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Sex, Romance, and Technology: Efficiency, Predictability, and Standardization in College Dating Cultures

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Abstract: This article considers the extent that new forms of communication technologies developed in the last half century have contributed to new forms of sexual and romantic relationships flourishing among early adults in the United States. This project pays particular attention to the implications of that during the 2020 pandemic lockdowns and the increased dependency on technology that followed. This empirical work uses the theoretical framework provided by the scholarship of George Ritzer (2004), which focuses on the social narratives that drive labor into increasingly rational and functionalist operations, which he terms McDonaldization. This project uses interview data collected from college students to explore attitudes and social forms related to casual sex and the development of serious romantic relationships among participants. In an analysis of the data, three key trends have emerged that can be understood within Ritzer's theoretical frame. Research participants utilize and value technologies within their intimate relationships as information filters that provide efficiency in creating relationships. They also demonstrate the use of technological, organizational, and connective tools as means to control relationships. Finally, technological tools and symbols signal a kind of semi-standardized symbol of commitment to the relationship, though the meaning of these signs is still contested.

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In 2020, the global pandemic and the resulting lockdowns instituted to control the spread of the virus forcefully reshaped the fundamental nature of human interaction in ways that were unimaginable for many people. Human interaction, communication, and connection became restricted and life-threatening. In this moment of collective social trauma, the need for intimacy, connection, and relationship support was perhaps as profound as it had ever been, and yet, it was profoundly dangerous as well. Into this gap stepped communication technologies and a new way of thinking about relationships, from co-workers to families and romantic partners.

The impact of lockdowns on intimate relationships will no doubt be an area of emerging research in the coming months and years. However, before the emergence of Covid 19, there already existed an emerging social framework rooted in the integration of communication technologies into daily life, and especially into intimate relationships. The role of social media, in particular in hookup culture, dating, and romance among college-aged adults is an area of rapid and, at times, erratic social change. The end of the 20th century and the start of the new millennium saw a coming together of two paradigmatic social trends that have profoundly impacted social and cultural development. Specifically, the development and emergence of individually accessible information and communication technologies and a growing set of cultural norms that focus on a form of rationalism that sets an extremely high value on efficiency, control, and predictability/standardization (Ritzer 2004).

The norms and expectations that exist within college culture are increasingly influenced by the power of such technologies and other emerging cultural norms. Both the short- and long-term implications of this transformation are still emerging and not fully understood by young adults themselves, let alone by researchers. Still, relationship norms and frameworks formed in early adulthood have the potential for long-term and widespread social impacts in the future. While Covid has perhaps accelerated the spread of new norms, our need to understand such changes goes beyond the current moment. Ritzer's work provides one framework for this understanding, allowing us to consider rapid social change, the role of technology, and the broader implications of both on human relationships.

To contribute to this research, the article considers the extent that new forms of communication technologies have contributed to new forms of interpersonal, sexual, and romantic relationships development among early adults in the United States. This project uses qualitative research and in-depth interviews with college students in the United States. This work considers specifically how young adults use Internet technologies to maintain intimate and casual sexual relationships and examines the symbolic meanings that they attach to the use of such technologies.

Through an analysis of the data, three key trends have emerged. Research participants utilize and value technologies within their intimate relationships as a) information filters that are understood to enhance efficiency, which is seen as desirable in relationship management, and b) the widespread use of connective tools that enhance the control that participants have over their relationships, c) finally, the much more contested use of technology as a standardized signal of commitment to relation-

ship partners. I analyze these findings through the lens of McDonaldization theory (Ritzer 2004), which allows me to better understand the emergence and implications of these patterns. This work is framed within the theoretical scholarship of sociologist George Ritzer, who argues that one of the key cultural transformations of the 20th century is the rise of what he terms McDonaldization. This term refers to social practices, attitudes, and behaviors that initially emerged in the workplace. These practices are rooted in the valuation of practices that focus on minimalization of time spent on a task, a focus on quantifiability over subjective quality, predictability, and controllable and uniform production (Ritzer 2004).

Review of the Literature

Relationships in Early Adulthood

One recent transformation in social behavior and interpersonal relationships of interest to researchers occurs in the realm of sexual and dating behavior. Young people, aged 18-29, generally have active sex lives, often with multiple partners. Taken together with research that identifies sexual relationships as central to college culture (Bogle 2008), this information suggests that sex, romance, and sexuality are important parts of understanding college student culture. Understanding the variations in meanings attached to sexuality, both by individuals and by couples (Christopher and Sprecher 2000), demonstrates the limitations of attempting to universalize cultural perceptions of love, sex, and relational intimacy. The complexity and diversity of meaning attached to this interdependent set of concepts help us to better understand the role of relationships, both sexual and otherwise, in contemporary culture.

The hookup, booty calls, casual sex, one-night stands, whatever you call it, college students are doing it, and researchers are interested in it. Casual sex and sexual exploration on college campuses is not a new phenomenon; but the explicit and public nature of the conversation around this topic is perhaps a bit more recent and deeply controversial, even among researchers. Research indicates that casual sex in a variety of forms is common to college culture and may even be replacing more traditional 'dating' arrangements as the primary means for the establishment of romantic relationships among college students in the United States. This is the case for both opposite-sex (Bogle 2008) and same-sex partners, though LGBTQIA+ students articulate significant critiques of hookup as a heteronormative practice (Lamont, Roach, and Kahn 2018). While heavily researched, hookup culture is not the only way in which relationships progress among US college students, simply one of the most common. Among certain subgroups, other practices may occur, one of which is the "friends with benefits" model, often organized by texting and related tools (Hoffman 2018). About half of all college students report "hooking up," though this was less common with students of color (Owen et al. 2010; Helm, Gondra, and McBride 2015). For some college students, hookups are a pathway to deeper relationships (Kettrey and Johnson 2021). While for others, especially heterosexuals, it reinforces gendered notions of male sexual dominance in relationships (Wade 2018). While some recent scholars, instead, focus on the strategies and management of such relationships, which are often deeply techno-mediated (Lundquist and Curington 2019). The nature of hookups and dating in general among college students varies based on identity, most notably sexuality (Kettrey and Johnson 2021) and race (Allison and Risman 2014).

Understanding Technology

The impact of technologically enabled communication on human social interaction during the pandemic was profound, but it did not emerge from that historical moment. Rather, the rise of information technology and specifically, interpersonal communication technologies in recent years, especially among young adults, allowed for the rapid dissemination of social norms into a broader social context. There is ample research available on the impact of interpersonal communication technologies, specifically social media, on individuals across the life course (Nathanson 2018; Wang et al. 2018; Hutmanová and Dorčák 2021; Procentese, Gatti, and Di Napoli 2019). However, it is teens and young adults, and specifically, college-age adults, where some of the most dramatic social transformations have emerged (David and Cambre 2016; Rosewarne 2016; Schwartz and Velotta 2018; Cassar 2019). To understand contemporary society, it is increasingly important to understand the role of social media and other forms of interpersonal communication among college-age adults in the US.

In recent years, research conducted with college students regarding dating and sex has become focused on a few important areas. First, the rise and spread of hookup culture among college students have been of interest to many scholars (Bogle 2008; Owen et al. 2010; Helm et al. 2015). Second, scholars have also focused on safety and sexual assault prevention, especially as these issues are related to drug and alcohol consumption as a central issue related to college social life (Sutton and Simons 2014; Reed, Tolman, and Ward 2016; Hirsch 2020). Finally, as social norms around the role of technology have been transformed, a growing number of scholars have focused on the role of technology in the college sex and dating world. Some of these works have focused on the implications of hookup culture or dating and sexual violence, but utilized a technology-based lens (Reed et al. 2016; Hoffman 2018). Other scholars have identified the technology itself as the focus of research, considering the implications of technological intervention in the formation and persistence of romantic, sexual, and dating relationships among college students (Hoffman 2018; Cassar 2019). Increasingly these scholars have identified both the practices that have emerged, as well as the growing social logic that underpins the use and normalization of techno-mediated intimacy, specifically within the realm of hookup culture and dating within college culture.

Less research has been conducted on long-term serious romantic relationships among this age group; however, there, too, innovative and technologically mediated social practices have occurred. Still, a growing body of work has begun to explore the shifts in other types of interpersonal relationships linked to the use of social media and related technologies (Hjorth and Lim 2012). Such shifts include the emergence of new behavioral norms and dating expectations, especially those connected to the use of smartphones and hyper-connection in intimate relationships (Hoffman 2018). Some contemporary research suggests that the processes of establishing, maintaining, and often ending romantic and sexual relationships among young adults are deeply techno-mediated (Kwok and Wescott 2020).

The use of cell phones, texting, and Facebook profiles as tools to organize and connect individuals for sex, and to a lesser degree, dating relationships, is mentioned repeatedly in the research of sexual behavior scholars, but has not been fully theorized. To me, one of the most interesting aspects of contempo-

rary sexual and romantic behavior is its dependence on communication technologies to function. The use of cell phones, particularly texting, to arrange sexual encounters, as well as engage in friendship work, demonstrates the integration of technology into interpersonal relationships. Further, discussions surrounding casual sex and the symbolic legitimation of serious romantic relationships are common on social media. The specific body of literature that explores the idea of communication technologies as both aids and challenges to the work of long-term serious intimate and casual sexual relationships will be the focus of my contributions.

