, all written down on a schedule. At the same time, M argues, the cleaners should be flexible and constantly communicate with the customers and change their work if needed.

When I ask B about instructions and own initiatives in cleaning she says;

B: Well, that’s a good question. Because there are instructions. But you also clean with the eyes. I mean, you should see where it’s dirty because that saves a lot of work.

K: But I also imagine that, when cleaning, there must be many unexpected situations...

B: Yes, there is. Then you work it out - if someone is busy in her office then you take that room the next day.

These answers sound a bit paradoxical. The instructions are said to be absolute and detailed; they are worked out by the head office or by the responsible managers at a particular company. Based on the contracts the cleaners have detailed schedules and B shows me one of these, coloured and patterned according to the type of room and which days it is supposed to be cleaned. At the same time; communication and flexibility from the individual cleaner is said to be very important.

## 6.4 Flexibility as ‘a part of cleaning’

In order to understand how flexibility can be interpreted in relation to detailed instructions it is important to look closer at the work process from the perspective of workers.

Another article in the union magazine with the headline “No Spending-spree for Low Wage Cleaners”<sup>8</sup> is about Hilikka, a cleaner at a shopping centre (FF, 2006:10). The main theme is not, like in the articles about Anncharlotte and Jenny, about variations in the job. Instead the article presents a portrait of Hilikka, an ‘ordinary cleaner’, and the difficulties of living on a cleaners’ wage. This article hence puts more focus on ‘class’ than the articles about Jenny and Anncharlotte.

Hilikka describes the variation in her work very differently from for example Anncharlotte. She tells the reporter how, in her job, ‘you have to be both a plumber and a guide’. There are often problems with the toilets and people often stop her and ask for the way although there are information boards everywhere in the building. “Then I try to smile the best I can no matter how tired I am. To be a cleaner is a service job. You always have to think about that”, Hilikka says (FF, 2006:10:6).

In this part of the interview Hilikka describes extra services and problem solving as ‘part of the service profession’. But Hilka also describes this flexibility and these services as difficulties and challenges in her work, for which she doesn’t get awarded. Hilikka seems to describe these service aspects as invisible aspects of her work. Furthermore, to fix broken toilets and take care of lost shoppers interferes with what is most important in her work, i.e. to make the shopping centre spotless; ‘almost clinically clean’, as she puts it (FF, 2006:10).

My informants L, B and M have problems describing competence and flexibility in cleaning work. Marie Aurell analyses flexibility as an important form of *informal competence*

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<sup>8</sup> My translation



in cleaning work (2001:124). In my material it is obvious that cleaning is not only done by specific instructions nor is it always clearly defined. Flexibility is however neglected in the representations of cleaning. This contrasts to the representation of work which includes ‘associated services’, like the work of Anncharlotte or Jenny. Individual responsibility, flexibility and competence are instead important in the descriptions of their work. Through associated services flexibility is formalised and accounted for by both the company and the customer when cleaners do *other services than cleaning*. But cleaning work does not only ‘produce service’; it is also understood as ‘to make things clean’.

The ambivalence towards flexibility in relation to cleaning work is also made visible in my interview with the cleaner E.

E: ‘People don’t know our work. They often ask...’I’ve been sitting on this chair for a long time now, can you Hoover the seat?’ Or ‘please please, I just spilled something’. ‘Just that’! And changing the curtains, that’s not included. [...]And I don’t like saying ‘no, I can’t’. I mean, they don’t use me, they just think that’s part of my job.’

Firstly E tells me about a returning theme in the material I have studied, namely that the customer’s employees don’t know which services their employer buys from the cleaning company (see also Sundin & Rapp, 2006, Aurell, 2001).

## 6.5 Cleaning as Service Work

In the interview with E she argues that she does these ‘extra services’ because she knows the employees at her work place; she has been there for a long time and doesn’t like saying no to them and seem stingy. In the article in the union magazine (in FF, 2006:10) Hilkka describes how she is often asked to do things which are not part of her job description, because these services are part of a more general description of ‘a service job’.

This description of cleaning work as ‘service work’ returns many times in my material. During my interview with her, manager B she gives me a book called ‘Professional Cleaning Service’. This book is distributed to all cleaners who participate in ‘SRY-training’, a form of certification for cleaners which is designed by the employer’s organisation Almega as a one week course. The first part of this book describes cleaning as a service job (Bejram, 2005). L works for another company which is also a member of Almega and which offers the course to some of its employees. L also emphasises the importance of a ‘service perspective’ in my interview with her. The importance of ‘a service perspective’ for cleaning companies also

becomes obvious when L corrects my idea of cleaning to point out that cleaning should rather be understood as ‘service’ (see above).

Many previous studies (e.g. Aurell, 2001, Sundin & Rapp, 2006) have shown that part of the increasing importance of social skills among cleaners can be explained by the introduction of day-time cleaning, which meant increased interaction with other employees at the work place. One of the managers in Aurell’s study even says that a cleaner’s social competence, e.g. taking time to small talk with the customer’s employees, could be more important for how the customers experience their work than correct and thorough cleaning (Aurell, 2001:127).

Service broadens the idea of cleaning work but it also makes the limits appear problematic. If the customers’ experiences come to guide cleaning work more and more; the competences and limits to work set by the cleaners are questioned. To construct cleaning work as service work might further be a way of distancing the profession from the notion of ‘dirty work’. The associations to dirt subordinates work in a culture where cleanliness, and perhaps also immateriality, are raised as signs of superiority (see e.g. McClintock, 1995). In my material I cannot make comparisons to cleaning which is being performed in other people’s homes. The associations to domestic work has however been raised by other feminist authors as reasons for the subordination of women’s work (see above). I think that the emphasis on service might also be related to attempts to distance the profession from such associations to ‘domestic cleaning’.

Furthermore, the question of language returns several times during my interviews as an important aspect of competence in general, and social competence and service especially. E, who works in a middle sized Swedish town has three ‘Swedish’ colleagues and brings up the question of language during our interview. We talk about the demands that a ‘good cleaner’ should have social skills and I ask E:

K: Do you think a lot of people have problems with this then?

E: Yes, as a matter of fact. I’ve seen many. But that’s from person to person. But where we are...nothing wrong! Not just I work like that. But there are substitutes – if she is Bosnian I want us to talk Swedish at work. Ok, a few words, or quietly. You know our people are a bit loud. There are many who; ‘ooh, my little treasure’, in Bosnian, and I’m dying. ‘But please can you be a little...’ (whispers). ‘But why, is that forbidden?!’ (talks loud). But please. There are those people.

E feels very uncomfortable if someone talks to her in Bosnian at work. Part of the reason for this might be that E’s colleagues are all ‘Swedish’. Several times during our interview E excuses herself for not speaking Swedish correctly. E associates the Swedish language to social skills which are important in the ‘new’ idea of the customer oriented cleaning

profession. She also understands herself as a competent cleaner with social skills which is why it is problematic for her when someone asks her to speak Bosnian. The increasing demands on the level of Swedish is, according to managers interviewed by Hammar (2000:103) related to a new entrepreneurship, valued in the cleaning profession. I link this argument to the concept of service which is used increasingly to judge competence. This focus on language as an important competence, which also the manager L talks about in our interview, could however risk legitimizing a hierarchy based on notions of ethnicity, culture, language and competence within the cleaning profession (see e.g. de los Reyes, 2007).

