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Rescuing the Error: A Methodological Note on the Use of Reflexivity in the Research Process

Abstract This article explores the opportunities of a research strategy that integrates both the observation of the object and the observation of the subject (researcher). In a research about shopping centers' workers, the researchers tried to show how the methodological misfortunes experienced by them, sometimes seen as errors, supported the inquiry on the very experiences of workers. Moreover, such misfortunes enabled an increased awareness about the effects and limits of the conceptual and technical instruments then used. In fact, only the integration of reflexivity in the course of the research enabled further knowledge about workers' social profiles and the temporal structures of their work activity. Thus, this article highlights the advantages that exist in evidencing and reflecting upon the methodological adversities as a preliminary step to their sociological exploration and shows how the theory is not something to be applied to others, but also that helps the researcher to keep his/her work under close scrutiny.

Keywords Qualitative Methodology; Reflexivity; Error; Sociology of Work

The purpose of this article is to present a reflection on the importance and feasibility of the integrated use of self-observation procedures in sociological research. Based on a research about shopping centers' workers (Cruz 2010), this article shows the importance of submitting the work of the researcher to observation procedures normally used to objectify the reality under study. Usually relegated or only raised according to the impersonality conventions in force in academic writing (like the ritualized use of "we"), preserved, and transmitted through an intellectual tradition sometimes going back to the point of view that springs in the European medieval universities (Durkheim 1990), the researcher sees an enthronization of his/her role as a neutral and innocuous instance in the actualization of scientific work occuring. As Franz Breuer (2003) poignantly states on the impacts of the subjectivity of the researcher on the research itself, frequently the solution found in the social sciences was to understand the contrarieties of the research praxis as errors that must be minimized or, ideally, eliminated. On the contrary, this methodological article advocates the subjection of the subject to the same procedures of observation usually used to frame the object of research. Avoiding granting any status of epistemological exception to the researcher, it rather allows the subject of the objectification to submit, voluntarily and consciously, to the procedures of explanation and justification he/she uses on the "external reality" (Canguilhem 1983:366). In this particular case, the methodological constraints faced in our conducting empirical research served, in the first place, as starting points for the review, the correction, or the enlargement of the knowledge that the researcher had about the studied realm. In the second place, as a variation of the original version of the negative-case method (Emigh 1997), whose virtualities of self-checking and self-correction of the research program were tested in this case, the methodological impasses not only encouraged this correction of the theory (Bunge 1986), as they also brought implications for the clarification and enhancement of the epistemological perception of the researchers about their own practices.

Bringing Reflexivity to the Contexts of Work: Epistemological Concerns and Methodological Issues

We meet the recommendation of Gaston Bachelard (1960:232) about the need to introduce an "epistemological vigilance of himself," a surveillance whose nature has less to do with the exercise of introspection or contemplative meditation than with the systematic and reciprocal criticism between scientific fellow-workers and the practical application of concepts, instruments, and styles of thinking of the science in question. Instead of being ignored, omitted, or overlooked, the methodological obstacles served just as well as access roads to test and inspect, in a theoretically controlled fashion, the applications and limits of the conceptual and methodological options. At the same time, they allowed to question the social vulnerabilities inscribed in the individual and collective experiences of the social workspace. Instead of tolerance and contentment towards the theses that deny or relativize the use of conceptual schemes in intellectual activities (Davidson 1974), the inspection of gaps or unforeseen empirical misconceptions, that seemed to counter, in a partial or generalized way, the previously accumulated theoretical knowledge, allowed for the reorganization, the extension, and precision of that knowledge (Lecourt 1975). In this sense, we reassume previous suggestions towards the "participant objectivation," that is, the mobilization of the sociological practices in order to constitute the researcher himself/herself in an "observed observer" (Bourdieu 2001). Through this systematic "objectivation of the subjective relationship with the object," we make explicit and use the very limitations of the research, its contrarieties, and resistances as a means to overcome them. Therefore, in this case, the sociology of work is not only centered in the activities performed by workers or their organizational contexts (i.e., the "object"), but it also puts the work of the sociologist himself/herself (i.e., the "subject") under the scope of sociological reasoning. This article proceeds, in

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particular, as were the gaps, hesitations, and setbacks along the research process that provide the pretext and the fulcrum to renew, in succeeding advances, the sociological knowledge about the fragilities that punctuate the profiles of shopping centers' workers and the temporal dimensions of their labor reality.

The research supporting this article has designed an eclectic methodological strategy, articulating the statistical data sources, collected in order to analyze the structure of employment in trade and restaurants, with the realization of semi-directive interviews, focus groups, and direct observation (Cruz 2010). The intention to undertake an intensive analysis of the social profiles of the workers and their social work contexts triggered the option by the technique of semi-directive interviews. Simultaneously, the interest in replicating and capturing in the context of a conversation the universe of representations of the working population of shopping centers, and in understanding to what extent it would be indicative of convergent and divergent understandings among those workers, implied the later technical operationalization of the focus groups.