McDonaldization Theory

Over 20 years ago, sociologist George Ritzer (1998; 2004) identified an emerging trend in US culture, which he termed "McDonaldization." Based primarily on his observation of US workplaces in the late 1990s, Ritzer argued for the growth of a cultural norm that focused on four key ideas in both the US labor industry, as well as among consumers. Ritzer argued that the four concepts (efficiency, calculability, predictability/standardization, and control) were evidence of a form of rationality that was rooted in the work of an earlier theorist—Karl Mannheim. This form of rationality was defined by Mannheim (1936:101) as "consisting of settled and routinized procedures in dealing with situations that recur in an orderly fashion." Arguments about the cause of this growth in rationality are complex and long-standing. The work of early sociological theorist, Weber, articulates a historical example of how labor and ideology reinforce one another (Weber, Baehr, and Wells 2002) to create an increased focus on the value of work. In contrast, scholar, Anthony Giddens (1991), examines the impact of "modernity," which he defines as an era somewhat

disconnected from the traditionalist past that requires more complex thought in decision-making on contemporary social life. Ritzers' work provides a theoretical middle ground to this argument, laying out how the forces of economic history may be impacting contemporary life today and creating an environment that constrains and limits the risk of individual decision-making, perhaps as a social response to the reflexive and relative freedom that Giddens identifies. In his more recent book, Ritzer takes the McDonaldization thesis and its specific goals of efficiency, calculability, predictability/ standardization, and control and extends it beyond the working world. He addresses how such ideas have infiltrated daily life, appearing in education, leisure, consumer behavior, and even sociological thought (Ritzer 1998). In response to his theorizing, some scholars have focused on resisting the spread of this hyper-focus on rationality, having identified it as a component of interpersonal communication, citizenship, sport, and art (Smart 1999). This paper contributes to the ongoing empirical and theoretical discussion around the impact of contemporary technology and the growing normalization of rational McDonaldization within the social world. I argue that this value framework now also extends to interpersonal relationships.

Method and Sample

This project includes data from two primary field sites, a private university in the northeast and a public college in the southeast of the U.S. I have conducted 68 semi-structured interviews with undergraduate college students. Data for this paper were largely collected before 2020, but data collection is ongoing. This project primarily focuses on the collection of behavioral and attitudinal data about online practices, but also includes a discus-

sion of attitudes and beliefs about media consumption more broadly. To some degree, the interviews focus on the integration of Internet communication technologies into social life, as well as discussions about privacy, information consumption, and identity formation.

Participants are recruited through announcements made in classes and via campus listservs at the two institutions. Once participants volunteer, interview times and dates are finalized. Interviewees were asked for recommendations of persons who might participate, at the end of the interviews, to create a "snowball" of potential interviewees. The current sample includes 59% women, 37% men, and 4% nonbinary persons. The participants identified as 72% white and 28% non-white. All participants were between the ages of 18-22. While formal data about sexuality were not collected, some participants identified with a wide variety of sexualities, including but not limited to: gay, queer, pansexual, demisexual, straight, heteroflexible, and questioning. Most students did not elect to self-identify.

Traditional face-to-face interviews are the primary data source for this project and are generally between 45 and 90 minutes and one hour on average. Interview questions are open-ended and encourage participants to tell their stories and express their meanings. Examples of topics include daily Internet use, the value of online technologies, and the importance of technologies and common practices among peers. To maintain privacy, all names used in this work are pseudonyms. This project follows ethical guidelines for human subjects' research and qualitative interviews, including obtaining informed consent, confidentiality, the opportunity for withdrawal, and the ability to request emotional support post-interview.

The final interviews are transcribed and coded, allowing trends and themes to emerge from the transcribed documents. The analysis is largely inductive, with findings and theories being developed after a comprehensive coding for emergent themes. It is worth noting that while the author was able to collect rich, in-depth data, it is not randomized, nor is it generalizable. The student experiences highlighted reflected overall trends within the data, but as with any non-randomized qualitative data, this work reflects only the contextual and located experiences of individuals.

Findings and Discussion

The degree to which techno-social communication is implicated in recent transformations in the social and romantic practices of young adults is complex and emerging. However, the process of establishing, maintaining, and even ending romantic and sexual relationships is deeply techno-mediated, like much of contemporary life (Kwok and Wescott 2020). This project seeks to identify how participants understand this techno-mediation and what value they ascribe to it. My findings suggest that participants see technology increasing the efficiency of connection with relationships, predicting the likely success of relationships, and giving participants a sense of control and shared meaning within the romantic world. Participants specifically state that for them, efficiency, control, and standardized meanings are desirable within relationships.

Relationships are embedded in the organizational and connective practices of participants in this study. This techno-mediation allows for an increased level of knowledge about intimate life that can further reinforce the sense of connection and intimacy experienced by participants in romantic relationships. Technologies are also used strategically as tools to

manage interpersonal, sexual, and intimate relationships in ways that maximize speed and efficiency in relationship formation and maintenance. Finally, the symbolic meanings attached to social media connections can act to indicate commitment among participants. The long-term implications of such patterns are still being studied by researchers, but current scholarship indicates that such significant transformations in interpersonal relationship norms may have profound consequences, not only on individuals but on society as a whole (Vrangalova 2015; Cassar 2019; Kwok and Wescott 2020).

To understand these phenomena, this project employs the work of Ritzer and his theory of McDonaldization. This theory suggests that increasingly culture, organizations, and institutions have normalized and valorized the core concepts that are often found in fast food chains, specifically efficiency, calculability, predictability and standardization, and control (Ritzer 1998; 2004). More recent applications of this theory suggest that in part due to the rise of digital communication technologies, these core concepts have not only become normalized within institutions such as economics, science, education, and consumer markets (Ritzer and Miles 2019) but also into more intimate parts of human life (Bakardjieva 2014). These findings suggest that dating, romantic and sexual relationships have come to be characterized by such values as efficiency, predictability, and control. Further, predictability, control, and efficiency in most areas of social life are seen as positive in many segments of US culture (Ritzer 2004), and certainty among participants in this study.

The Efficiency of Information Filters

One way in which communication technology and social networking play a role in the establishment of serious and casual romantic relationships is by acting as information filters to enhance the speed and efficiency of relationship building. Participants largely consider enhancing the efficiency of relationships as desirable in this study, though some participants did indicate hesitation about the value of such efficiency in interpersonal relationships. Several elements of social interaction described by participants demonstrate a focus on, and desirability for, romantic relationships that are efficient and speedy. Participants in this study often note that relationships could be sped up by using social media profiles to both sort prospective romantic partners into categories of desirability and by moving through the "getting to know you" phase of the relationship quickly and efficiently.

Ritzer identifies efficiency in the workplace as increasingly seen as a kind of moral good. Effectively, working efficiently is viewed as, in and of itself, a positive, rather than indicative of high skill or quality (Ritzer 2004). The participants in this study also, with a few exceptions, consider efficiency in romantic and/or sexual relationships to be good in and of itself. Below the participants explain how technological shortcuts in romantic relationships provide an efficient dating life. Interestingly, only one participant in this study even questioned the idea that efficiency was a desirable aspect of dating and hookups. The data collected in this project suggest that this narrative of ease and efficiency has moved beyond hookup culture and is now a central component of narratives around more serious and/or long-term romantic relationship development.

Utilizing both social media and texting to "get to know" a prospective romantic partner quickly is seen as very desirable. For example, the use of techno-mediated communication is central to the pro-

cess of creating information profiles on prospective partners, often referred to as "background checks" (Standlee 2019), allowing for just such an experience, if it is desired. As Oscar, aged 22, states, "dating or sex, whatever, it's all about getting things moving, I'm a busy guy, and I don't have time to mess around. Life moves fast, you gotta keep up." The cultural normalization of speed and efficiency in broader US culture is evident here and is increasingly a component of relationship building among this population (Bakardjieva 2014).

Other participants discuss how once a potential romantic partner has been identified, the "getting to know you" stage takes on new dimensions. One participant, 19-year-old Misty, walks us through the process, explaining step-by-step how you go from meeting someone to establishing a serious relationship.

> Well, it first starts when you first meet someone; a big thing is to follow them on Instagram or whatever. And they don't always have to accept… you to follow you back. So, it makes you think, "OK, well, they don't want to connect with me," or whatever, and people can reject you. Or they start liking things; they do things to get your attention. So, then, you'll do that back to them. Then you'll hang out or whatever, and then, I would say, typically, from what I've seen, it's serious after about three weeks.

Misty's description of the process by which she and her peers move into romantic relationships is quick and efficient. The speed at which the process moves from introduction to a serious relationship is intense. These forms of social efficiencies within romantic relationships are closely tied to the perceived intensity of relationships. Erin, aged 20, agrees with Misty regarding speed as she shares her experiences and analysis of the situation.

Relationships are sped up a lot because you're constantly in contact with people. You're always texting, and you're always talking to somebody, so you get to know them a lot quicker; and so, things you would have learned over time, with people, you know so much sooner, I think I learned that a lot by [my] own experiences. I had a relationship with a guy that was long distance for a while, so we relied on chat and text, video chatting to keep in touch and get to know each other, and we got to know each other pretty quickly that way.

The phenomena of background checks and the frequency of texting allow relatively recent acquaintances to know a great deal about one another. As Kass, aged 18, notes, "I guess that kind of helped me see, okay, who I'm looking at. Like, I guess, it's kind of stalkerish, but I just kinda wanted to see, like, what people are posting. I can figure out people and move on, you know, if they aren't right." Getting to know people online via social media, and especially Instagram and TikTok, are essential starting places for many new relationships, and both sexual and dating relationships are implicated in this pattern of behavior. Many students note that while such knowledge is shallow and limited, it still provided an effective way to sort prospective romantic partners, thus making the entire process of dating and even serious relationship building less time-consuming and more efficient. Participants rely on these data to predict the outcome of potential relationships before they even begin, and in doing so, increase the efficiency of moving through the relationship process. Efficiency and predictability within a relationship are highly desirable outcomes for most of my participants.