## 6.6 Are there limits to service and flexibility?

The book B gave me, which can be thought to represent most larger cleaning companies, further instructs that if customers want services which are not included in the work descriptions it is important that the cleaners report these services to their employer. While this might not feel like a sacrifice for individual cleaners these services should be included in work descriptions so that the cleaning company can charge for them, according to the book (Bejram, 2005). I understand the instructions to include more tasks in the work descriptions as attempts to formalise the work process flexibility in cleaning work which I have described above. The cleaners often perform a lot of extra services and to document these deviances, as they are called, could imply further recognition (and compensation in time and money) for this work. E explains how her employer is careful to point out that extra services should be documented:

‘I mean, if they want all curtains taken down, now that’s a lot. Ok. That takes time. You have to climb a chair, take the pelmets away, and the curtain storeroom is far away. Then you unpack them, if they are creased anywhere you need to iron. And hang them. With these hooks that look...you now, an older model. And if you do it in an open-plan office for example... But individually, the guy who sits in his office and says; ‘these are dirty – can you change them?’, I don’t write that down. I actually don’t. But according to my firm I should. And then there are many other things...’ (E, ‘cleaner’)

Many of these extra favours are only requested occasionally, and then E feels uncomfortable asking for compensation. But she is not certain about how to draw her own boundaries for what she chooses to document. One problem of documenting and hence formalising flexibility in the form of extra services seems to be that it conflicts with the idea of cleaning as a service profession. Among the managers both B and M argue that the most important thing is that cleaners communicate with their customers, that they might ‘do this

instead of that', although the managers also say that extra services should be reported to the company.

E who is very careful to point out that the relations to the customer's employees are important to her also tells me how important it is for her to do the job thoroughly;

K: We talked about that, that there are many own initiatives, but do you feel that you get a lot of appreciation?

E: We don't get much appreciation. I asked actually, one time when it was Christmas. [...] Nobody says that I should do it. It's my initiative, I want it to look nice. I did it everywhere. It was so hard to move furniture in the kitchen, it was really a lot. The kitchens are not small! Sofas and small tables and large tables and smaller sofas. So I'm thinking; I made it nice and it's shining and nobody says anything. And then she comes, the manager, and I say; why is it so? Because small things, if you forget, for example the bins - they should be taken out Thursdays, but if they are full you can take them earlier - but if you forget, then they call immediately, you know. And nobody can tell and say, 'oh that's nice!'. Only a blind can't see! Only a blind man, it's so extra nice. Then you get a bit sad and so. And she says to me; 'E, you have to understand that they call us when they are not satisfied.' But why don't they send an e-mail or something? But it just works that way here.'

Sometimes E gets appreciation from some of the employees who she has gotten to know better. But she also gets sad when her bigger efforts are not noticed; especially because she does things she doesn't need to do. The loyalty to the customer can hence not fully explain why E does these extra services. Several times during the interview she returns to how important it is for her to do a good job. Aurell (2001) finds similar descriptions from the cleaners in her study. They do their work very thoroughly out of loyalty to the customers, but also because they have a strong professional pride where they want to be seen as thorough and competent cleaners (2001:131ff).

## 6.7 Formalising flexibility

Both Aurell and Hammar mention in their studies from 2000 and 2001 respectively that cleaning by result instead of cleaning by detailed instructions is being introduced on a wider scale. Aurell understands this as a formalisation of what cleaners have already been doing, i.e. to adapt their cleaning to what needs to be done (2001:207). One of the methods for evaluating such cleaning is called Insta 800 which means that a certain amount of dirt units are allowed in a particular space. In this system cleaners clean without instructions, i.e. they 'clean with their eyes', and therefore controllers are only allowed to measure visually how much dirt they can see (Bejram, 2005:22).

The article ‘Fast Enough for Quality Control?’<sup>9</sup> (FF, 2008:1) in the union magazine is about a conflict concerning this system at a large industry in Ludvika, Sweden. The article explains that the contract between ABB and ISS was formulated in 2005. The idea was to adapt cleaning after what was required and the cleaners should learn to ‘clean with their eyes’. The cleaners Rosa Dominiques and Katarina Sjöström argue however that the new form of control system forces them to work under a lot of pressure which is damaging to their bodies and their health. The cleaners received training in the new methods and were also taught to carry out own controls of their work. But Rosa and Katarina say that it felt like they were learning to count litter (ibid:6).

The cleaning company estimates the work load to be less with this system and has therefore enlarged the cleaning areas for cleaners. The cleaners in the article claim that although some tasks have been removed other unnecessary tasks have been added. They think it’s wrong that door knobs should be wiped off, but not the doors. Because dirty doors make an unclean impression, they argue. They also think it’s unnecessary to clean the outside of the waste paper baskets and absurd to have to wipe off the legs of office chairs (ibid:4).

According to the article the cleaners past the last quality control, but they feel that they had to work too hard to achieve it. The union representative, interviewed in the article, claims that the company gives double messages; that they practice both the old and the new system. She is however positive to quality controls when used properly and not announced too far in advance, since that might cause stress. The head of the cleaning company is also interviewed in the article and claims that the problems that Rosa and Katarina describe are mainly due to the fact that cleaners have to leave the old way of working. If the cleaners focus on the right things they wouldn’t have to stress, he argues (ibid:6).

This system can be understood as a formalisation of cleaners’ flexibility, their competence to judge situations and ‘clean with the eyes’. Rosa and Katarina however seem to experience these new directions as a questioning of their competence ‘to see’ where cleaning needs to be done and to judge the experience of ‘clean’. ‘To see’ is also mentioned by Aurell to be an important skill in cleaning work (Aurell, 2004). Limited time however leads to a routinization and degradation of work. The strategies of the cleaners to resist such demands have often been to control part of their work themselves and to judge the result of their own cleaning, although it often leads to more work (see above and Aurell, 2004). Through control systems

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<sup>9</sup> My translation.

such as Insta 800 however the flexibility is increasingly controlled by employers. The cleaners seem to understand these changes as a routinization of what has been suggested to be the freedom in cleaning work, i.e. the worker's own judgement and not instructions on how to judge. 'It feels like we are learning to count litter', as Rosa and Katarina say (FF, 2008:1).

## 6.8 Flexibility and Technology

The formalisation of flexibility through an introduction of result oriented cleaning is said, by the company, to increase efficiency in cleaning. We can understand this as a further exploitation of the cleaners' work. Parallels can also be made in relation to other technological and organisational developments within the cleaning profession. Both E and F tell me that their work has improved a lot since they first started working as cleaners, 15 and 30 years ago respectively.

It is often argued that cleaners are against technological development. Especially older cleaners are 'a challenge' when it comes to introducing new technology according to both managers B and L in my interviews and several of Aurell's informants (2004:109). F is very positive to new cleaning methods and new tools but she says that they don't really get much of that at her work place, especially not new machines. Aurell similarly argues in her study that although technology is often emphasised in relation to cleaning in order to raise the status of the profession, most cleaners do not work with machines or new technology (2001:97).