The starting point of the interview process benefited from privileged contacts that the research team had with university students working in shopping centers in Porto (Portugal). Such contacts were essential, since not only the student workers readily made themselves available to be interviewed, as they later facilitated a significant number of other interviews by mobilizing their networks of interpersonal relationships. These privileged con-

tacts certainly filtered the interviewees' selectivity through the characteristics of the research team networks, such as age or academic qualifications. The need to diversify the interviewees' profile generated other options, in which the research team approached the workers directly at their workplaces. Such strategy includes some pattern to observe people: searching female and male workers with a higher age (more than thirty years old); finding proportion between the two types of analyzed shops and, within them, obtaining the gender balance; visiting shopping centers in Porto during different moments of the day and of the week (morning, afternoon, and night) in order to determine whether new workers' profiles could be found. In this process, we presented ourselves and the main aim of our research and then questioned workers about their availability for an interview (scheduling then the day, hour, and place of the encounter). In total, there were sixty workers interviewed in eight shopping centers in the Porto Metropolitan Area, a number that was reached when the so-called "principle of saturation" was attained (Glaser and Strauss 1967:61), in other words, a strategy that provides for the collection of information until the moment it becomes redundant. This concept is considered important as it addresses whether research is based on an adequate sample to demonstrate content validity. Besides the debate about this topic (O'Reilly and Parker 2012), we consider in this research that data collection stops because there are no new or further insights. Two types of shops were analyzed, namely, restaurants and clothing, because they correspond to the most represented activities within the shopping center (see Table 1.) Of the sixty respondents, about 58.3%

were female and 41.7% male, and 62.9% of the women interviewed were concentrated in clothing shops and 37.1% in restaurants, while 60% of male respondents labored in the second type of shops and 40% in the first.

Table 1. Information about the sample.

	Restaurants		Clothing shops		Total	
Female workers	13	37,1	22	62,9	35	100,0
Male workers	15	60,0	10	40,0	25	100,0
Total	28	46,7	32	53,3	60	100,0

Source: Self-elaboration.

Concerning focus groups' technique, at an early stage we decided by the completion of four focus groups, two in restaurants (of different brands) and two in clothing shops (of distinct brands), with a number of six to ten participants of both genders and with different jobs in shops. However, this had not been materialized due to the significant difficulty of bringing together all the various workers. The finding of this methodological adversity, immediately revealing the strong turnover of working hours, involved altering the design provided for the application of this technique, not its abandonment. Actually, instead of abandoning the technique of focus groups altogether by reference to the generally agreed conventions of focus group application (Macnaghten and Myers 2007), we decide to introduce a reflexivity stance to problematize the specific intricacies arising from the focus groups conduction in our research, since it promises important insights for the research itself. There-

fore, two focus groups were held, one in restaurant *Hot Point*, and another at the clothing shop *Space*. In the first, nine workers participated, five women and four men, the second incorporated only three female workers of the five (three female and two male workers) that had agreed to collaborate. Not all participants of the focus groups were previously interviewed individually, which meant that after each of the focus groups, elements of characterization about their profiles were collected. The empirical information from the interviews was analyzed through the software *NVivo7* that allowed, in the first moment, for the vertical analysis of the same and the capturing of singularities underlying each one of them. Subsequently, it enabled its horizontal analysis, so as to discuss, for all the interviews, the analytical dimensions contained in the script of the semi-directive interview. In relation to focus groups, we deepened dimensions not contemplated originally by the design of interview. In fact, the initial guide proposed for the focus group was intended to get the participants to explore their beliefs and values about their working experiences in shopping centers. Actually, the two focus groups revealed the particular ways participants set up, in conversation, opinions and topics one does not usually talk about with a stranger to their shared work environments. The focus group was transcribed and the analysis of the transcripts was centered on performed interactions between the participants as they responded to the questions (Macnaghten and Myers 2007). The emergence of an interpretation based on this analysis will be discussed further in this article, especially related to the mandatory use of uniform in the working context of restaurants and clothing shops.

Noticing the importance that prosaic transactions have for the constitution of scientific knowledge (Latour and Woolgar 1986), we will expose the moments of disturbance we felt along the search to a methodical treatment analysis. However, instead of joining in an uncontrolled tendency to "invent" (Bouveresse 1984:16), we will insist on the potential that the sociological observation has to circumscribe and appreciate the historical and social constraints that weigh on the research, such as the vicissitudes in scheduling and conducting the interviews or the search for solutions in order to circumvent the limitations of the set of respondents. It was, therefore, to transform the provoked and, sometimes, tense encounters that the researcher maintains with his/her "objects" of study in an explicit "instance of interrogation about his practice and his assumptions" (Canguilhem 2000:72). When we deal with times, places, and acts of research that are generally repressed by the significations, standards, and principles in force in scientific communities, the use of explicit epistemological operations conferring visibility and awareness to them becomes relevant. In this case, we put under systematic reflection, first, the stages of research, then the whole mass of routines and beliefs that constitute "the spontaneous philosophy of the intellectuals," as upon a time Louis Althusser (1992) calls it. Such habits of thought and action of the researchers that, while historically constituted, were meanwhile naturalized and therefore tended to function more as implicit assumptions than to be consciously articulated by the researchers, constitute the school unconscious (Bourdieu 2000) of a particular academic community. They may, however, be treated by a re-historicizing therapy,

by which the past and present social constraints that affect the sociological observation were focused, including those most directly acting on the situation of interaction between the researcher and the researched. In these terms, this article aims to show the potentialities that accompany the exercise of "reflexivity" as a "mode of objectivation of the subject of objectivation" (Bourdieu 2001:174). Seen here in its more technical and restricted fashion, applied to the most vivid routine of scientific activity, this reformist conception of reflexivity allows the researcher to examine the relationship— usually taken-for-granted—that he/she keeps with his/her objects and with his/her instruments, possibly giving him/her a wider margin of conscience (and freedom) over his/her own practice and over the respective effects and limits.