Connection and Control

The organizational and connective role of technology is demonstrated in both casual and serious rela-

tionships. This pattern of behavior allows for a degree of control over a complex and often difficult element of human interaction, sexual and romantic relationships. Effectively, the use of social media that creates the efficiencies noted above, combined with the practice of social media and text-based flirting and relationship building, allows for the introduction of non-human technologies as a means of control. Ritzer (2004) identifies the growing incidences of individual experiences of labor being controlled by non-human technologies as part of the normalization of valuing control over creativity. My research suggests that the desire for control, and the use of technology to get it, has become normalized within college hookup culture and, to some degree, within dating culture as well.

Chloe, aged 22, explains that, for her, texting is about the pursuit of casual sex. She considers herself an independent queer woman for whom the traditional dating and romance aspects of college culture are uninteresting. Rejecting traditional gendered expectations of sexual behavior, Chloe believes that technology allows her to be more open and strategic about her pursuit of casual sex. As part of the growing number of women who consider casual sex during and after college as desirable (Grello, Welsh, and Harper 2006; Bogle 2008; Wilhite and Fromme 2019), Chloe is a proponent and participant in hookup culture, and her phone is her most effective tool in the pursuit of casual sex.

> I like to think that I've perfected the art of the coy text message. It just makes everything so easy. Not to say that I still don't value talking on the phone to the people I'm getting with…Actually though, one of my go-to moves was that when I was at a party, or wherever I was with someone, I would text the person from across the room and tell them that

> I wanted to make out with them [laughing]. It always worked!

Chloe goes on to explain that without her phone, she would "never get laid." The use of technologies in the pursuit of casual sex among my participants is substantial, particularly text messaging. Several male participants also discussed using texting as a means to hookup; however, neither they nor Chloe suggested that hooking up using texting or apps such as Tinder (David and Cambre 2016) was more common among men than women, and they agreed that for college hookup culture, the text message was the primary tool for controlling one's sex life. Participants of all genders identified technology as means to make casual sex easier and more easily managed. For the contemporary college student in this study, phones, apps, and social media are central management tools in arranging the hookup. As one participant, Rich, aged 20, explains that, for him, texting is about planning and control,

> …it's important to look at the way people use it, to kind of interact with other people, obviously, how they get what they want out of it. It takes on many different uses. Like… for me… I am using my phone to communicate with a female to try to get that shit going…

Rich and Chloe both use cell phones to plan for hooking up, which may or may not include casual sex. However, for some of their peers, techno-mediation in intimate relationships is less about fun and/or sex and more about romance.

Serious romantic couples also text one another to decide whether to meet up or just to keep in touch. As Ruth, aged 18, explains, the need for regular contact via text is also an important component in the relationship process.

…if you are dating someone, you normally keep in contact over the phone. Like, oh, what time… are you out of class, now? OK, cool. I'm gonna go eat. You want to come and eat? You know, small things like that… and texting is literally, like, talking with someone, so they'll text throughout the day. It makes it easier to manage the relationship, right?

The expectation of this frequent contact is deeply familiar to participants. Like other relationships, the need to be present and the perception of being always available for interaction play an important role in the techno-social world. Keeping connected and keeping in regular contact with a romantic partner or friend is made possible by the structural aspects of technology that allow participants to control and manage their lived experiences, through the use of these technologies. Intimacy is increasingly occurring in multiple communication mediums; connection only online or only offline may not be enough to sustain a relationship. One participant, Lin, who identifies as a lesbian in a serious relationship, aged 20, explains that she texts her girlfriend "about just... random stuff and nothing in particular. But then, it's just, keeping in touch all day... then I feel like I'm always in contact with her." These experiences of "just being in touch all day" form a new kind of intimacy, technologically driven, but still a necessary part of the relationship.

Still, the potential for tensions or difficulties due to technological issues is substantial. The phone is, in some ways, the third party in many romantic relationships. As such, it should come as no surprise that problems and tensions can arise based on technological issues. William, who identifies as straight, aged 22, outlines one example for us.

…back in the day. A guy would call a girl, or a girl call… it's like, "Should I call? Should I call her?" I don't know if [I should] call them… you know what I mean? It's changed now. I dropped her a text. You know, she didn't respond. She didn't read it, or I see that she read it—she didn't respond. What did I say? Do I send her a text now? Or is that going to send the wrong message? You know what I mean? It's completely different…

While not fundamentally new to interpersonal relationships, anxiety over social expectations for romance takes on new dimensions with the integration of technology into relationships. Part of that issue is about the visibility of such tensions. William explains how his smartphone allows him to see if his recipient has read the text he sent her or not. He is also fully aware that if she has seen it and has not responded it may be because she has consulted her friends by showing them exactly what he said and getting advice on how to respond. This allows a level of control and management of interaction that can be both empowering and intimidating. Further, for some, it may decrease the spontaneity and creativity of communication. Imparting more control of the interaction, but creating a whole new set of social challenges. As William goes on to explain,

You send it early in the day to try to see if they're going out, I don't know, maybe it seems like you care too much… and you don't want to seem like you care too much, 'cause then you're losing control.

Despite the changes in how romance is conducted, the fears and tensions associated with the experience are just as relevant as ever, in part because texting and social media make messages more widely visible and more permanent than oral communication.

Contested Commitment

One of the most difficult issues that my participants identified is related to standardization. According to Ritzer and other scholars, the desire for standardization is a key component of modern life (Ritzer 1998). We see evidence of standardization in the workforce, education, science, and research (Kenney, Hermens, and Clarke 2004; Gregg 2018), yet standardization among these participants exists at a cultural crossroads that is not so easily accepted as efficiency and predictability. The individualist desire for difference, for a uniqueness that is central to Western culture, plays an important role in resistance to standardization. Among participants in this study, the creation of a standardized interpretation of emerging social trends comes out as an area of significant contestation. A rejection of standardization, perhaps combined with the contestation of emerging shared meaning, demonstrates how some young adults are resisting the McDonaldization of their intimate lives.

We see this resistance most significantly around meanings attached to techno-facilitated communication and as a signal for commitment within this data set. For some participants, the use of Internet technologies has become a necessary and important symbolic indicator of commitment to the intimate relationship. For these participants, the act of acknowledging one's status as a couple on social media and trading frequent texts are viewed as expressions of intimacy and commitment. As Mark, aged 21, explains, "It's all about being public, being serious. We are too young to get married or engaged, that would be crazy, but if you want to be serious, everybody has to know." The process of public acknowledgment has deep symbolic meaning, and posting couple photos on Instagram, for example,

has serious implications for many participants because, as one student in this study, Andy, aged 19, notes, "Instagram is basically the number one dating app for college students."

Visible indicators, like couple selfies, and romantic hashtags such as #love, #relationship, and #romance are a deliberate and strategic investment in the romantic relationship that signals a desire for permanence. For many participants, public acknowledgment also serves to gauge the value the relationship holds to those involved. Visibility is not the only factor here however, the speed and frequency of contact, especially via texting, in the relationship is normalized to the point that rejection of such practices sends a clear message that denotes a lack of commitment. As Molly points out,

> Look, if he won't sneak a text in class or text during the day, takes forever to get back to you, or stops liking you [on Instagram], it's time to end it. He doesn't care, and you do not need that.

For many participants, failing to integrate these technologies into their relationships is often experienced as an overt rejection of the commitment to said relationship. Even infrequent technological inaccessibility, such as not responding to a text during class, sends a powerful message of rejection of the intimate relationship, regardless of intention, according to these participants. As Jolene, who is queer-identified, aged 18, notes, her previous serious relationship was damaged by her partner's inability to engage in what Jolene perceives as intimacy-building activities, like texting.

> My last relationship, we didn't text at all. Like, I never… it was always phone calls. Which I hated 'cause I hated talking on the phone and I wanted… I was,

like, "Can we please text?" And she was, like, "No, we're not. That's... absolutely not, like, I don't text." Which in that one was really frustrating for me, because I love texting and I hate talking on the phone. So... it didn't work out.

The ability to stay in contact, to know what is going on without seeing someone is one of the ways in which technological communication provides participants with a means of establishing intimacy and has come to symbolize commitment for many participants, as Jolene notes above. Jolene and other participants discuss the degree to which this form of behavior is normalized within their social world. Karina says, "regular texting, couples tags on Instagram, that's how it's done, if they won't, then probably they just aren't into you or just want to hook up, everybody knows it." Still, for most participants, techno-social mediums are just one part of the set of social practices that result in establishing and maintaining a sense of emotional intimacy. For these participants, intimacy is developed through multiple forms of interpersonal communication, both techno-mediated and face-to-face. For some participants, the meaning of techno-facilitated symbols of commitment is clear, standardized, and can be perceived as universal.

Still, despite Karina's claim that "everybody knows it," not everyone is convinced that the use of online tools in romantic relationships means the same thing, indicating a failure of standardization. One participant in this study, Kacy, aged 21, explains she is not a very "techy person" and prefers more traditional and intimate communication, which made recent lockdowns a struggle for her.

> I like to hear your voice. It's just that I'd rather do it in person... their bodies [are] in my world during the

daytime, so when I have the opportunity to actually interact with someone, in person, physically, in front of me, or talk to them, verbally, it's an opportunity for me to get to know them.

Kacy claims that she is unique among her friends in that regard. Rather than frequent but shallow contact to build intimacy and social media to symbolize connection, Kacy prefers rare but intense communication. She goes on to acknowledge that, for her, this is because she dislikes casual communication in general, noting, "I really am not the type of person to ask, 'How was your week?' or 'What's new in your life?' Or just to tell them some random anecdote about me." For her peers, Kacy explains, texting and social media are ways to easily maintain intimacy with acquaintances. This is something that she is personally uninterested in because it is "too shallow, too casual." While Kacy considers herself unique, in her rejection of the standardized notion of technology as a meaningful means and symbol of intimacy and commitment, she is not entirely alone.