E tells me that she has asked her employers for a new cleaning machine because the one she and her colleagues are using is far too heavy:

E: Once, when they had rebuilt, the guys, the special cleaners, came around with one of them smaller ones [cleaning machines, my note]. So we asked for one of those because we have such large areas you know. But the employers said no. They said it's fifty thousand. But we said, well how much are we?! *Laughter*. I have a slope up to where I clean, and there are glass doors so I have to hold it real hard, otherwise it might crash into the doors... I mean, I wanted to...it was heavy but in the beginning I tried to do it with force. There is a toilet just there around the corner, and every time I went there to through up. Now I try to take it easier.'

E thinks that better machines can solve a lot of work related problems but also says that the company is often not interested in such investments, although the older machine is so heavy that it makes her vomit after pushing it in front of her. Manuel Castells argues that technology as interconnected with knowledge creates new opportunities for organisations in a global economy (2000). Much research has however focused on whether technological developments imply more freedom and flexibility for workers or whether it instead gives companies more

tools for controlling the work of employees (see e.g. Taylor, 1998). Ordinary cleaning is labour intensive but technology is also present in my material. Feminist researchers on labour have argued that jobs performed by a gendered working class, although performed in close connection with information and communication technology, are often not understood as such (see e.g. Acker, 2006). E tells me several times during the interview that most technology is introduced through special cleaners. Aurell finds similar results in her dissertation; the work of male cleaners is often understood as more technological and as requiring more competence than that of female cleaners (2001:107).

Aurell understands the resistance from some female cleaners against new technology as rooted in notions about 'a good worker' as someone who performs physical and manual labour and she associates such statements from her informants with a working class identity (2001:106). Class based understandings of work might therefore be important for how we can interpret the changes which are discussed in relation to cleaning work. I understand the article about Hilikka (FF, 2006:10) as coloured by representations of class. In the article we are told by the reporter that Hilikka has been warned by her employer for refusing to use one of the new cleaning machines. Hilikka's explanation in the article is that she thinks it's dangerous to drive around all the shoppers and bring the machine in the lift between the floors (ibid:6). But Hilikka also gives voice to the same identification that Aurell mentions as important in relation to technology. Hilikka was taught to clean very thoroughly by a tough supervisor in the beginning of her career she tells the reporter, and she has only been away from work to have her two children. She further thinks that she is part of the last generation of cleaners who are in the profession their whole lives; the job is too tough she says. When she explains how she has managed 34 years in the profession she says that it's because she is 'a stubborn Finish woman who never gives up' (ibid:7). Both ethnicity and class seem important for how Hilikka experiences herself as a cleaner and expresses the pride of her work. In these descriptions Hilikka expresses both competence and control over her work.

In my interview with F she explains her experiences of changes in cleaning work as follows:

F: It's so much better today. Before we had [older] mops<sup>10</sup>. Heavy to wipe the floor and stuff. But today we have really nice things, so we have. It's a lot easier to clean today. But before it was, oh no. But in a way it was nicer to clean before. The managers didn't...if you were finished you could leave, no one was complaining. Then you could have three or four cleanings every evening. But not now. Now it doesn't matter if you're done. It was heavier before but a lot better psychologically. Not so much trouble. Not so much stress.

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<sup>10</sup> 'Svabb', older model of mop where a lot of water was needed.

F says that cleaning is not as heavy today as it used to be. But she also suggests that the stress is constantly increasing and causing new problems. Similarly Hilkka emphasises the stress and the heavy pace of work when she describes changes in methods and tools. Neither Hilkka nor F seem to separate these developments but rather understand them as interconnected. The introduction of new technology and new cleaning methods can also be used as a reason for increasing efficiency and the size of the areas which need to be cleaned. What F and Hilkka describe is a kind of alienation in their work which is not necessarily associated with their identity as workers.

## 6.9 The Pressure of Time

As I mentioned in the first chapters, concerns about the increasing demands on improved efficiency and speed in cleaning are neither new nor controversial. The increased competition in the business and the lower prices are often mentioned as explanations (see e.g. Sundin&Rapp, 2006). This constant lack of time changes the way cleaning is performed and also has an effect on how flexibility and service can be understood. To formalise associated services and include them in a contract could of course have the positive effect of acknowledging more of the work which a cleaner performs and give time for this. Equally, to document and hence acknowledge the extra services, such as putting up a new curtain, can also mean that the cleaners' time is better understood and valued. But in contrast to the 'associated services' or such specific services as putting up a curtain, the extra services which are included in the work of 'making things clean' are rarely formalised. In the article about Hilkka she tells the reporter:

'I wish I had a horn on my cleaning trolley. If I had that then maybe people would get out of the way. Now they hardly ever do that.'(FF, 2006:10:6)

To make a crowded shopping centre clean involves other obstacles than just dirt. Both E and F explain to me that there are many different aspects which you need to consider when you clean, different obstacles concerning everything from how the building is designed to how different spaces are used.

Aurell (2001) argues that flexibility is an important aspect of the cleaners' competence. At the same time she describes how this competence is not only unacknowledged among managers but sometimes also illegitimate in relation to the cleaners' work descriptions. The



cleaners are forced to be flexible and make constant priorities in their work because of the time limits, even though these priorities sometimes mean that the contract is violated. Cleaners often help out with things which are not included in the contracts if the customers ask for it, according to Aurell's study (2001:128ff). E tells me about these priorities several times during the interview. She has a hard time cleaning her rooms, the cafeteria and reception, when there are conferences and many visitors for example. E also feels very stressed when she knows that her ordinary detailed schedule cannot be followed and often works too hard and endangers her own health to be able to finish. F also points out many times during our interview that the contracts and the instructions are wrong to start with.

K: So there is more to do?

F: Much more. Much more. They have put double areas on people now.

K: But, how can they motivate that?

F: Well, we have a meeting. And then they say 'this, this, this, this area, you have this and you have this.' So you can't say no. It's another thing if you can make it or not. You don't have time to do even half of this. People feel really bad. And you feel guilty. Because you don't have time.

This guilt which F talks about and the constant lack of time seem central for understanding flexibility in cleaning work. F describes the relation between the detailed instructions and her actual work as follows;

F: I'm one of the best cleaners. But then it's wrong to be good because then they don't make money.

K: What do you mean?

F: If I do my job real nice, and make sure to do everything, I don't eat lunch or nothing, then they don't get to work extra. If I do my job, if I do it nicely, I don't know how to explain, then they can't do the job again.

K: No, I don't really understand...if you work really well...

F: Then they say: 'F, we are so good blablabla...' But in the long run they don't get extra work anywhere.

K: I see. If it's not done properly they can ask for more money to do more work?

F: Yes, exactly. So you do the work which is on the list. I have a list, the contract. So I do what's on the list. You're not so stupid that you work extra. Because you don't get paid.

F experiences that she is encouraged to work hard to a certain point. She argues that there is an ambivalence towards flexibility and extra services within her company and that the contract is designed so that there should be opportunities to order extra cleaning, either by special cleaners or to buy extra time from ordinary cleaners. It is in the gaps, where the service is not performed to perfection, where the cleaning company can negotiate with their customers according to F. If she does her job too well it will affect the design of the contract and the 'extra work' which the cleaning company can get paid for.