Questioning the Research "Handicaps," Not Ignoring Them, or: How to Grasp the Methodological Constraints through Self-Reflection

In this section, we will present two points of tension with the empirical data that apparently seemed to menace the "technical" scruples of our research process. First, our initial purpose of obtaining a transversal presence of the workers' age profiles was countervailed by the inability in supplementing older interviewees. Primarily stated as miscarry of the research, it helped to show the importance of such age cleavages inside the very social universe being studied. Then, the constant problems in scheduling interviews showed, lately, more than a personal incompetence or a management issue in the research: they revealed a very

important propriety of the work universe of these workers, their uncertain and volatile workloads. So, our labors to deal with such "problems," which promised "errors" in the technical frame of the research, meant primarily not to repress or obliterate them to the backstage of the inquiry, but to reflect upon their conditions of production, turning them into illuminating points for the researchers' self-reflection practices. That self-reflection helped to improve the research, at least by knowing its empirical and epistemological limits, and, thereafter, to tune the analysis. Therefore, it is crucial not to label the methodological constraints as excrescencies to be omitted in the analysis (or as lacks and handicaps to be corrected through technical procedures), but to integrate them in the very process of research as a way to reveal unsuspected and promising venues of inquiry. In this sense, we try to apply techniques of decentration and self-reflection in order to extend the plea for another socio-scientific methodology, voiced by Franz Breuer (2003).

Tracing the Workers' Social Profiles

The difficulty experienced in carrying out the work of finding interviewees with a higher age profile was translated in revealing data to the research. Motivated by this impasse, we had to operationalize a work of direct observation that would supplement the existing interviews and those which were initially planned. The attempt to safeguard the maintenance of proportionality between age groups had to be interrupted, taking into account, on the opposite, the expressiveness of the empirical findings. Indeed, with the direct observation conducted in shopping centers we perceived that

the population that worked in shops, in particular those who served at the counter, were mainly young. The analysis of the age composition of the population interviewed highlights precisely this tendency for the juvenilization of these workplaces (approximately 77% of them located in the age group of 18 to 29 years of age).

The age issue thus proved to be particularly relevant to understand the configuration of the recruitment patterns carried out in these universes of work. More than half of the population surveyed did not face any educational and professional requirements. If we withhold the scenario of recruitment in restaurants and clothing shops, it is apparent that, at first, the level of school demands is slightly higher, while the scenarios of shops are closer to what concerns the low professional requirements. However, it is necessary to bear in mind that there is not a homogeneous scenario within restaurants and clothing shops. We cannot neglect the fact that, inside of each universe of shops, there are segmentations resulting from the commercial brands, anchored in the symbolic value that customers and employees give to them and which produce special effects of social distinction.

In addition to these requirements, two others proved to be relevant: "being more than 18 years" and "being a student" in contextualizing the techniques of recruitment for the clothing shops and restaurants in shopping centers. In these contexts of work, the condition of being a student may be required, which from the outset explains the fact that significant shares of respondents assume this condition. It explains, also, that it built a strong network of social

relationships that work as a pool of juvenile self-recruitment within the shopping center. In spite of the students finding themselves in the labor market for several reasons, in the present study they were there for financial needs (especially related to the imperative of financing their studies, but also with the maintenance of a certain style of life, for example, the acquisition of their own car), which motivated the labor inflows of these young people. This condition implies a strong logic of juvenile segregation that can be observed, for instance, when the workers consider that being more than "30 years old" could be a deterrent personal attribute to work in clothing shops, that only "want young girls, with pretty faces," as an older worker (50-years-old) of a restaurant refers to it. In fact, after reaching twenty or so years of age a person is considered "old" for work in these shops, for various reasons. In the case of restaurants, it happens because people do not have "the necessary rhythm" to perform various tasks, especially in fast-food restaurants. In self-service clothing shops, the "young" image does not fit with the context of work and, ultimately, the fact that those shops prefer more juvenile segments of workers, in order to capture customers in the same "juvenile" condition as the workers. It should be noted that this situation also occurs, but with other settings, in customized service clothing shops, as the *Elite*, in which "are not admitted very young girls, but more between 27 and 35-years-old" because "they have more of a sense of responsibility at work," according to the interviewed Micaela and Paula, working in that shop.

The interest of employers in resorting to student youth labor signals the desire to control costs, be-

cause here is offered a very low hourly payment: in the analyzed cases of restaurants and clothing shops, these values are about 2.16 Euros and 2.88 Euros, respectively. It also signals the desire to maximize the numerical flexibility, in terms of the number of hours of work and the functional flexibility, translated in mobility between jobs. This advantageous situation for the employer can cause two types of effects for the young students. On the one hand, the worker-student is challenged to do more hours and ends by complying, because it means more money at the end of the month. Notwithstanding, this situation interferes negatively in their everyday school life. Let us look at the testimony of two female, student workers who attend higher education schools.