As Robin, who identifies as pansexual, aged 21, explains, something is missing in such relationships.

> There's never been a way to make relationships easy, but it's like the EasyMac of relationship building. And that's creepy because if you've ever had EasyMac, it's not the same as the box. It's not as yummy! It is the EasyMac of relationship building, and there's a lot left to be desired there.

Robin reminds us that relationships are, indeed, difficult and require trust, effort, and time to become meaningful. From this perspective, the ease of relationship building using technology robs relationships of some of their meaning, rejecting the standardized notion among peers that technology

is necessary and meaningful. Modern technological integration into friendships and romances is, indeed, different from the past. The perception of "realness" in relationships based significantly on technology may leave some participants wanting more. Or perhaps, as Robin suggests, the loss is about effort and ease. For Robin and Kacy, the experience is less satisfying, and "there's a lot left to be desired there." While not all participants agree with Robin's assessment, many do find themselves struggling to engage with the fast-moving and ever-changing techno-social practices of their world. Indeed, as one participant, Scott, aged 20, says,

> Honestly, I don't really know what it all means, what I am supposed to do, it's just too much sometimes. I am so tired of living on screens and trying to figure out what it all means, but what else is there?

Scott and others struggle to make sense of changing social expectations within relationships, as with other parts of life. The rapid change of technology, built on a narrative of increased efficiency and productivity, functions in modern society as a paradigmatic shift in culture. Within this context, control and, to some degree, standardization may be experienced as a counter to the disorientation that comes with rapid change. Still, while the pace of change may be rapid, it is not instantaneous and leaves some individuals in a liminal space of social change, struggling to make sense of the symbolic meanings attached to technology. Thus, it is no surprise that as social expectations shift, meanings become contested, and not yet standardized for everyone.

Conclusions

This work suggests that Internet technologies have become deeply integrated within the most intimate elements of young adults' social relationships. Due to these radical social shifts in the norms and expectations surrounding relationships, we understand very little about how this techno-mediated intimacy is contributing to changing sociality among young adults, let alone long-term implications. Exploring such transformations allows us to better understand the potential impacts, both positive and negative, of the interdependence between intimate relationships and technology. Further, this work argues that while the development of information and communication technologies has, indeed, changed the romantic and sexual landscape of social interactions among my participants, the emergence of the technology alone is not enough to explain the changes. Rather, technological development is deeply entwined with cultural transformations surrounding the increasing desirability of efficiency, control, and standardization within US culture in recent decades. Ritzer first observed these practices in the realm of labor and work, but such cultural attitudes have moved beyond the working world, into education, entertainment, and even into our romantic and sexual lives.

This project is limited in scope, as is the nature of qualitative research, and as such, can only raise questions about some of the emerging trends in human and social behavior. Further study is needed, both regarding the role and impact of information and communication technologies on social life, as well as concerning implications of the potential normalization of perspectives and attitudes of McDonaldization so thoroughly outlined by Ritzer in our intimate lives. Issues of sexual identity, gender, race, and relationship status cannot be generalized based on these data. Instead, we should cultivate a tolerance for ambiguity, as shifting norms emerge from a rapidly changing techno-social environment. Still,

the data collected in this project suggest that for this population, the use of technologies as information filters, organization, and connective tools and the frequent but contested use of technology to signal relationship commitment are common, though not universal. The limited sample and regionally located nature of the data collected makes it impossible to generalize these findings.

One of Ritzers' key ideas is that McDonaldization devalues labor and in doing so, devalues the worker (Ritzer 1998; Ritzer and Miles 2019). For some participants, this idea holds within the realm of relationships. Does a focus on efficiency, control, and even the contested arena of standardization create a kind of "EasyMac" of relationships? On the other hand, there is perhaps value in using tools to create a better and more meaningful relationship experience. This work allows us to theorize about the degree to which technology has become a powerful force in the shaping of the most intimate aspects of human relationships. While more work is necessary to fully understand the implications of this, it opens some directions for future research. Examining the role of technology in sexual and romantic relationships among adults has the potential to help us better understand the impact of social media and technology on the broader human experience.

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Citation

Experiences of Living with Fat Bodies with Stigma in Poland. An Intersectional Analysis Based on Biographical Interviews

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Abstract: The article offers an analysis of living with a fat body and ways of experiencing it in everyday life in the context of stigmatization of this type of corporality. Biographical interviews with fat people of varying socio-demographic profiles were conducted. The analyses show that having a fat body/being fat is generally a stigma that discredits the individual in the eyes of the so-called *normals* based on both physical characteristics and character traits allegedly associated with fatness. The participants mainly medicalize and internalize the stigma of fatness and manage it specifically by passing, covering, and coming out. In transgender people, fatness may never take on the characteristics of a stigma, but instead allows the individual to obscure another stigma or conform to social expectations of appearance in line with the gender identity.

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The

main objective of the study described in this text is to discuss in a sociological manner the body experience of fat people throughout their lives through the prism of Goffman's stigma theory (1963) and Kimberle Crenshaw's intersectionality theory (1989).

It is a new field of study in Poland, where the medicalizing discourse dominates. The issue of interest to us has only been addressed concerning children by Zofia Boni (2014; 2017). She conducted in-depth ethnographic research. There are no other studies conducted in our interest stream. The project complements this gap in research. In contrast, the experience of the body among fat people has already been partly studied outside Poland (cf., e.g., Joanisse and Synnott 1999; Ogden and Clementi 2010). The project presented here contributes to this knowledge and the knowledge about how transgender people experience fatness—a topic rarely addressed in world literature.

The social science literature, to the extent that it deals with body weight, most frequently describes issues of eating disorders such as anorexia and/or bulimia, as in the case of sociology of the body, or of food in general, as in the case of food studies (Brytek-Matera 2008; Ogden 2011; Józefik 2014; Lavis 2016). The topic of fat people appears mainly in medical publications, where "obesity" is classified as a disease and a problem (Himpens et al. 2018; World Health Organization 2018:20; 2019). The association of "overweight"/"obesity" with disease risks, explicitly expressed in medical publications, is, however, sometimes problematized in the literature (Campos et al. 2006; Bacon and Aphramor 2011; Brewis 2011:22,125). The struggle against "overweight"/"obesity" can, in turn, be analyzed as simply moral panic (understood as social anxiety, a sense of threat to the general public) (Campos et al. 2006; Wann 2009; Ramos Salas 2015; Warin 2015:18-19).

The fact that the slim ideal of beauty is a Western phenomenon has also been discussed (Walden 1985:334; Bell and McNaughton 2007:113-115; Del-

peuch et al. 2009:45; Brewis 2011:96; Brewis et al. 2011:269, 274). It is known that judging fatness is strongly conditioned culturally. Globally, increasing numbers of people are classified as "overweight" and "obese," the majority in the wealthiest countries. The phenomenon of the spread of "obesity" around the world, called "globesity," is strongly linked to industrialization and urbanization (Delpeuch et al. 2009:46-50; World Health Organization 2018). The number of people categorized as "obese" is highest—in descending order—in the Pacific Islands, the Middle East, the USA, Canada, Mexico, the Caribbean, and parts of South and Central America. Only Sub-Saharan Africa does not see a surge in obesity statistics, probably due to the hunger problem still present in the region. European countries rank in the middle of the scale (Brewis 2011:274). In Poland—where we conducted the study—more than 20% of people are classified by the World Health Organization (WHO) as "obese" for men and women (Himpens et al. 2018:13).

The situation in Poland after the Second World War (official socialist ideology and the economy of scarcity) was not conducive to the interest in the body. At the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, the country underwent a political transformation from a socialist to a capitalist system and from an authoritarian to a democratic one. Many aspects of social life underwent increased (though also previously present) westernization, including the spread of the influence of slimness as the beauty ideal. During and after the transformation period, the mass media played a massive role in the growth of interest in the body and appearance. A Western-style magazine market began to function. Fashion and image magazines appeared in the publishing market. Similarly, TV programs and TV series (Polish and foreign) in which carnality was

exposed and discussed came up. According to Beata Łaciak, who researched media messages in popular magazines and TV series in the post-transformative period, the topic of a slim figure dominated. The articles covered women and men. Focusing on a perfect figure was presented as a duty. An analysis of the series showed a pattern that a fat body is more of a problem for a woman than for a man. For example, female characters from TV series do not eat sweets or are constantly on a diet. The pursuit of the media ideal of beauty has become one of the reasons for the increase in the number of various types of eating disorders. At the same time, paradoxically, anorexia and bulimia have become media topics. The subject of obesity has also started to gain popularity. In the 1990s, the media began calling "overweight" people "fluffy." People who "accepted their weight" were the heroes of articles in the tabloid press. In recent years, body trends have been moving towards physical activity and fitness. The body-positivity movement is gaining popularity. There are plus-size models and fat people in various roles in the media. However, the discourse still oscillates between accepting and medicalizing the fat body (Łaciak 2006; Wójtewicz 2014). Social and technological changes have also meant that bariatric surgery is performed with increasing frequency in Poland (Walędziak et al. 2019). This is, in fact, an international trend (Welbourn et al. 2019).

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical part includes explaining our paradigmatic approach, conceptualizing crucial terms, and describing theoretical frameworks. The project was conducted from the philosophical perspective of feminist objectivity (Haraway 1988), the tradition of qualitative research in sociology (Denzin and Lincoln, 2017), and fat studies. The terms used

reflect these choices. We analyzed the data using Goffman's stigma theory and Kimberle Crenshaw's intersectionality theory.