## 6.10 Physical Work and Invisibility

The managers consistently emphasise the service aspects of cleaning work in my interviews. They argue that the relation between the customers and the individual cleaners are becoming more important. In the interview with L we discussed how the company estimates how much time is needed for cleaning:

K: Then maybe you take notice on which type of cleaning it is, like how heavy it is?

L: Well, cleaning is not heavy today. It's physical but it is not heavy, it shouldn't have to be. Not like before. Back then cleaning was heavy. You had to carry buckets and wring out mops. But there are tools for this today.

All managers argue the same thing; that cleaning should not be represented as 'heavy' or that such a description should be avoided. In another part of the interview where we talk about training and certification L tells me:

L: It's extremely important to raise the status of the profession. And you do that with this course. Because you still see a tendency that people look down on cleaning...for some reason. 'Cleaning is heavy.' 'Cleaning is for those who can't do anything else.' You notice when you talk to the social insurance office...even with doctors. That they; 'poor cleaners'. No, we work to raise the status of people through training.

I interpret these answers as consistent with other strategies to change the image of cleaning and the status of cleaning jobs. Cleaning is a service job, it's not a dirty job or a heavy job, the way it used to be, according to L. But while managers emphasise that cleaning does not have to be heavy today, with new methods and tools, the cleaners often emphasise the dire physical aspects of the work and that it is tough on the body. Cleaning is a profession with high numbers of work related injuries and both F and E feel pain in their neck and shoulders.

K: Are there any particular movements that...

E: Yes, it feels like the muscles are inflamed, it's when you do a lot of wet...

K: Yeah. Ehh...I heard that you hardly do wet anymore, but you're saying when it's winter and snow...

E: Yes, I'm like that. And look at this! (E shows me calluses on her hands) It's when I pull the mop. I call it professional deformation. *laughter*

E, who has several more worrying problems with her body and work related injuries than calluses on her hands talks a lot about the body and the physical aspects of work. As I have shown earlier E is positive to new methods and technology, but she says that heavy manual labour is still needed in order to get everything clean. F also talks about how it feels in her body to clean different areas. The cleaners use their body and the physical aspects of their work to judge how much work there is, what it feels like in the body to clean certain carpets etc. F points out to me several times how the stress is devastating for the working

environment at her work place, but she is also very careful to point out the physical aspects of her work. E also talks a lot about this in the interview.

E: And I walk. You know, all through [my workplace] there is like a culvert, it's maybe three meters wide and long. If you see someone at the end you can't tell if it's a man or a woman. That big! So you have to walk five times down, five times up.

K: Oh. That's a lot of steps.

E: Yes! And we had a pedometer. But as soon as I do this I drop it. (E bends down) So I don't know how many kilometres it is every day. But I know it's a lot. A lot.

In her study of service workers, Paula Mulinari finds that the physical aspects of the work only come up when she asks straight questions even though many of them and especially waitresses are on their feet all day (2007:125). The opposite is true when it comes to the cleaners I interview. The physical aspects are very important for the cleaners in how they understand their work and also for how they experience boundaries for their work. One example is when E throws up after pushing herself too hard with the heavy machine and therefore legitimates her decision to take things slower even when she has a lot of work to do.

I think that this emphasis on the body and the physical aspects of work is also important for the visibility of cleaning work. The invisibility has been a main aspect of many previous analyses that incorporate gendered, classed and racialised notions of work. I find it interesting that flexibility is an important aspect of strategies to construct cleaning as more visible and 'professional' because there are tensions and ambiguities in these descriptions. Anne McClintock has for example in an inspiring manner described how power relations and labour can be made visible through signs and markers on the body and through the play with symbols such as dirt (McClintock, 1995). To emphasise the physical aspects of cleaning work instead of the service related aspects can therefore not only be interpreted as a rigid working class identity. The acknowledgement of the bodily aspects of labour can instead be understood as resistance towards conditions of work and relations of power. The new methods which have made cleaning work easier, but also more efficient, can be seen as a re-establishment of invisibility. Many cleaners argue that they do not get appreciation for their service-mindedness and also that they get into trouble if aspects of their cleaning are deficit. Managers emphasising service and flexibility, i.e. workers' ability to perform different tasks which the customer needs, might also be understood by the cleaners as their work passing unnoticed.

## 6.11 Competence, Control and Flexibility

To analyse flexibility from a work process perspective draws attention to the difficulties of defining flexibility. Flexibility is not talked about in relation to the work process in my material and cleaners and managers represent cleaning work very differently. I have however found that terms such as ‘varied jobs’ are used in order to talk about the positive aspects associated with a flexible work process. In my material I have also found that the concept of ‘service’ is sometimes used to talk about flexibility in cleaning work. Part of the explanation as to why cleaning work is not understood as flexible might be because flexibility is seen as a ‘natural’ and inherent aspect of cleaning work. Jane Jenson (1989) has further argued that the definitions of flexibility are related to the social construction of competence, where women are seen as ‘talented’ whilst ‘skills’ are coded as male (as presented in Grönlund, 2004:124). To analyse flexibility with the focus on cleaning work furthermore unveils the class bias in some theoretical definitions of functional flexibility.

Flexibility is interesting in relation to the representation of cleaning work as service work. As I presented in the first theoretical chapter service work is often related to the coming about of post-industrial or service society and more flexible production. However, many previous studies have also shown that service work is not necessarily flexible. There are many examples where service work can be seen as work by the assembly line, for example the routinized work at McDonald’s which often is used to illustrate such standardized service work (see e.g. Leidner, 1993). Cleaning work is to a large extent routinized through the specific instructions and the time pressure which makes routines important in order to be able to finish cleaning during the working hours. There is however ambiguities in this routinization because cleaners also need to take a lot of individual responsibility which is not recognised.

For many cleaners there seems to be a gap between the service aspects of their work when they communicate with the customers and their ‘core work’ which is to make things clean, often while following detailed instructions. Service therefore not only broadens their work but because of the tough time limits it often interferes with the work of making things clean.

## 7. Spatial/Work Place Flexibility

Most previous studies concerning cleaning work have dealt with the issue of outsourcing since this has had strong effects on the organisation of cleaning work from the 1990's (see above). In my material I find that the constant insecurity of whether or not the cleaning company will keep a contract after the next procurement affects how the cleaners experience their work. E is very happy with her work place where she knows the routines and gets along with the other employees. She has been there for about six years. When I ask her about the contracts she says:

E: There is always something going on you know. Always something. Yes, every two years. Sometimes they have one year. Up here we have three. So this year we got two years and then there is a procurement on that. Yes, but he was really happy with us so they didn't have a procurement this year. No one could come and compete with us. And that was really nice....nice to know. And they made cards for all employees at [name of customer, my note]. But, now, it's a bit under control because...and...you just go in with this...like this...press a code..

K: Yes, a pass!

E: Yes, and we had the usual before. Without....security. Now it's a little bit special, it's like an ID that works in all Nordic countries. So first we had those without pictures. Then he called us and told us to come to his office. He who is responsible [name, my note], and he said; 'I think you're so good you should have the same card as the rest of us.