I have difficulties in reconciling work and the college, I have an excessive workload, when they ask me to do hours, I do, because it means that I will also earn more at the end of the month and this is bad...a person gets used to the money and then the study is left behind...if I had a financial situation that would allow I would abandon the work, because I think that at this time...I have made a great effort to come to the study, they say that it is more difficult to get out, I hope that this does not happen, if I could, I would dedicate myself only to the study. [Rute, sales assistant in the restaurant *Hot Point*, shopping center 1]

I do extra hours that eventually affect the college, it could be in the last year finishing the course and I am not for the sake of the hours and the money that I receive more by working more hours in addition to my time...but I think that does not compensate because nobody recognizes us really at work and I am only

harming my path. [Carolina, sales assistant in the clothing shop *Orange*, shopping center 4]

It can be said that for these respondents, the negative effects of a greater workload on university performance are more significant than their benefits. That ends up by contributing to fragile and weakened school trajectories, which in turn augments the need to prolong working experiences in order to fund the longer periods at the university. The work was initially seen as strategic and for short duration, but it becomes essential over time for a precarious survival.

Finally, the demand for intensive student labor by employers in these contexts of shopping centers assumes the construction of an image for this universe of work, where "remuneration" is combined with "fun." This intentionally built image is particularly relevant for the attraction of young students, who want to earn some money while studying and who are not indifferent to the appeals of "having some fun." It is frequent for the interviewed population to invoke the positive material dimensions related with this labor universe (financial compensation, need to acquire professional experience) together with others of a positive social nature, such as the establishment of networks of friendship and learning with work colleagues. So, to many of them, what is appealing is not exactly the nature of the task itself, but the opportunity to work with others of the same age, of meeting new people, and to occupy their time earning money, even if little. This is particularly significant because the most painful moments of labor eventually are transformed into moments of "fun" or competition by the manage-

ment strategies of the shops. Let us look at the following testimony of the interviewee, Arlindo, who was challenged together with his colleagues of the night shift to win a playstation, if they could gather more money in the box in the hours of greatest movement ("rush" hours, which are the periods of greater influx of customers and, therefore, the more demanding ones in terms of work) than their colleagues of the morning and afternoon shifts:

The staff of the morning made 2500 Euros and would win a playstation, so the employees at night were a bit upset because we usually make more money than them and they made it first and then we made 3500 Euros. We left tired, but we seemed crazy running in there, it was just cash in the cash boxes that barely fit, then we had to start making beads called cash withdrawal that there has to get there, we take that money, then the box says that the money was missing because it was taken by the manager...Cash withdrawal. We did several cash withdrawals because money no longer fit in the same cash box, the faster cashiers are basically five employees, I am one of them, we are the locking personnel, the staff of the closure is usually always faster on the cash box, the money did not fit, we had to take it, "Look, I have to do a cash withdrawal, there is no place for more money." And then there is that naughtiness that often comes with these contests, we are all happy, but then after two days no one wants to run, since they start being angry with us, they say this and that, it becomes a bit tiring. [Arlindo, operator in the restaurant *Royal*, shopping center 1]

The promotion of competitions is a strategy of mobilization of workers capable of breaking with the

tiresome work routine, particularly evident in the context of fast food restaurants. It also allows the active participation and a stronger involvement of the workers, because they search for the counterpart of their effort (in this case, the playstation, but in others, it may be an additional dessert, or, in the case of clothing, a discount on the purchase of a product or a commission on the sales).

Together with these requirements there is a set of individual characteristics that are valued in this working population. Highlighted are those based on the "have such-and-such" and on the "know how to be." The categories that point to the "have such-and-such" correspond to: "have good physical image," "have ability to dialog with the customer," and "have good presentation." As for the "know how to be," the most valued are expressed by expressions as "be responsible," "be friendly," and "be fast." This is what some authors refer to as *soft skills*, which basically include the social knowledge of workers. A particularly interesting aspect pointed out by the respondents is the need to "learn to control emotions," of "knowing how to smile," which refers to the issue of emotional labor. Often is reported the need to have a "perpetual and sincere smile" in the course of interactions with customers (Macdonald and Sirianni 1996:9). As Hochschild (2003: 8) put it, "smiles are a part of work… that requires…coordinating self and feeling so that the work seems to be effortless." Furthermore, the value of a personal smile is groomed to reflect the particular shop's orientations. Such characteristics are in harmony, first, with the fact that it is not required to have any specific educational and vocational training and, then, with the preference for

the recruitment of a student and young workforce, selected by its flexibility (Bettis 1996) and availability. These aspects point to a management model that is based on relational skills at the expenses of professional qualifications. This model intensifies the vulnerability of workers, placing them at risk when situations of disagreement emerge in the social work space.

Given these characteristics, it is pertinent to emphasize that these work contexts cannot operate a clear distinction between the product that is being sold, the work process, and the worker himself (Gadrey 2002). The employers will eventually claim authority on the most varied subjective aspects of workers, trying to adjust their physical appearance (work) and the aesthetic way of behaving (emotional labor). What is being sold is in the last analysis a set of emotions. The work process is standardized, in particular with regard to the ways of doing, being, and communicating. For this standardization or "harmonization" contributes a set of requirements drawn up by the shop or brand, in accordance to which the workers should follow certain routines in their relationship with customers, with each other, and with the supervisors. In some cases, such requirements also request the engagement in social gatherings outside the workspace, precisely because they also shape workers' behaviors and attitudes. See, for example, the practice of weekly sport encouraged by the *Hot Point* restaurant, involving workers in weekly soccer games, or the organization of an annual gala organized by the clothing shop *Vip Shop*, which brings together all workers that operate in the brand across the country.