Our paradigmatic approach—understanding, oriented to the individual's way of experiencing the world and giving voice to the participants—is reflected in the language. The term "fat person" is used as non-medicalizing and most in line with the contemporary directions of international fat studies research (Puhl, Andreyeva, and Brownell 2008; Cooper 2009; Rothblum and Solovay 2009; Wann 2009:xii; Bacon and Aphramor 2011; Cawley 2011; Hardy 2013:7-8; Saguy 2013:19). We employ it for three reasons. First, it is descriptive rather than normative. Secondly, it is how people partaking in the fat/size-acceptance movements seek to reclaim a stigmatizing term and talk about themselves. Thirdly, the non-pathologizing approach allows for richer data to be collected and retrieval of what is systematically overlooked in other streams of literature, such as the positive aspects of fatness (cf. Monaghan 2005).

It could be questioned whether the voice should be given to people living with fat bodies in an academic article and by academics. We present two arguments supporting our choice. First, one of us is a fat person herself, and she initiated this research project. She intended to present another perspective in the strongly medicalized scientific discourse about fat people in Poland. Second, one of our participants, an activist fighting against discrimination against "obese" people, supported our project. She specifically stated that social research about this kind of discrimination is needed and was interested in presenting our results in her organization and the media. She believed it could support her work as an argument in the social debate about "obese" people. Therefore, we believe the voice of our partic-

ipants would be heard not only by other academics but also activists, journalists, and politicians. To our best intention, it would help tackle the discrimination against fat people.

In contrast to the scientific and political context presented above, "obesity" is not treated as a disease in our article. For us, it is a bodily feature around which meanings are constructed. Fatness is, thus, one of the manifestations of bodily diversity among people (Wann 2009:ix-x). The people we study are embodied social actors, not passive recipients of medical classifications (Monaghan 2005:83). A "fat person" is understood here as a person who feels fat (individual, psychological aspect) and is perceived by others as fat (social aspect) (see the sampling criteria in the methodological section). Apart from the term "fat person," "fatness" and "fat body" are used interchangeably.

As "transgender," we understand people who do not identify with the sex assigned to them at birth. In this text, we use terms such as "transgenderness," "transgender experience," and "being a transgender person" interchangeably. Gender identity, gender expression, and gender social roles are for us different aspects of gender.

The theoretical analysis is based on two interpretative frameworks—the intersectionality theory by Kimberle Crenshaw (1989) and the stigma theory by Erving Goffman (1963). These two perspectives allow us to analyze fatness as a potential stigma and the process of living with a stigma. They also enable an intersectional view of other features related to the stigma experience and their relation to fatness.

We understand the use of the intersectional perspective primarily to think about data and the re-

lationships between them. Although there are various personal features among our participants, it is the way of perceiving the interactions between these features and analyzing relationships with fatness that allow us to name it the intersectional perspective (Crenshaw 2010; Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall 2013). In this study, other than fatness, there are features such as gender identity, transgender experience, and disability. The group differentiation regarding gender identity and the transgender experience was intentional and consistent with the purposive sampling. The topic of disability was not the result of purposive sampling, but it was included in the analyses as an essential perspective of the relationship between fatness and disability.

Crenshaw (1991) distinguishes three types of intersectionality: structural, political, and representative. Structural is characterized by relationships between differentiated features regarding social subordination and dependence (e.g., social class, gender). Political is about the relationship between features, at least one of which plays a politically significant role. Representative is related to the representation (both in quantity and image) of a given group in the media space and how this representation affects the group's interests. In the case of our analysis, we are dealing primarily with structural intersectionality.

The analysis is also based on the theoretical framework of the stigma. The theory of Erving Goffman (1963) is well rooted in fat studies (Monaghan 2017), and its interpretive potential for understanding the experiences of individuals, in our opinion, is not diminishing. According to the author of the theory, stigma is the type of attribute that is deeply discrediting. These are the visible features that emphasize negative differentiation (Goffman 1963:12). Goffman distinguishes three types of stigma: physical, char-

acter, and "tribal" (Goffman 1963:4). In our article, stigma is understood as the characteristic of an individual that is socially noticed/distinguished and about which the individual is treated differently (usually worse) than *normals*.

The terms *norms* and *normals* frequently appear in Goffman's text. He does not explicitly define the term *norm*. However, inferring from the context, it can be assumed that he considers the *norm* to be a set of behaviors that characterize *normals*. "We and those who do not depart negatively from the particular expectations at the issue I shall call the *normals*" (Goffman 1963:14). Therefore, the normals are a group that does not have any stigma-like features and does not experience negative consequences. Additionally, Goffman treats the category of *normals* in a binary way. One is or is not normal. Stigma experience may exclude from this category. At the same time, in the author's opinion, *normals* are the majority category, often writing "we" as the default group of people representing the *norm*. We decided to use this term only as understood by the author.

In addition to the stigma category itself, in the analysis, we also apply two strategies for dealing with the stigma described by Goffman and one added by Cat Pausé. In the course of a moral career, that is, the relatively common biographical experiences of individuals experiencing a given stigma (Goffman 1963:32), the individual, according to Goffman's typology, can manage information about stigma in two ways—through passing and through covering. Passing is understood as a process of "the management of undisclosed (and potentially) discrediting information" (Goffman 1963:42). Covering, in turn, is the process of not hiding but diminishing the role of the stigma and relieving tension in social inter-

actions (Goffman 1963:102). Pausé, following other authors' footsteps in analyzing the experience of fat people, proposes to add the third strategy to this enumeration—coming out (Pausé 2012; Sedgwick 1994). She points out that Goffman's analyses preceded the emergence of freedom movements, hence the lack of description of this type of reaction. In our view, coming out is analyzed (though unnamed) by Goffman as a final possibility of ending the process of passing (Goffman 1963:100). Coming out is, thus, the voluntary disclosure of stigma, that is, the transition from the position of a discreditable person to that of a discredited one (Goffman 1963:100), but on one's terms.

Methodology

This article is based on data generated in the project "Experiencing Body by Fat People," which aimed to analyze how fat people experience their bodies (including the experience of possessing the stigma). Between October and November 2018, we conducted six biographical interviews with elements of an in-depth interview. It is accepted that in the exploratory stage of biographical research, the sample is small, but diverse. We focused on deepening case studies, not on completing a group that would allow us to generalize conclusions. We assumed that the fatness experiences are unique. Each person develops a different relationship with their body, has a different history of body size, and has different needs and expectations. Therefore, the diversity of participants and their life experiences was crucial in selecting the sample (Froggett and Chamberlayne 2004; Köttig 2008). We assumed that this would allow us to capture the limitability and multidimensionality of the thickness experience. The interviews were conducted in Polish, inside the territory of Poland.

Biographical interviews are an acknowledged way of exploring the experience of individuals (Strauss et al. 1997; Schütze 2012; Wengraf 2012; Fischer 2000), accompanied by the so-called cumulative mess (Riemann and Schütze 2013:408). Not all respondents can construct a comprehensive biographical story, so we used the individual in-depth interview (IDI) as a supporting technique. The flexible format and the long duration of the meetings allowed us to explore and subsequently analyze ways of experiencing the body and access to the participants' feelings and circumstances and significant moments in the life course related to being/becoming fat.

The research tool consisted of instructions for the biographical interview and IDI, a sheet for the projective technique—the Figural Rating Scale (FRS) (Brewis 2011:156)—and an observation note made after the interview. The FRS was used in an atypical way: as a supportive projection technique rather than a quantitative scale. We wanted to present images to our participants to focus their attention on the image of the body (in this section of the research tool) and help them formulate answers. The data from the FRS are not analyzed in this article. We used different techniques as elements of the methodological triangulation, which gives a "fuller picture" (Silverman and Marvasti 2008:86) of the phenomenon under study. The research tool was not pilot-tested. The informed consent was obtained verbally, then repeated and recorded before the interview.

The first part of the meeting with the participants took a typical form of a biographical interview (Chase 2009:17-18; Goodson and Sikes 2017; Golczyńska-Grondas 2019:186). They were asked to tell their life stories from the perspective of experiencing the body. In the second part of the interview (within

the IDI), we asked about issues that did not appear in the biographical story. The instructions for this part were based on Katarzyna Kowal's (2015; 2018) scheme of experiencing the body in three aspects: as a material entity, concerning the "I" (who am I?), and in relation to objects and people. This allowed us to capture the process of identity distancing from the body and the process of building unity with it.[1] Kowal's scheme is comprehensive and includes many aspects of experiencing the body. After the initial analysis, we discussed the results and concluded that the theoretical framework of stigma theory could be used to analyze further, interpret, and explain the phenomenon under study (experiencing the fat body). The stigma theory was not, however, used to design the study.

Researching fat people is associated with specific difficulties, including the researchers' positionality as thin/fat (Lloyd and Hopkins 2015; Ioannoni 2019). In an intersectional research project, other characteristics could also play a role. Therefore, we present here our gender identity, (dis)ability, and (according to the COREQ guidelines [Tong, Sainsbury, and Craig 2007:351]) credentials, occupation, experience, and training. The fieldwork was designed and conducted by two researchers holding a Ph.D. in sociology—one of them described herself as fat and one as thin. Both of these researchers had more than

10 years of experience conducting qualitative and quantitative social research and were employed at a public university. They specialize in the sociology of the body and the sociology of sexuality. The analysis was conducted, and the article was written by these two researchers and a Ph.D. candidate from the same university specializing in transgender studies. She held an MA in cognitive sciences, had experience in a scientific project in psychology, and described herself as thin. None of the authors described themselves as a person with a disability. All of them were ciswomen.