K: Yeah...

E: With picture and everything! Ok. Then we thought...we're staying. Because these cards cost!

The personal pass makes E understand that the customer is willing to invest in her and her colleagues. She explains that she is nervous some time before she knows if there is going to be a new procurement. These situations cannot be controlled by the cleaners and all communication with the customers goes through the cleaning company. E is careful to point out that she takes responsibility for her company keeping the contract by working extra hard and sometimes doing favours which are not included in her work descriptions. She tells me that in general her work place is really good, she is happy not to work in a school for example where the cleaning is much heavier according to her. E was previously working in a museum:

'They opened at ten, but when there were bookings – in the middle of my cleaning there could be people coming. And you clean and they walk all over it. It was....you weren't too happy with what you had finished. It didn't even show that you had been there. But. Anyway. You do what you should. And I'm like, I never want any complaints, I'm that kind of person, and if there are controllers or managers coming who would think that this was not well done. So I do things that maybe I shouldn't really do. But. Anyway. They are happy and we are still there...'

This passage illustrates how E experiences the cleaning of different spaces differently. The risk of being transferred to other workplaces where the cleaning company has a contract is also the risk of heavier work. The quote by E however also illustrates the increased

individualisation of responsibility in cleaning work. E says that she and her colleagues must have done a good job because their employer still has the contract with the museum. Aurell finds in her study that most cleaners do not primarily feel loyalty with their employers but often to their customers (2001:149). It is also not uncommon that staff and managers at the company who buys cleaning have very specific requests regarding who is cleaning – they may only prolong a contract if they are assured to keep the same person or if they are promised to get someone replaced, according to the union representatives cited in Sundin & Rapp (2006:33).

The instability of these contracts may however not only mean that cleaners need to change work places. When F's previous employer lost their contract at the factory F and several other cleaners chose to stay and instead work for another employer. This however meant that her work situation has become increasingly unstable. F describes this instability when we talk about competence in cleaning and how she thinks that her employer does not offer any training or courses.

F: We want more courses. We really need it. There are new people all the time. People come and go and come and go. And we have had at least ten managers in five years. So no manager could... They are here for half a year, a year. There was a woman we only had for a week. I have only been here for a year but it feels like a really long time.

K: Are there a lot of things changing then, like schedules?

F: They change everything all the time. As soon as there is a new manager they change something.

The above may say more about the experiences F has of her employer than her experiences of the cleaning business as a whole, but the instability is also related to the flexibility in the contracts. The cleaners often feel that there is not enough time to create new routines for their work. The cleaners express that they are vulnerable to these changes because the cleaning takes different forms in different work places.

E: At my work place they rebuild all the time. They rebuild and many rooms that you did once a week, now you do it two, three times or every day. A lot of that. They just rebuild. And they move from one house to another. But it's getting bigger and bigger. You shouldn't complain but...in one of the transmitter rooms which was cleaned only once a week, that's a dining room now!

K: Oh.

E: Yeah, that's five times a week.

E does not get more space to clean but the places change character which means more work for her without extra pay. Outsourcing as a strategy of flexibility does, as noted by Jonsson (2007), seem to lead to increased instability for cleaners. However, the spatial flexibility within a work place can also be a source of freedom where the cleaners are allowed to move and escape certain control. F tells me how this has often been central to her when it comes to getting to know more people but also being able to leave whenever she is finished.

## 8. Working Time Flexibility

As I have presented in previous chapters stress and pressure of time structures most cleaning work today. In my interview with F she returns to the theme of stress:

K: Is it your manager who tells you where to clean and when, do you have a precise schedule?

F: I had my area, my schedule. It was good but still you had to run. Ok, today I have to do this before 8. And at that place I had to do the dishes before 8. The third part should be vacuumed before 8. Then you run and you plan, how will I have time for this and this. It's not small. These are large places.

K: So at what time do you start in the mornings then?

F: I go there at 5 am to make it. I work one hour for free.

F tells me that she comes in one hour earlier in order to avoid some of the stress and take a few breaks during the working day which she says that many of her colleagues hardly ever do. Aurell (2001) has found that many cleaners work unpaid over time in order to be able to finish their work. Although time in cleaning work is represented as fixed and regulated in contracts; cleaners give witness to demands on flexibility also concerning time.

The cleaning business is furthermore characterised by a large number of part-time workers. Between 50-75% of all cleaners employed by cleaning companies work part time; depending on if the numbers are given by the union or by the employers' organisation (FF, 2007:9). E tells me about her professional life since she came to Sweden in the beginning of the 1990's when she started working in a hotel:

E: I liked it up there, but I was just working hours. And we paid for food. I switched bus twice to get there. North you know. I didn't have a drivers' licence back then. So I got up at seven in the morning to start at half past nine and then I got back at half past four. And then you have only worked for six hours. So it was nothing, just a waste of time. And of the body too. The worst thing was to change sheets. I hated that when I came home, to change sheets. And, there was a lot of responsibility. And then I started working here at [name of her current employer, my note] and in the beginning I was working at six different places. Two fixed, the museum and at a dentist's reception. And then the rest. I did that for four and a half years. Running back and forth. Sometimes I walked seven kilometres a day between the places.

K: Then you had full time...

E: And still it wasn't full time! If I'd have full time I'd had several more places. And you can't make it, no matter how much money you get. Five or six years ago I got a drivers' licence. And it's a lot easier, you're not so tired.

The instability of this employment, to work at different places, is something which E doesn't wish to go back to. Such employments are however a rather common situation for cleaners. When I ask the managers B and L they say that it is rather common that cleaners need to work at different places in order to increase the amount of hours they work every day. The flexibility which these cleaning companies offer their customers make it increasingly difficult for cleaners to be offered day-time, full-time work. More and more customers want cleaning in the mornings, for example before the students arrive in schools or customers to shops and

supermarkets. Evenings, after closing, are also requested. Many cleaners therefore need to split their working days.

This type of working time and work place flexibility can of course mean that the working day is stretching out into the cleaners' private time. E tells about the logistic difficulties of travelling with little time and money, no car and no drivers' licence. However, both F and E who have previously worked with these combined jobs, working in the mornings and in the evenings, argue that they had more time to spend with their children that way. These split work schedules sometimes seemed to imply a greater independency for cleaners in their work.

E: I was working at the dentist's in the mornings, then I went home to wake up the little one, fed him and then took him to day care on my way to the museum. Now, I often feel that I don't have time for him. And he needs this time. But I am always tired, sometimes I come in here [to the kitchen, my note] and close the door. And have a cigarette, and he can't come in. But I feel guilty also.

The experiences of E could be understood as work time colonising private time, which makes her feel guilty also in the home. Similarly Hilka tells the reporter in the union magazine (2006:10) that the lack of money makes her private time both less efficient and less pleasant. This puts focus on the importance of studying the relation between work and home in order to fully understand how flexibility and flexible time works in relation to class and gender (Hochschild, 1997).