That standardization or harmonization effort extends over to the customers themselves, in order to organize their consumers' experiences. The strategies to organize them include, for example, the design of the physical setting and the layout of the shopping spaces (Simmel 2001), particularly evident in the self-service devices of the garment outlets and of the fast food restaurants. If in the case of fast food restaurants, the customer does not ask about the available meals, in the self-service clothing shops, he/she does not ask about the existing pieces.

The demand for standardization, in particular in case of the emotional labor, has been analyzed in several investigations and viewed as an instrumentalization framework undertaken by employers. However, it lacks the dimension of retributions the workers could extract from the social space of work, as we noted in the previous section of this article. According to Leidner (1993) and Bolton (2006), the aforementioned standardization can be capitalized by workers, who can use it tactically, not transforming them necessarily in "alienated subjects." It is necessary to inquire into the meanings that this standardization triggers, in particular the advantages that could be extracted from it. Indeed, routines can enable the workers to have a more effective control of interactions and to allow them to protect themselves from the lack of respect sometimes felt in the relationships with customers and colleagues. If the management delivers strategies of standardization that protect them in the interaction with customers, or that allow an increase of their relative power, workers are not inclined to reject them. Bolton (2006) considers that emotions or expressions of emotions can be oppressive to

workers, but there is room for maneuver to allow them to have some control, albeit occasional, in the social workspace. There are always uncontrolled areas where spontaneous behaviors of relaxation are exhibited, for example, when young workers of the restaurant *Kuanto Baste* throw sugar packets to each other on the counter, during periods of lower flow of clientele. We think that the standardization does not imply that the management of the shop will be able to always impose unilaterally its routines. In the case of the work carried out by workers in restaurants and clothing shops, the issue of emotional control does not arise in terms of linear antagonism of interests between the management and the operation areas, because there are several parties and interests involved.

Temporal Structures of Work Activity

Another methodological constraint that emerged during the empirical research was related to the appointment of the interviews. Actually, it has proved to be more complex than originally envisaged and triggered episodes that deserve a special reflection, in particular the following three. In a shopping center in the city of Vila Nova de Gaia, was firstly contacted a worker; she provided the phone number of her place of work so that we could contact her later and appoint an interview. The meeting was scheduled for a Tuesday afternoon in the store. After some failed attempts to confirm the interview on the day before and the very day of the interview, we took the decision to go to the store at the scheduled time. The worker was in the store and told us: "Today I cannot. We have too much work." Another situation happened in a shopping center in the city

of Porto, and involved a worker who provided her personal contact. The next day, when we called, we receive the following response: "My boss doesn't authorize me and said that I should not have given my phone number without her permission." A third case involved a woman working in a shopping center also in the city of Vila Nova de Gaia. The worker was contacted at her place of work and gave her phone number for the subsequent interview. This was scheduled for a Thursday afternoon at the *Teatro Rivoli*, a famous theater in the center of Porto, and confirmed the day before by phone. Arriving at the scene, and after ten minutes of the scheduled time, we received the following message on cell phone: "I'm sorry, but I had to go to the store because the other store manager failed...I have to do her shift! Thank you."

These three cases are surrounded by very different circumstances. However, it is not excessive to say that on the basis of the impediments lay similar professional reasons, commonly related to aspects that are beyond the control of the workers and that reveal some underlying dynamic work activity in analysis: overwork; exercise of power by a hierarchical superior; and, finally, the need to replace a colleague. In addition to these cases of failure, it is important to point out that there have been other situations in which the interviews took place, but that entailed a considerable waiting period in view of the strong rotation of schedules in clothing shops and restaurants, more pronounced in the latter than in the former.

This constraint has opened clues to the understanding of the activity of work in analysis. Issues

such as the weight of primary sales and stepping up the pace of work emerged in the context of the discussion of this methodological difficulty. There is a set of goals and business rules that are defined by the shops and for which the interviewed population has to work. The imperative of making "sales" that meet approximately three quarters of the "objectives" is identified by interviewees as particularly important, almost compulsive. The perspective of the interviewee, Cristina, is revealing in this regard:

As goals, the essential is "sell, sell, sell," the numbers and store invoicing are valued at the end of the month. [Cristina, responsible for the clothing shop *Space*, shopping center 8]

To the goal of selling emerges the closely associated need to "beat the budget store," that is, make more "results" on a given day or month compared with the same period of the previous year. Consider the following discourse of respondents about existing objectives in the restaurants:

We have daily targets to achieve: we have post…we have, ah…posted in...in, in the table, ah...the money that they...that they think they can, that we can do, ah...this day equal to the same day of the previous year, is hitting the budget from the store, it is good for us. [Filipe, collaborator in the restaurant *Kuanto Baste*, shopping center 1]