Conducting biographical interviews about body experiences was challenging for us. Our participants revealed very personal and intimate information about themselves. The stories were sometimes painful, and we struggled with adequate reactions to them. We tried to be very empathetic. To avoid secondary trauma (see, e.g., Močnik 2020), we discussed the interviews with each other after conducting them. We also wrote down our impressions and feelings in observation notes. One of the interviewers is a non-fat person, but she experiences weight changes due to chronic disease and has to take medications (e.g., steroids). For her, the situation of an interview had always been challenging. While trying to accompany our participants when sharing their experiences, she could not stop thinking about her condition. She thought about the possible consequences of long-term treatment and changing the status of a *normal* person into a stigmatized one. The third writer did not participate in the interviews, so she was not touched by the emotions of conducting them. When studying transcripts and analyzing them, the narratives of transgender people resonated most with her. They seemed more familiar and personal due to the writer's experiences with transgender life stories. During the interviews,

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[1] Kowal's concept, which she uses to analyze the experience of the body after transplantation, can be used to analyze the experience of the body in other contexts. This concept is based on the dilemmas and questions—crucial for the sociology of the body—related to being a body and having a body, and constructing identity through the body (Jakubowska 2009; Shilling 2010; Cassam 2011; Tsakiris 2011; Wójtewicz 2014). The context of the hand transplant is secondary here. In our case, such a "foreign body" might be a fat tissue. Further analyses (not included in this article) have shown a more complex picture of the relationship with the body in the participants' biographies, including many threads related to its materiality (Hoffman-Riem 2012; Warin 2015), for example, after bariatric surgery, concerning disability, or gender transition.

we sought to spare the participants from secondary traumatization and used assurances of confidentiality, post-interview stabilization through conversation, and the opportunity to review and revise the transcripts (Riemann 2000; Merrill and West 2009).

The study included people describing themselves as "fat"/"overweight"/"obese"/"plump"/"plus-size" (but declaring themselves as not suffering from anorexia or bulimia). Self-description was the main sampling criterion. We decided to use BMI (above 30 at the time of the study or in the past) only as an additional criterion to have a sample of pretty homogeneous people in terms of (changes in) body size. Behind this was the ontological and epistemological assumption that their experience is embodied and cannot be wholly separated from the material body.

By using the BMI criterion, we excluded three groups of people. First, those who may feel fat due to buying large clothing sizes due to above-average height (cf. Lloyd and Hopkins 2015:306). Second, people who are classified as "overweight," but not "obese." Third, people who may feel fat, but are not classified as "overweight" or "obese." Groups two and three require further explanations. Although groups two and three may feel fat, they are not in the same position as people medically classified as "obese." The "overweight" people are not as strongly medicalized as "obese," and those of standard shape and size are not medicalized in the way described in this article. Additionally, both of these groups do not meet the same physical obstacles in their experience as "obese" people. Especially people on higher scales of "obesity" will, for example, go to the shop and will not find any clothes to measure, they will not be able to fit into a chair in the cinema, or they will feel the edges of a chair. On the contrary, many women of standard shape and size who feel fat be-

cause of the Western beauty ideal (sizeism) can still find many clothes in a store to measure, and they will fit into almost all chairs. People classified as "overweight" are obviously in between. The body experiences of these groups of people would require a separate study.

We are aware that BMI is not an ideal criterion; the BMI=30 does not constitute a sharp distinction between different experiences, and that BMI does add a part of the medical perspective to our research. Considering all the arguments mentioned above, we decided to use BMI as an auxiliary criterion, but not the only one intentionally.

The sampling was purposive, with demographic variables taken into account (Goodson and Sikes 2017). It is justified by the tradition of research into gender and corporality, which indicate that these are important factors that differentiate body experience (Bell and McNaughton 2007; Kwan and Holtom 2019). We interviewed four cisgender people (two women and two men) and two transgender people in the process of transition (one male and one female);[2] two in rural areas, two in a medium-sized city (population of 200,000), and two in a huge city (population of over 500,000).[3] This allowed the experience of corporality to be framed by the category of increased visibility (being 'in the public eye' in the countryside) and invisibility (in the huge city). The differentiation in terms of gender identity was especially important to us because it is closely related to

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[2] We are concerned with the broad spectrum of transgenderness, the diversity of gender identities, and the needs associated with it. When we refer to transgender people, we mean only people with gender experiences similar to the biographies of our narrators.

[3] Size of the locality according to the criteria adopted by the Polish entity for official statistics—Central Statistical Office (GUS).

the experience of the body. Including transgender participants allowed us to broaden our perspective and show the gendered body experience from not only a cisgender point of view.

We contacted the participants through our extended social networks (we did not interview close friends, colleagues, or family of any of us) and the media (we found an article in a paper about one of our participants—Irena). The first author of the paper conducted three interviews (two people had known her before the study commenced), and the second author also conducted three (none of them had known her before the study commencement). The participants were approached directly by e-mails and/or messages on social media. None of the people who were approached refused to participate. The experience of possessing the stigma was not a prerequisite to participating in the study. We asked about it in a more neutral way later, during the interviews (e.g., "how did you experience," "what were your relations with," "what did you feel").

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of participants

	Sampling Criteria				Additional Demographic Data				
	Pseudonym	Gender Identity	Transgender Experience	Place of Residence	Age	Education	Occupation	Current BMI	Relationship Status
1	Anna	F	Yes	village	30	vocational	unemployed	32	single
2	Grażyna	F	No	medium-sized city (population of 200,000)	38	higher	white-collar	48	married
3	Piotr	M	No	medium-sized city (population of 200,000)	37	secondary	pensioner	26	married
4	Irena	F	No	huge city (population of over 500,000)	47	higher	white-collar	29	single
5	Tymek	M	Yes	huge city (population of over 500,000)	30	secondary	white-collar	38	LAT* relationship with a woman
6	Robert	M	No	village	31	higher	white-collar	36	married

* LAT—Living Apart Together.

Source: Self-elaboration.

Due to his need of caring for his wife, the interview with Robert was conducted via Skype; with others, it was conducted face-to-face. The children and wife were present during the interview with Piotr. The flat was too small to isolate the interview situation completely, and Piotr is in a wheelchair and finds it difficult to leave the flat. Other interviews were conducted at the participants' homes (Anna, Irena), at work (Grażyna), and in a restaurant (Tymek). These places were chosen by our participants.

The interviews lasted between 120 and 203 minutes. Their conduct did not require ethics committee approval (Surmiak 2018: paragraph 53).[4] They were audio-recorded. The transcription was outsourced to an external company and controlled. In compiling the data, we used Atlas.ti software. The analyses involved coding and categorization of meanings, condensation of meanings, and interpretation of meanings. We included elements of language analysis and theoretical analysis (Kvale 2007:104-119). The coding tree was based—as was the research tool—on Kowal's scheme of experiencing the body.

In addition, 2-3 page biographical notes/summaries (Merrill and West 2009:135) were prepared for each participant based on events of significance in the individuals' lives (e.g., the birth of children, receiving a diagnosis of illness, changing jobs) and on facts about the body (e.g., weight loss/gain, starting/ending a diet). These events were chosen by us. We chose events that are typically (for the major population) turning points in the life course and the facts that were crucial for our study. Therefore, these events were similar for our participants. We also distinguished turning points understood as meaningful, important, and personal experiences resulting in an identity change, a life's turning point, and a transition (Reimer 2014:4-7). The

biographical notes, unlike the interviews, were merely factual and encyclopedic. It means that we did not cite our participants if it was not necessary to understand an event. The biographical notes were organized chronologically (in participants' life years). We minimized the usage of adjectives. If necessary, we marked if the participant viewed something positively, negatively, or with ambivalence. If we could not determine when an event had happened, we placed it at the end of the note. We used subtitles. The biographical notes helped us deepen our understanding of the individual stories and facilitated comparisons between them in a technical sense.

Results

Types of Stigma and the Participants' Experience of Its Visibility

Having a characteristic or being treated in a certain way can foster a particular position in society and be the basis for building a specific identity. This text looks at the stigma of having a fat body/being a fat body,[5] that is, the first type of stigma identified by Goffman (physical). We

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[4] This project was not financed by an external grant institution. In such circumstances in Poland, the approval of the relevant research ethics committee is not required. Therefore, we did not seek it. There are still few research ethics committees that operate in Poland (Surmiak 2019) and they take the formal/controlling role (accepting/rejecting a proposal when someone applies for a grant) and not an advisory one. Non-funded research is not regulated by any national or local guidelines. There are, however, codes of ethics of specific disciplines, and this project was conducted following the Code of sociologists' ethics of the Polish Sociological Association (2012).

[5] We use the term being a fat body/having a fat body to refer to the fundamental and ongoing discussion (especially among body sociologists) about the ontological status of the body. The relationship of the individual with the body is still being analyzed by researchers, and, at the same time, the body is the basis of our experience of the world (both for researchers and participants). Of course, we are not talking about dualism in the Cartesian sense with its outer object body and inner mind. Rather, we are closer to the approach initiated by phenomenologists who were interested in the issue of experiencing the body and rooting consciousness in the body (Grosz 1994; Merleau-Ponty 2001; Cassam 2011). We decided to use such a notation because of how the participants talked about their embodiment. They used both terms—"I have a fat body" and "I am fat / I am a fat body." This issue is principally concerned with the relationship between the body and the self and identity formation through the body and is discussed in this article primarily in the context of stigma.

also consider more contemporary findings on the perceived relation between character traits and being fat—the character stigma (Pausé 2012:44; cf. Brink 1994). When among *normals*, the bearer of fatness stigma can, at most, as Goffman (1963:41) puts it, behave as if the distinguishing feature were unnoticeable and unimportant. However, the stigma we are dealing with is indisputably visible. Concerning fat people, the doubt Goffman pointed out about the knowledge of stigma, the need to ascertain whether we are dealing with a stigma bearer is also absent. Fatness is a stigma that has a crucial impact on social interaction—becoming the basis for constructing the individual's identity by the environment (Goffman 1963:48-51; see also Scott 2015).