## 9. Employment Flexibility

Lena Gonäs (1991) points out how stabile employments which have traditionally been held by men have been seen as standard employments while short-term or part-time employments, which have traditionally been held by women, have instead been understood as exceptions. An article in the union magazine brings up the theme of involuntary part-time work and the ambition of the union to make full-time work standard in the profession (FF, 2007:9). This ambition is something that also the managers I interviewed return to and it seems to be related to status raising strategies, i.e. that cleaning should not be seen as a job 'on the side', as a 'women's job' but instead as a 'real job'.

The article describes how the cleaning company Lilja & Co which has a contract with Quality Hotel in Luleå, a town in the north of Sweden, has come to an agreement with the union to guarantee employees more working hours every month. Cleaners who work at the hotel should have a stabile amount of hours counted as an average during a quarter of a year.



The owner of Lilja & Co says that without this agreement they wouldn't have dared to employ these many on stable contracts since the work load differs a lot between different periods (ibid:5). Three cleaners have full time contracts while seven are employed 50-75%. Those part-time cleaners who wish to work more are prioritised in case more work needs to be done, according to the article. The schedule is changed on a day-to-day basis when cleaners are called in for the next shift (ibid:6).

Four cleaners are also interviewed in the article. Linda was previously employed for ten hours a week but was often called in and worked in general five hours a day. She could support herself only with the help of her partner she says. Linn and Camilla work 50% and they both live with their parents. They would like to move out but they can't afford it. They are however not certain that they would like full-time employment as cleaners because they are not sure that their bodies could handle it. After only one year in the profession they feel pain in their backs they say. Carina, who is a single mother of four, has a full time employment since previously, which is necessary in order to support herself and her children she tells the reporter (ibid:6).

This article about the hotel cleaners illustrates numerical flexibility in the cleaning business. This corresponds to theories presented earlier which argue that there is a polarisation on the labour market where workers with 'low-skilled jobs' are seen as increasingly replaceable (see e.g. Atkinson, 1987). The arguments concerning difficulties of calculating the amount of work needed in advance and the small margins for doing so are stated by the owner of Lilja & Co and returns in my interviews with the managers L, B and M. The article mentions that there are also cleaners employed 'by the hour' at the hotel when more work is needed (ibid:5). The work situation of these cleaners is however not described further in this article. My material for this thesis largely describes the situation of those workers who have a position *within* the cleaning business and not those who have the most insecure positions with insecure employments and unstable situations. This can partly be explained by the interviews with the managers who emphasise the ambitions of secure employments or the two cleaners, F and E, who have both been employed for a rather long time. However, the experiences from these insecure positions seem absent also in the articles I have studied. Swedish trade unions have long been criticised for neglecting those who are not employed on 'traditional contracts' with stable employments (see e.g. Sahlström, 2008).

The article about the hotel cleaners in Luleå also raises the question of whether there is a shift in flexibility to apply also to those who have stable employments, i.e. who are

guaranteed a certain amount of work hours. The employees in the article no longer know when they will work their hours, although they have the right to refuse work in the weekends (FF, 2008:1). Such employment contracts could be seen as another way of formalising the flexibility which seems to be inherent in the way cleaning work is organised, i.e. that cleaners constantly need to adapt to the demands and the needs of customers to the cleaning companies.

Although employments are sometimes split so that the cleaners work in the mornings and then return to work in the evenings the main consequence is that many cleaners are only offered part-time work. Many researchers have pointed out that it is primarily women who end up having part-time jobs, where a large responsibility for the family can be seen as both a cause and a consequence of less time spent at work (see e.g. Stanfors, 2003).

Part-time work has also been said to affect the notion of competence among workers and part-time workers often get to perform other tasks than their full-time colleagues (ibid.). In my interview with L we discuss the certification training they offer some of their cleaners.

K: And is this training for all your employees?

L: No, well, everyone should get the introductory training. Then we offer the certification, firstly to those who are employed more than 20 hours a week, then you go down...

Those cleaners who work part-time are not, at least not at L's company, offered training to the same extent as full-time cleaners. Training is, as I have shown in previous chapters, important for how competence is understood within the profession. Similarly in the interview with the manager M she says that the varied jobs, which are understood as 'better jobs', are more often offered to full-time employees.

My material also shows how the consequences of numerical and functional flexibility cannot be separated when focus is 'the doing of work' and the representation of cleaners. In relation to the formalisation of flexibility, which I presented in earlier chapters, the book published by Almega instructs that it is important to report extra services because; 'when there is substitute staff who do not perform these extra services customers experience worse service than before' (Bejram, 2005:17). The numerical flexibility which characterises the organisation of cleaning work, i.e. the use of substitute and extra staff employed by hours, therefore also affects the work process. The numerical flexibility, especially part-time work to fill the need of staff at certain times during the day, can be understood in relation to the physical aspects of cleaning work. As two of the workers in the article (FF, 2007:9) argued they would like to have full-time jobs, but they doubt that they could work full-time with cleaning

## 9.1 A reserve army of labour?

Hammar argues that those who have the lowest positions, who are most vulnerable and who most often lack secure employments are immigrant women who know only little Swedish (2000:23). In the interview with L, who is 'Swedish' and works as a manager in a larger city, we return to this theme several times.

K: Then who works for you? It's still a female dominated...

L: Yes. Maybe 80-20.

K: And immigrants/workers with a Swedish background?

L: It's a lot of immigrants. I don't remember how many nationalities but I think it was a good bit over 40. Like...our company rests upon that we can find people who want to clean. And we are really lucky to have our immigrants, because otherwise I think we would have a lot of problems. A bit of a shame really. Because it would be better if it was a mix. Then you could help each other with the language.

K: But this must differ...you are located all over Sweden...

L: Yes, absolutely right. Down in [name of small municipality in the region] there is almost 100% Swedish staff. That is, non-immigrated.

K: Then, is there a problem to find staff there?

L: No. And that depends...because it's different where you are. I mean, where we clean at hospitals it's easier to recruit because we can offer 8-hour-employments. But that doesn't mean that we sort and only pick Swedish, the best qualified gets the job as long as they know Swedish.

I interpret L's answers to mean that the reason there are so many 'immigrants' employed as cleaners in the city where she works is because it is difficult to find workers for certain jobs. In relation to numerical flexibility I find the following passage, presented in Sundin & Rapp (2006) especially interesting. A manager at a cleaning company, which has recently received a new contract with a company in the food business, explains how they needed to hire new staff:

'The work starts at 6 in the morning. It's the same in many schools so that's not such a big deal. But then there is Saturdays and Sundays. They [the shops] are always open – it's two days a year that they are not open – they are open all these bank holidays. Us Swedes, we want our time off, we care about that. So here we have our immigrants to thank for getting these jobs done.' (Agneta, cleaning manager quoted in Sundin & Rapp, 2006:59).

This passage is not commented upon further by Sundin & Rapp. It seems however, according to this quote, that there is a notion of immigrants as workers whose flexibility is valued but who also put up less demands concerning free time etc. Although L is careful to say that her company does not discriminate against 'immigrants' the essence of this and similar argument are that 'immigrants' are sometimes understood to constitute a form of reserve labour force within the cleaning sector. The interview with L continues:

K: Do you notice any of this, that customers request cleaners with a Swedish background?