Goals are like that they depend, every month they give us an objective and every day we have an objective and each shift has a goal. For example, today my goal was very low, only 310 Euros for lunch time. Normally, by

day is 700 Euros, 800 Euros. Often, we fulfill and, other times, we do not achieve half. Everything depends on the shopping. [When asked about the ease or difficulty in achieving the objective, the interviewee responds:] Depends on the month. The past month was a month to forget, February was a month to forget. This month has improved a little, but still did not achieve the objective. Our aim was 15 000 Euros, we only achieved 13 000. Therefore, there is no prize. But, it depends. There are objectives that are also very high, which are very difficult. This month the goal was low. But, it did not achieve, even then did not. [Madalena, shift manager at the restaurant *Victoria*, shopping center 6]

A person reaching the objectives in terms of sales budget, at the level of product deviation, a person fulfilling these objectives, a person receives an award, it is like if we were managing the shop by ourselves. [Alberto, shift manager at the restaurant *Bonanza*, shopping center 5]

The "objectives" of the shops sustain the economic aims that workers must pursue and achieve in their everyday work. The discourse of the interviewees about sales suggests the existence of a managerial practice that seeks to articulate the individual benefit and the financial results of the store, which can generate contradictory impulses. Like Aubert and Gaulejac (1991) refer, individuals are struggling between the tendency to work less in order to protect themselves from the requirements of the store and the inclination to work more to increase their financial contributions and constantly improve the collective results of the store.

From the point of view of the commercial mandatory rules, the interviewed population highlights

the issue of compulsory wearing of uniforms in the restaurants and clothing shops, although with less weight in the latter. There are several accessories that make the uniforms, some of them, very detached from the normal forms of self-presentation. In restaurants, especially, the number of accessories is, compared with those of the clothing shops, more complex and more detailed than the cloths the workers usually use in their everyday lives. Actually, the focus group with restaurant workers showed the extremely revealing exchange of opinions regarding the mandatory use of uniform. Here is an excerpt:

Rodrigo: We are young and with this ridiculous uniform nobody gives us credibility. Rarely a person aged 18 is selling in a Mercedes or BMW stand... You must be at least 40...37 years for the Mercedes or 40 years for the BMW.

Ruth: You do not see anyone in a restaurant where only people of 37 or 40 years are to serve, you do not see anyone go to the counter and say, "So, do not meet here?" It's all talk. Nobody talks like that...Only the cap, wear that cap...For now, just the fact that the bosses have blue shirt and we have the green shirt differentiates us. OK. But, also our uniform is not a uniform that conveys respect, distinction...I do not know...It's really that young thing of fast work...The client does not treat us with any respect. The whistling and...

Patricia: Sometimes clients start to whistle to call for us.

Ruth: "Oh, Carla, get me this. Carla, do not take cola with ice." I do not know this person from anywhere. I'm serving him. It has to be a service with respect.

Gabriela: That's what I said a while ago. Increasingly we are disrespected for being young, for being in

a fast food restaurant. [Focus group, restaurant *Match Point*, shopping center 1]

The mandatory use of uniform is used to build a corporate or brand unified image, but it is also linked with the existence of a professional hierarchy inside the shops. As the participant, Ruth, refers, the fact that the "store managers have a blue shirt" and other workers use a "green shirt" is perceived and functions as an interpersonal and institutional device of differentiation. However, according to this same worker, the uniform does not transmit "respect" or "distinction," it appears, by contrast, to be felt as highly stigmatizing and undignified. Still, according to Ruth, it symbolizes "that quality of quick work" associated with the "youth," which leads the customers to not treat them with dignity and, quite the contrary, seems to propel the emergence of disrespectful practices among customers, such as "whistling" or using the informal treatment titles ("you" in the singular, "missy," etc.). According to the participant, Gabriela, workers are then "disrespected for being young" and also for being at a "fast food restaurant."

The forms of treatment here described are indicative of the existence of asymmetric powers (Wolf 1990; Sennett 2003) within the interaction between workers and customers, since they have respectively very unequal social capitals. This inequality suggests the question of the relational dimension of dignity, discussed previously in this article. Possessing and feeling "dignity" is, in itself, a publicly recognized mean of being treated like a person and not being merely used as a means to an end by another person (Sayer 2007). If the employee feels they are being

treated in an undignified way, he/she tends to react in order to show his/her indignation, in a silent or audible mode, as in the case of the worker, Bruno, who, immediately after the client has addressed him as "boy," counter-questioned, "which boy?" The issue of dignity, or rather its threat or loss, is associated with the lack of seriousness with which many clients face these young workers and the clear lack of autonomy (Hodson 2001) that they have their social space in the workplace.

If it is the brand itself which pays for the uniform, the workers must take care of it, ensuring that it maintains an immaculate appearance during the time it is consigned to them (which could comprise a time period of six months). In the case of clothing shops, workers wear branded garments of the place where they work, which exhibits a symbolic distinctive value, as in case of the garments of restaurants. In addition to the maintenance of the uniform, they must follow another type of rules, in particular, be careful with hair and nails, wear bijouterie and make-up; these last two applied to clothing shops and are prohibited in restaurants, by issues of hygiene and safety at work. The non-compliance with the rules ultimately deserves comments and reprehension from the managers. One interviewee recounted an episode which just happened in the shop where she worked, in which, during a visit to the workplace, the commercial director of the shop had directly addressed a worker who had fattened and called her attention to be especially careful with the weight she gained meanwhile.