THEY Look at Us

In the participants' narratives, the theme of the visibility or even hypervisibility of the fat body is clearly present. It resounds in the words of 37-year-old Piotr, who is a person with disabilities (as a result of cerebral palsy, he has problems with walking and uses a wheelchair):

> Thanks to this [fat][6] body on us... they watch us, they look at us. They see us as our body is, too, yes...It is something through which they judge us, whether good or bad... the body... it is something that defines us. [Piotr]

Piotr is a person doubly discredited by visible stigma due to co-occurring fatness and disability. However, an analysis of his experiences indicates that it

[6] Notes in brackets are additions made by the authors of the article to improve the clarity of the quoted statements.

is the visible disability that is the primary stigma: "Because what else can be... what else can happen to me that will be more visible than this wheelchair... the wheelchair is already kind of a part of me, I've grown into it" (Piotr). An important memory of Piotr is the situation that happened to him and his mother while he was undergoing one of his therapies. Another woman criticized his mother for still carrying such a large boy in a stroller. This equipment seems to be more of a problem for him throughout his life than a fat body. Fatness is obscured by it and reveals itself in specific contexts such as, for example, a visit to the doctor. However, always in connection with a disability. Piotr himself, weighing about 100 kilograms as a teenager, simply masked his appearance with baggy clothes. Only the traumatic experience of his mum's death (when he was 16) made him think about the need to lose weight. Piotr began to care about both his health and the increase in physical attractiveness (he became interested in women). Not without significance was the need for greater independence, when Piotr's life lacked his mother, who cared for his well-being to the fullest extent. Nevertheless, comparing the experience of being fat with a disability is the basis of stigma in Piotr's life. Being fat makes it even more complicated (it increases the stigma). Nowadays, Piotr is aware of this, and he uses diets when he notices a danger, in his opinion, an increase in body weight. He and his wife ensure that their sons eat healthy food and are physically active.

Unlike Piotr, Anna is partly able to control information about one of the stigmatizing characteristics, transgenderness. Here we have a unique interaction between two characteristics (transgenderness and fatness) and the stereotypes accompanying them. Anna's environment does not perceive fatness itself as a particularly shameful trait. Still, the reality of

transphobic Polish society (Winiewski et al. 2016:63-80)[7] makes the narrator's fatness something more visible when her transgenderness is revealed. She is no longer perceived as a fat woman (cf. Saguy and Ward 2011:13-14). Using Goffman's language, Anna's otherness, which is not immediately visible but can be revealed (transgenderness), combines with the different visibility of her other characteristic (fatness). Her transgenderness increases the stigma of fatness.

> Most people say I shouldn't say I'm fat at all. Of course, as long as I don't say that I am transsexual, because then I am immediately fat for them…It is usually men...who are looking for a partner; for instance, they chat you up online...And when you speak frankly about yourself, the reactions are usually brutal in this way, "You fat tranny." [Anna]

In turn, Irena states: "the biggest curse of our illness is that you just see it, well, if it wasn't visible, nobody would pay attention to what we look like" (Irena).[8] An impossible to hide symbol of stigma, that is, a fat body, has a significant informational function for the social environment—it becomes a field for judging and valuing lifestyles of fat people.

According to Goffman (1963:5), *normals* do not believe that the stigmatized person is fully human. Meanwhile, the participants show concern for the *normals'* aesthetic impressions. They are convinced that their appearance may not appeal and that it is the *normals'* right to feel uncomfortable in their company. Some of the participants are considering or have considered interventions (including surgery) to their bodies at some stage of their lives. On the other hand, others try not to expose their bodies in public places for too long to improve the *normals'* impression of them. This is an effort to reduce the level of visibility of the stigma and to give the so-called impression of normality:

> For me, [for] the reaction of a few other people, also to make this view pleasant for others, because hanging, flabby skin, with a relatively young face, is not a very pleasant view. [Irena]

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[7] The situation of transgender people in Poland has its specific context. According to the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, and Intersex Association (ILGA) Europe report (2021), which is an annual review of the status of legal protection provided to LGBTQ+ people in European countries, Poland received only 13% in 2021. It was the penultimate result of this year among all European Union countries. Percentage points are awarded for the existence in a given legal system of specific legal solutions securing LGBTQ+ persons against discrimination, violence, and enabling their equal rights to heterosexual cisgender people. Since 2018, we have been observing an annual decline in Poland's results, which means a reduction in the number of laws protecting LGBTQ+ persons. At the same time, social acceptance for non-heteronormative people in Poland is decreasing (from 2019 compared to 2017), although it had been gradually increasing (Bożewicz 2019). Transgender people are a group that is particularly vulnerable to violence and discrimination. Research conducted by the Campaign against Homophobia (Świder and Winiewski 2017) shows that 79% of transgender respondents experienced violence within two years from the date of the survey. Both the Ombudsman (Mazurczak, Mrowicki, and Adamczewska-Stachura 2019) and the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhumane or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (2020) indicate the deterioration of the legal situation and quality of life of LGBTQ+ people in Poland.

[8] Although the interviews were conducted with the intention not to medicalize the fat body, the participants themselves enter a fairly common narrative that medicalizes fatness. All the people we interviewed had or still have health problems (from relatively harmless to chronic diseases). In contact with the health service (in various contexts), there was always the issue of being a fat person. Even if the disease was not directly related to obesity. It can be assumed that this influenced how the participants think about being fat. Additionally, their socialization took place partly in the pre-transformation society, that is, they learned to understand and accept their corporeality in adult life. Before the systemic changes in Poland, child obesity was perceived as an indicator of family prosperity and resourcefulness. The obese adult must either be sick or eat too much. This norm began to change under the influence of Western patterns propagated by the media in the early 2000s (Łaciak 2006).

Not that... I don't want people to be afraid of me or anything, I don't want to be that American fat guy. [Piotr]

I've never liked to expose myself somehow with my body. I am aware that it is not as if everyone will like it, that some people will look, for example, that my belly is hanging out or something...It is, indeed, a certain discomfort, something that is definitely not a great pleasure, but it is not a total blocker either, I mean, I would never give up going to a swimming pool just because I have to undress or change because it is rather not that. But, I rather don't like to display my body, so when I change there, I do it in such a way as to do it quickly, smoothly, and not to expose myself for too long, and that's it. [Robert]

Analyzing the statements of the participants, we can see that the providers of stigma can be found mostly in public places and institutions, to a lesser degree, in the private environment of the individual.

Managing the Stigma of Fatness

In Goffman's typology, there are two ways through which an individual can manage information about stigma—passing and covering. Following Cat Pausé's work, we also analyze the third strategy—the coming out. All these three concepts (passing, covering, coming out) came from the literature. When our participants shared their stories, they described examples of these strategies, but they did not use the exact names of these concepts in the theoretical meaning we use here. Specifically, the coming out was used to describe the process of revealing information about participants' gender and/ or sexual identity, but not weight. We should mention that the three strategies presented here

are a typology and not a classification (Nowak 2007:161). It means that all these strategies are interconnected in different situations. Their separation is analytical. One person could apply all or some of them.

Participants' Perception of Fatness

The chosen strategy could depend on an individual's perception of fatness. Therefore, here we present how our participants perceived their weight—what language and in which contexts of their stories they used.

For Anna, gaining weight was a new experience in her life, because previously she had always been very slim. When she started taking hormonal treatment, she began to gain weight and was very pleased with this fact. Then she tried one diet, but quickly gave up. After some time, she also decided to focus more on exercises to keep her weight and not gain it. She was influenced by transfemale friends who focused on diets and exercises, but then she decided to cut these ties. Her weight was, for her—at first—a sign of being a woman, a positive bodily characteristic (see subsection *The Positive Aspects of the Fatness*). It was partly a choice (she tried diets, and now she exercises) and also not a choice (a consequence of hormonal treatment). She says she has "problems with obesity" or "my adiposity" and, at the same time, it is okay for her to use the term "fat": "fat people if you will."

Grażyna also used to be thin (as a child and a teenager). She, by contrast to Anna, does not treat her weight as a choice at all. For her, it is a consequence of other illnesses. In the past, she tried to lose weight and was pushed to do

it by her mother. Now she accepts it. She speaks about "obesity" or "fatness" (she does not mention adiposity) as a phenomenon and not something personal. It is her body characteristic.

Irena was not a thin child. She remembers children in a kindergarten commenting, "she is so fat, she is so fat." Irena was the only participant who clearly defined her weight as an illness. She talked about it during the whole interview. However, as we write in the *Covering* subchapter, it changed during her life. She took this identity before her second bariatric surgery. Now she defines herself as a person "ill with obesity": "I did not think about myself, at all, that I was ill, first, that I was ill with obesity, but that I was just fat, that's all, so I have to lose weight" (Irena).

None of the men were a thin child. Piotr, Tymek, and Robert have blamed themselves for their weight (see subchapter *Covering* on the internalization of the stigma). All of them felt guilty about it—Piotr (a cisman) the most, Tymek (a transman) the least. Piotr directly says (but not in a positive meaning) that he is "fat," not "fluffy." For him, being thinner or fatter is a choice he makes about his health. His guilt is strengthened by the fact that his first child is also fat, and he and his wife blame themselves for it. They speak about their "stupidity" in the past.