L: No, that's crazy. This is our resource. Without our immigrants we wouldn't stand a chance. But you have to separate this, that we have demands on their level of Swedish. I mean, I can say that we invest a lot in this that our employees should learn the Swedish language. I held a circle for four ladies here all autumn so that they

would dare to talk more. Because they did talk once, they went to SFI [Swedish For Immigrants, my note]. But when you get a job you do that job and only spend time with your colleagues and only talk that language. And at home you only talk to your family and relatives. And unfortunately maybe you live where there is no possibility of speaking Swedish. Even in the shops they talk... And then you loose what you have learnt. We have Folkuniversitetet [translates People's University, adult education, my note] where we have sent people. Paid for education there. And that's not for free, I can tell you that! But we have to do something. And now we were actually granted money for an EU-project for this. Not only the Swedish language, but the most part is for this. And then it's integration and equality. You won't be equal if you don't know the Swedish language. Then us employers won't invest in trainings for you. Because we can't. If you can't profit by..

L says that without 'our immigrants' the cleaning company 'wouldn't stand a chance'. For L cleaning work and the recruitment of new cleaners also seems to be linked to discussions concerning a more general division in society and questions concerning integration. These links are crucial for how we can understand flexibility in relation to cleaning work. Jill Rubery, Professor of Comparative Employment Systems, writes:

'The existence of disadvantaged groups in the labour market is in part the consequence of broader social forces leading to discrimination within the labour market and elsewhere in the social system. However, disadvantage is also created through the policies of employers. Employer policies on recruitment, retention, and training all imply selection and selectivity.' (Rubery, 1994:53)

Segregation and discrimination in the labour market needs to be understood as the outcome of several interacting processes. My material does not allow for deeper analyses of the interaction of these processes in relation to cleaning work. In relation to my material it is however interesting to note that labour market participation is often talked about, by politicians and other debaters, as the way towards integration for immigrants and cleaning work is sometimes seen as a realistic starting point. Hammar (2000:105) for example reports of a company which initiated but never carried through a similar project of integration to that which L speaks of.

L is careful to emphasise that her company makes no differentiation between 'Swedish' and 'immigrant' cleaners. Previous studies (see e.g. Hammar, 2000) however point out that there are hierarchies within the cleaning profession where certain ethnicities (for example 'Swedish' and immigrant groups from European countries) are privileged. The processes of gendering and racialisation of cleaners can however not be interpreted only through 'identity' or 'ethnic background'. Hammar gives several examples of different types of alliances based on gender and ethnicity, and of racist notions which are constructed within a company or at a specific work place (2000). In processes of racialisation groups of workers are also constructed as 'the Other' to a norm, which in smaller towns might be 'Swedish' whilst in larger cities other hierarchies might be constructed. Racialisation of different groups of workers in the cleaning business through the notions of competence and culture is therefore

complex. In order to fully investigate these processes more specific studies which are localised in geographical and organisational contexts are needed (see e.g. de los Reyes)

The stories about a racialised work force are however present also in my material. In the quotation by L above, she says that ‘when you get a job you do that job and only spend time with your colleagues and only talk that language’. Although there are ‘40 different nationalities’ employed at her company there seems to be a segregation of the workers on the basis of ethnicity. Hammar has found that such ethnic segregation is rather common in larger cleaning companies (2000).

B, who also works as a manager in a large city, does not speak about the importance of language in our interview.

K: About the job, that it’s female dominated, is it mostly immigrants who work with cleaning here?

B: Well, you should know that we have a lot of really well educated cleaners.

When I ask B about the division of different workers along lines of ethnicity she does not confirm the image which I had been given previously of immigrants as a reserve labour force and she seems to question the way my question might insinuate a generalisation of ‘women and immigrants’ in so called low-skilled jobs. I interpret this way of answering the question as a reflecting back on societal circumstances where well educated immigrants work with cleaning because they are not offered other jobs, and therefore emphasising competence rather than the lack of competence among immigrants who work as cleaners.

F hardly has any ‘Swedish’ colleagues where she works, in the outskirts of a larger city. Ethnicity is present in several parts of our interview for example when F speaks of different conflicts at work:

F: They have placed me at another area now. They didn’t want me at the first area because I had too much contact with my colleagues. I could talk to them and share my experiences. But they were afraid so they moved me. These were Thai girls who didn’t know anything. So you had to teach them how it worked in this society and everything.

F talks about strategies of resistance toward her employers when their demands on the cleaners constantly increase. Because it is not possible to tell from this material how the cleaners F refers to as the ‘Thai girls’ experienced their position at work a deeper analysis of the power relations at F’s specific work place is not possible. F however seems to understand these workers as more vulnerable to the organisation than she is herself, partly because they have not been there as long as she has.

These divisions between workers in organisations are also affected by numerical flexibility. Åsa Hammar argues that cleaners who are on supply contracts and therefore the most

vulnerable. One of her informants especially mentions the difficulties of saying no to the employer and control their own work (2000:17,23). According to union representatives interviewed by Sundin & Rapp (2006) the short term employments also keeps wages low and other benefits at a minimum because every time there is a situation of new recruitment (when a new company has won the contract) younger people with lower wages and shorter holiday are employed.

There is an official ambition of making cleaning into ‘a real job’, which is understood as ‘a full-time job’. The numerical flexibility which can be understood as gendered as well as racialised however creates divisions also within the cleaning sector. The strategies to raise the status of the profession risk stabilising inequalities between different groups of cleaners where ethnicity plays a role in how cleaners are privileged in relation to employment and varied work. Previous studies have also shown that male cleaners are privileged in similar ways in relation to female cleaners (Aurell, 2004).

In relation to numerical flexibility I further think that parallels can be made to Lena Abrahamsson’s study on how the gender order re-creates hierarchies and prevents organisational changes. Work in organisations is often gendered thereby causing conflicts when attempts are made to change the organisation. The gender segregation therefore tends to be consistent, according to Abrahamsson (2000). Similarly, when ‘immigrants’ and women constitute a numerical flexibility, cleaning work is however re-created as a profession where part-time work is the norm and where many workers are not sure how to work on a day-to-day basis.

## **10. Concluding Discussion**

In this thesis I have shown that cleaning work has not become more flexible, and also that there are attempts to formalise flexibility within the profession. According to the cleaners who have been in the profession for at least 20 years their jobs were previously flexible; in time, space and the work process, which according to them implied a certain freedom in their work. The formalisation of this flexibility can be interpreted as increased control over the work process by employers.

‘Ordinary’ cleaning work is not represented as flexible as far as the work process is concerned. The managers often emphasise detailed contracts and work descriptions which are negotiated with the customers. I argue that there are tensions in this representation of cleaning

work as regulated through contracts. This is partly based on how cleaners describe that their work often demands that they adapt to different situations which are not included in these contracts. I also argue that flexibility can be understood as an important *competence* in cleaning work. This flexibility is however not acknowledged or valued according to many cleaners in my material.