The question of the use of uniform was also an object of discussion in the focus group of the clothing

shop. For many, the uniform has a positive meaning and, transmitting the brand image, transfers advantageously to the worker its symbolic value, such as professionalism or presentation. At least, it grants the worker with the protective surface of the brand, dismissing him/her of enacting personalized interactions with the customer. Notice the following opinions expressed during the focus group:

> **Francisca:** For me, the uniform is important, transmits a brand image for whom we are working. Is seen as some organization and care for the image.
> **Conceição:** I agree, it is a positive image to customers.
> **Ricardina:** It seems to me also, incidentally, in addition to the uniform, I think that we should use an identification plate with our name...so the customer knows our name, but the uniform is very important for a certain professionalism, we only used t-shirts and jeans, but still I think that it is important. [Focus group, clothing shop *Space*, shopping center 8]

It is possible to point out that from the set of collected speeches understandings about the use of uniform assume various configurations and reveal fragilities in the working context of clothing shops and restaurants. To discuss these fragilities within service activities it is important to underline that they make use of employees' looks, personalities, and emotions. Regarding emotions it is worth underlining the conception of emotional labor introduced by Arlie Hochschild (2003). Meaning "the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display" (Hochschild 2003:7), emotional labor "calls for a coordination of mind and feeling, and it sometimes draws on a source of self that we honor as deep and integral to our individuali-

ty." Such analysis focusing on the standardization of emotions has tended to examine the alienation side of emotional labor. However, it does not always mean alienation (Bolton 2006). The standardization of emotional labor can be either overwhelming or positive for shopping centers' workers in a sense it allows them to have some control over their social space of work. Actually, the aim of standardizing emotional labor has to be understood not only as managerial practices implemented by brands to achieve sales and profits, forcing employees to control, reshape, or suppress their selves (Ritzer 1998), but also in relation to how employees face the social space of work and try to re-appropriate it (Leidner 1993). In the latter sense, the standardization can be advantageous from the point of view of workers because it helps them to better control interactions with customers. The increase of standardization can also be used by the workers against the "lack of respect" shown by customers or the pressures from the management. Meant as tactics to sustain the "sense of one's self" (Lüdtke 1998) against the pressures from the management or the customers, these workers' leverage protecting practices are through the strict compliance with the managerial norms to deal with customers without affronting the norms and rules of the workplace.

The workers are operating at an accelerated pace that is justified by the logic of "bigger, better, and faster," widespread within these labor universes. This logic is associated with the promotion of a sense of team that is strongly anchored in the ideology governing the new spirit of capitalism (Boltanski and Chiapello 1999). It is an ideology that promotes, among other aspects, the idea that everyone should always be

giving the maximum, finding himself/herself emotionally involved in pursuit of the same goals. There is thus an emotional labor, as mentioned above in this article, that sustains this fast pace. From the one side, the daily presence of leadership in the area of the shop, working together with the remaining workers, and performing the same tasks, and, from the other side, the more or less constant flow of customers, although more pronounced in some periods of the day and night, both contribute to a rhythm of work predominantly high—and that is to be *accelerated*. Additionally, the system of rewards offered to workers promotes the constant search for high performance, sometimes causing a spirit of fierce competition that contributes to disseminating a climate of tension in daily working. It suffices to see the following statements:

> Very fast. It has to be. In shops who charge much has to be. Or are we doing the rhythm or after we ended up leaving…If we do not correspond to, or the person leaves the brand, or the brand invites you to leave. There are certain people who cannot work in the brand even, it is not for any person, there is a very strong pace of competition, it is very demanding… [Leonor, responsible of clothing shop *Mon Ami*, shopping center 7]

> The pace is fast, the system of cross-selling is as well…I'm in the box, I'm registering…the person begins to look and behind me has bijouterie, have wallets, have glasses…ask me, and I sell, of course, to make my sales, I make proposals, suggestions, and after the customer of a few laps in the store, and my colleague thinks that the customer is hers…I don't need to go there stressing…have days, the environment is highly competitive…sometimes I arrive and I reach the goal,

the other colleagues are saying, "You arrived now and you are already first in sales!" I think that it is the stress and the wanting to sell. [Carolina, sales assistant in clothing shop *Orange*, shopping center 4]

According to interviewee, Leonor, there are some people who do not fit in, or that simply do not resist these accelerated rhythms, and eventually abandon the work in the shop, especially in clothing brands that reach very high levels of daily turnover. The accelerated work pace associated with overwork contributes to some workers being unable to stand any longer and to be "asked to leave" or to "go out" on their own initiative. Both factors, often associated with mismanagement and abuse from superiors, may cause a deficit of decent work and/or the performance of meaningless work (Hodson 2001). Associated with the fast pace of work is also the "competitive" work environment, according to the interviewees. In these two cases, the system of individual commissions strongly contributes to the construction of this highly competitive scenario.

It is also important to underline, in relation to the work pace, the fact that few work situations may trigger moments so accelerated and so tiring as the periods of increased work. The addition of stress caused by the constant monitoring of the managers, who are responsible for ensuring that all workers are always "doing something," constitutes a reality captured during the empirical work of this research. Finally, it is interesting to underline that these temporary work structures associated with peculiar workers' profiles frame the discourse on labor activity, often yielding a naturalization of the constraints that underlie it.

Conclusions: Considering "Controlled Errors"

This article seeks to reflect on the extent to which methodological adversities in driving the empirical research about shopping centers' workers reveal dimensions associated with the vulnerabilities in the material contexts of these workers and the temporary structures of their work activity. It gives to researchers the opportunity to articulate the conclusions brought about by the sociological knowledge of the observed social reality (the workplaces of the shopping center) with conclusions regarding the social and intellectual conditions that regulate the production of sociological knowledge itself. In fact, the whole of this article suggests the need for a convergence between the "theory of fact observed" and the "theory of own observation," or "theory of the instrument" (Koyré 1986:44).

The difficulty in finding older interviewees indicates that the juvenile condition seems an essential attribute for working in shopping centers. Those young people are prone to early insertions into the labor market in economic activities, such as clothing shops or restaurants, which could mobilize an effective significance of young unskilled labor, since they do not require high or specialized professional qualifications. Employers also expressed a preference for young people who are studying, by the flexibility that characterizes them. For the interviewees, to be young, a university student, and a worker at the same time may be, simultaneously, positive and negative, because if such conditions allow them to earn money, it also makes it difficult or impossible to dedicate more time to the school uni-

verse. The conditions for exercising the daily work suggest intense daily routines, with a constant flow of work combined with a very labile organization of work schedules, visible, for example, when workers had to change previously scheduled interviews due to variations, often unexpected, in the work schedules. Young workers seem to be exposed to accelerated rhythms of work and to situations where abusive managerial practices, that undermine their dignity in the social workplace, are frequent. The discourses of the interviewed population about work denote an apparent inconsistency, particularly when the topic is the degree of (dis)satisfaction experienced in their working lives. In spite of the majority of the total population being reasonably satisfied, it appears that there are more student-workers than workers that are satisfied. The situation of biographical and relational transiency (Dubar 1997) that characterizes the student-workers' condition helps to explain this fact. This student transiency is reinforced by the existence of a background of underprivileged social origins and early entries into the world of work, which explains focusing on activities without high professional or educational requirements and with precarious working conditions. It is therefore absolutely crucial to point out that although this transitional situation constitutes a temporary phase, it can also mean the absence of security and the beginning of an uncertain and precarious future that, therefore, could assume a structuring nature for the subjects' future life. However, organizations such as the shopping centers tend to treat their workers as a means to their own ends (Sayer 2007), especially within the ideology governing the new spirit of capitalism (Boltanski and Chiapello 1999), which tends to pressure

for the iterative creation of situations perceived by the workers as compromising their dignity. Dealing with the emotional work includes, therefore, consideration of workers' dignity. Maintaining one's dignity or having one's dignity recognized "is to be treated as an end in oneself, at least in part, and not merely as a means to someone else's end, or as substitutable for someone else" (Sayer 2007:19). In the context of shopping centers, the question of the relational dimension of dignity is highly centered on the relationship between workers and customers, the locus of contact that truly structures the organization of labor inside these workplaces. So, questioning the conditions of emergence of dignified status for these workers involves taking into consideration the common assumption regarding the "non-qualified" nature of their work. Moreover, the public perception of these jobs also conveys assumptions regarding the age of these workers: as much as they are seen as "young people," thus "inexperienced," they also tend to be perceived as "undeserving of respect."

These findings were only possible, as we explained, in virtue of a research strategy that incorporated both the observation of the object (i.e., the workers of the shopping center and their work experiences) and the observation of the subject (the sociologists) of the research. What this article thus shows is that there are benefits to make visible and then to scrutinize the sociological and methodological obstacles faced during the research. Such obstacles are not simple "cemeteries of errors" (Koyré 1986:80). Extending to this case the expression that Pierre Duhem (1991) has used for history of science, in order *to save the phenomenon* we need *to save the error*,

the "unexpected" results or the "failed" encounters, instead of using maneuvers to obnubilate and erase the setbacks encountered during the sociological research. First, because the supposed "error" is the motive and the opportunity to rectify the accumulated knowledge, is an opportunity to increase the clarity about the limitations of the concepts and the instruments used by the researcher. Then, because the difficulties encountered during the research stimulate further formulation of alternatives. The empirical "anomalies" observed served, therefore, for the creation of "new" theoretical assumptions and for the extension of the research work (Salmon 2005:120). Finally, we have seen how these occasions, more than justify the abandonment of rationality in the social sciences, may serve to emphasize the need to know the magnitude of *controllability* that the sociological research has over the reality being studied. That is, it may serve to integrate in the research also the effects and limitations that accompany the interference of the social scientist over a specific context. The challenging interactive mode of recruiting interviewees in our research and the episodes that subsequently occurred are illustrative in this respect. If the misfortunes encountered do not necessarily lose their nature of "mistakes", at least they will be, henceforth, "controlled errors," (Sklar 2000: 56). The "errors" are, ultimately, unavoidable; the very nature of the scientific research is to explore their potential productivity as occasions to improve the existing theories and methods. So, to put the "errors" and other methodological misfortunes under scrutiny helps the researcher not only to confirm the already existing theories, but to reformulate them to unexpected and innovative aspects of the reality and, even, to open up new avenues of inquiry.

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