Strategies to *formalise* flexibility, e.g. the introduction of ‘result oriented cleaning’, may result in an increased recognition of the work that cleaners perform and for their skills ‘to see’ what needs to be done. This formalisation of flexibility is however also associated with demands on increased efficiency which may cause alienation in relation to work and experiences of increased stress among cleaners. Numerical flexibility is also an aspect of the formalisation of flexibility; substitute staff can more easily be called in when there are instructions also for flexibility. Cleaners furthermore interpret aspects of ‘result oriented cleaning’ as increased control by the employers. The cleaners’ abilities to judge what needs to be done; abilities which were previously aspects of work associated with certain autonomy among cleaners, now become objectives for quality controls. I have also attempted to discuss the strategies of resistance among the cleaners towards such development, for example through their emphasis on the physical aspects of their work.

I have shown that ‘ordinary cleaning’ is represented as low-skilled work and cleaners are therefore seen as easily replaceable. I have furthermore discussed how notions of competence should be understood in relation to the gendering of work, where some work is seen as female and less skilled. The notions of cleaning as low-skilled and as a continuation of (female) domestic work are said to be challenged by strategies to make cleaning work more respected, for example by a larger focus on technology and new, better cleaning methods. In my material the low-valuation of cleaning work in society at large causes customers to be unwilling to buy enough time from the cleaning companies. The constant lack of time furthermore causes a degradation of cleaning work performed by groups who are subordinated in relation to class, gender and often ‘race’/ethnicity. Despite attempts to raise the status of the profession, cleaning work is re-established as low skilled routinized work which is hard on the body. Here, I think that studies on customer-cleaner interactions would have been interesting as complementary perspectives in this thesis.

The analysis of representation of flexibility in cleaning work has captured organisational and employer strategies within the cleaning sector. I did not initially have this focus on ‘service’ when I approached my material to analyse flexibility. I have however found that

cleaning work is *actively constructed* as service work. The increasing customer orientation therefore makes flexibility in relation to cleaning best understood through theories where a deeper understanding of the work process in service work has been developed (see e.g. Sosteric, 1996, Mulinari, 2007).

I have found however that there are tensions in the perspectives of cleaning as ‘making things clean’ and cleaning as ‘service work’. The construction of cleaning work as service work can be understood as an attempt to break gendered and ethnified stereotypes of cleaning; for example ‘cleaning work as extended household work’ or ‘the isolated cleaner who doesn’t speak in Swedish’. A focus on service can furthermore be understood as attempts to make cleaners more visible, for example through more interaction with the customers. In my material I have however discussed how ‘service’ may cause the physical aspects of cleaning to become more invisible and that cleaners describe how their work ‘to make things clean’ continues to pass unseen. These status-raising strategies need to be understood in relation to a segregated labour market where the gendering and racialising order re-creates work such as cleaning as low-valued jobs performed in the margins of the labour market.

Flexible time, which is most often defined as an opportunity of workers to choose when to work, is not present in my material. Instead, cleaners argue that their working time has become increasingly regulated. However, there is also evidence that there is an increasing exploitation of cleaners who work unpaid over-time or who work more during working hours.

A large part of this thesis has been focused on functional flexibility which has appeared as a central theme in my material. The introduction of associated services is for example said to make cleaners less replaceable in work places. ‘Associated services’ have however also previously been performed informally by the cleaners. The formalisation of these services could therefore be understood as strategies to make *the cleaning companies* less replaceable at a particular workplace. The functional flexibility therefore risks leading to a boundlessness of work when more responsibility for the stability of contracts is passed on to individual cleaners, i.e. an individualization of work.

I have also shown how functional flexibility needs to be understood in relation to gendered boundaries of work, where ‘ordinary cleaners’ are mobile only within work which is categorised as ‘female’.

Functional flexibility is represented as an upgrading of work, as improved work satisfaction and influence over work. I have however shown how there is a division between different groups of cleaners in this respect, where mainly full-time cleaners who are understood as



‘socially competent’ are offered these varied jobs. I have also discussed a racialisation of numerical flexibility, where ‘Swedish’ cleaners more often have stable positions within the company whilst ‘immigrants’ are represented as a reserve work force. My material does not allow for more detailed discussions of the processes behind racialised stereotyping of competence in cleaning work. I therefore encourage further studies to investigate representations of ‘race’/ethnicity in relation to notions of competence and work.

My main argument in this thesis is that we can understand flexibilisation of the work process in cleaning work as connected to representations of cleaning work as low-skilled. When the *specific* competencies required ‘to make things clean’ are not recognised cleaners are seen as easily replaceable. Furthermore cleaning work is represented as a profession on the margins of the labour market; it has historically been ‘an entry for women’ and is now increasingly seen as ‘projects of integration’ for ‘immigrants’ to be integrated into the Swedish labour market.

In relation to previous debates I have contributed with a study where the relations between flexibility, control and the construction of competence are explored in relation to a profession which has not been represented within theories of ‘the new economy’. I have shown how the perspective of competence *as a social construction* questions earlier theories where a functionally flexible and *skilled* core work force is seen in relation to a numerically flexible and *unskilled* work force (see e.g. Atkinson, 1988). The intersectional perspective in this thesis has made it possible to see how flexibility is related to the specific constructions of competence and replaceability in relation to class, ‘race’/ethnicity and gender. The polarization of the labour market can therefore not be understood only in relation to capitalist processes where different kinds of jobs are created independent of gendering and racialising processes, as other theorists have argued directly or indirectly (see e.g. Walker&Sayer). Although attempts are made to decrease polarization in the labour market, e.g. by union initiatives, I have shown how numerical flexibility causes many workers to be excluded from such attempts. I have furthermore shown how more or less freedom in work is not related to flexibility per se. I have instead discussed the gendered and racialised processes behind employers’ control over work, whether it is through formalisation of flexibility or through the exploitation of boundlessness and individualization of work.

## Informants and Articles

### Managers:

B - Manager at a cleaning company, transcribed interview

L – Manager at a cleaning company, transcribed interview

M – Manager at a cleaning company, interview documented through notes

### Cleaners:

E - ‘Ordinary cleaner’, transcribed interview

F – ‘Ordinary cleaner’, transcribed interview

### Articles:

(FF, 2006:7) - Pylkölä, Minna (2006) ‘3 Jobb i Ett’, in *Fastighetsfolket*, vol. 7, pp. 22-25

(FF, 2006:10) - Rönnerberg, Ingegerd (2006) ‘Ingen Köpfest för Lågavlönad Städare’, in *Fastighetsfolket*, vol. 10, pp. 4-7

(FF, 2007:2) - Pylkölä, Minna (2007) ‘Ett Jobb som är Vikt för Jenny’, in *Fastighetsfolket*, vol. 2, pp. 6-8

(FF, 2007:9) - Pylkölä, Minna (2007) ‘Pusslet som ger Fler Timmar’, in *Fastighetsfolket*, vol. 9, pp. 4-7

(FF, 2008:1) - Pylkölä, Minna (2008) ‘Snabb nog för Kvalitetskontrollen?’, in *Fastighetsfolket*, vol. 1, pp. 4-7

### Instruction Book for Cleaners (by Almega, Employers’ Organisation):

Bejram, Björn (ed.) (2005) *Professionell Städservice*, SRY, Kristianstads Boktryckeri, Kristianstad

# Literature

- Abrahamsson, Lena (2000) *Att Återställa Ordningen – Könsmönster och förändring i arbetsorganisationer*, Umeå, Boréa Bokförlag
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