Tymek says he is "a person with obesity." Although he separates himself this way from his weight, he still thinks about coming back to exercising and diets. He is persuaded to do it by his female partner. Robert also thinks about his future diet. For Tymek and Robert, their weight is also a choice. Piotr is afraid he "could die." Tymek mentions that his weight could make his new operation (mastectomy) harder. Robert is concerned about his hypertension.

All participants partly or wholly medicalized their weight. All of them partly internalized the fat stigma. Some resistance could be observed in Anna's (using the term "fat" in a not openly pejorative way, being happy about becoming more female when gaining weight in the past) and Grażyna's narratives (using the term "fat" in a not openly pejorative way, accepting her current weight).

Passing

Passing (Goffman 1963:42) means that a fat person may, in specific social situations, appear not to be fat. Cat Pausé states that it is difficult to speak of passing in the case of fat people because the stigma of fatness is, as we write above, visible. At the same time, she suggests that this type of reaction may apply to people who are not fat but feel fat. They construct their fat identities and live as if they were fat, but do not suffer the social consequences of this stigma. The author also mentions the example of people who have lost weight (Pausé 2012:47) and may not disclose information about their previous weight. The biographical narratives of two of our participants help show how else the process of fat people's passing could look.

Irena underwent two bariatric operations. After the first one, she lost a lot of weight and then slowly got fatter. She was supported in this decision by her family and friends.

> I started losing weight and at full speed because from November... '96 to July '97, I lost 75 kilos and got less

than half of me…I began to gain weight again. And, at some point, in 2010, this weight increased to 135 kilos. [Irena]

Since the second surgery, she maintains the weight accepted by her doctor. The doctor changes her diet based on her well-being. Irena eagerly described her relationships with bariatric surgeons in Poland, including the ones who encouraged her to become an activist.

I remember that the surgery was in September 2010, and in April 2011, I came to my professor [of medicine] and stated he should stop it because I did not want to lose weight anymore as I had enough, period. And then I weighed 68 kilos already. I could eat very little because it ended up in regurgitation. My intestines did not get used to working under new circumstances, so there was a change of diet—to a high-calorie one to make me gain some weight. [Irena]

After each operation, she had to cope with the excess skin after the rapid weight loss. After the first operation, she was hiding it when she was away from home. She was keen to highlight her new slimmer figure, which did not live up to her expectations. Removing the excess skin would have required additional expensive and painful plastic surgery, so Irena opted not to have it, even after the second surgery. At the time of the interview, she wore loose clothing. So, initially, while very tight clothes helped in passing, now very loose clothes help.

Well, you know, the summer comes, it is not so bad in the winter, but in the summer, when it's hot, and I have to wear long-sleeved blouses because my skin hangs over my shoulders, or I have a sack of skin down to my knees...There was some chafing there, and I had to roll up the skin to fit it under a skirt,

or pressing tights, and pressing tights were generally a standard, thick tights, so if it was even thirty-six degrees of heat, I walked in thick tights because the skin was just hanging there; you had to hide it, so I was so disappointed with everything. [Irena]

While describing these experiences, she did not specifically mention her gender. We could assume that it was linked to being a woman. Women are usually (in Western culture) expected to look attractive, which often means wearing tight clothes to look slim. For a woman after bariatric surgery, it could result in an increased stigma and, consequently, physical discomfort.

Yet another way of passing can be one's activity on the Internet, for example, on dating sites. It is then possible to control the disclosure of bodily characteristics and so—control the visibility of stigma. One of our participants opted for such a solution. For most of his life, Piotr has been a fat child, teenager, and adult. The role of his mother was crucial in this experience.

And my problems with weight started, let's say, when I was seven or eight. My mum was taking more care of me. I have always liked eating. It was a result of me being a disabled person; that is, when I was a kid, my mum did more of everything for me. It was easier for me, somehow physicality... I had never had these physical activities as a kid and when I was, let's say, fourteen or fifteen, I weighed about 100 kilos. [Piotr]

When he was about 16-17 years old, he and his friend started playing sports and lost weight. A few years later, he also met his first sexual partners. When he stopped doing sports and, at the same time, problems arose in his family life (conflict with the sister who was his caregiver), he put on weight again. He

decided to look for a partner in Internet chat rooms. He then concealed information about his current weight. Piotr's wife, who was present in the house during the interview, mentioned that he had sent her a photo from when he used to be thinner.

> **Piotr's wife:** I had been sending such photos of how I really looked, and he had sent me thirty kilos lighter.
> **Piotr:** When I was trying to find a wife, it mattered to me what kind of photo I sent. It's natural. I sent a slimmer one.

At the same time, the same participant during the dating process had chosen to disclose from the beginning that he was a person with a disability. Bodyweight was for him—during the dating process—of secondary importance to disability (cf. Goffman 1963:74), although for his wife, it was important. Piotr knows that the intersection of fatness and disability could overlap and exclude him even more. Therefore, he decided to focus on only one stigma (disability) and separate it from the second one (fatness) to decrease the stigma, at least temporarily.

> So, subconsciously, this weight is inside me, not the wheel... the wheelchair is already kind of a part of me, I've grown into it, but I make it easier for me, as I say, I make it easier that I take this disability to myself, for people to notice this [disability] first, and obesity, we will talk about it later, won't we? [Piotr]

A particular example in this context would be the story of Tymek, a transgender man whose fat body facilitated passing related to his gender identity (see subsection *The Positive Aspects of the Fatness*) and is described by us as positive aspects of fatness.

The possibility to use the strategy of passing is different in different social networks. We explained

here examples of 'visual' passing—the situations in which a fat person could be seen as not fat. Our participants were able to apply this strategy outside their closest social networks (e.g., Piotr could have sent the photo with a slimmer version of himself, but eventually, he met his future wife in person). Irena wore tight clothes outside her home, but not inside. It shows us also that passing could be temporary and processual. It does not have to be narrowed down to visibility. It could go further than that—just as fatness is not only a visible bodily characteristic but is related to thoughts and other behaviors.

Covering

In passing, a person can pass as thin (be considered thin), and in covering (Goffman 1963:102), this person cannot do it. The individual diminishes the role of the stigma and thereby relieves the tension in social interactions. In the case of fat people, the covering can take the form of constantly mentioning the diets one is or has been on or complaining about the size of the clothes one wears (Pausé 2012:47). It is also creating narratives about the causes of fatness unrelated to character traits, for example, illness (Grønning, Scambler, and Tjora 2013:279-280).

In the case of our participants, covering took very different forms. Firstly, they used the strategy of assuming the role of the ill person (Parsons 1970:258) with obesity. Irena had not taken this role until her second bariatric surgery.

> And then I did not think in this context of ehm a treatment yet, I mean, I did not think about myself at all, that I was ill, first, that I was ill with obesity, but that I was just fat, that's all, so I have to lose weight... Anyway, they repaired inside what they were supposed to repair and, and did this gastric bypass, and I

was aware enough then, that ehm that, first, I am not fat, but I am ill ehm that no method ehm... that there is nothing like, that people say officially this is the method of obesity treatment, but… The idea of this treatment is that the body weight is reduced to a level that is safe for a patient. On the other hand, there is no method for ehm for curing obesity. After the body weight reduction, the patient must simply learn how to control one's illness. [Irena]

Secondly, they attempted to reduce their weight: with diets, sports, medication, and bariatric surgery. Our analyses showed that women in the family and friends' circles (mothers, female partners, wives, female friends) were crucial in these attempts. They encouraged changes and/or criticized the bodies of our participants. We would argue it is linked to the female gender role in which a woman is responsible for the family. She is expected to take care: of her food intake, health, and image. All participants used at least one of these solutions at different stages of their lives, although only Irena called herself a person suffering from obesity illness.

My first attempts to be more regular were two years after I had started taking hormones, more or less, when I actually gained a lot of weight, and I decided, "Oh, it is time... it is time to shape up because other [(transwomen] are sl... slim, pretty, and popular."…I went on a diet, eight days of a diet, a nice adventure, the diet was very good, I lost four kilos, then I got up to five, not too fast, a lot of exercises, but I did not feel physically well with all this. [Anna]

I went to the pool; actually, I started, just terribly hard, trying to go in the direction of the sports, maybe some murderous efforts would cause something to happen , a miracle. [Grażyna]

Some fruit diets, 1,000 calorie diets, of course, some herbs, there was a lot of it when I was a teenager, and my mum discovered acupuncture, acupressure, God, and massage. [Irena]

Others (cismen and transman) strongly internalized the stigma of "obesity" and blamed themselves for their body size. We could argue that the experience of living in the male social role could increase the stigma of fatness, and the experience of living in the female social role could—sometimes—decrease it. It is easier for women and more complicated for men to admit they are ill (which culturally means also "weak"). Accepting the role of a person "ill with obesity" (not necessarily undergoing bariatric surgery) could be easier for women and help them cope with the stigma of fatness. At the same time, men could more strongly internalize the stigma and blame themselves for the "problem."

Piotr's wife: When we eat, we say that we bitched ourselves out, "So be it," it is said.
Piotr: We do not like these embellishments…no, like in the army.
Piotr's wife: And then I just say: no giving up, we are starting again, when Christmas comes, we will stuff our faces again.

In the case of Robert, it resulted in avoiding contact with doctors and, in consequence, necessary treatment for hypertension.

Actually, some doctors make comments this way that it would be appropriate to lose some kilos. Ehm this woman I mentioned here, she is a very good doctor, she treated me very well. I have to confess, to be honest, that, ehm, I resigned from her a little bit because every time she, we saw each other every 3 months, I had a follow-up appointment every 3 months. Every

time she asked me about my weight. And if I had not lost weight, I even felt bad to say that I had not lost weight…And it was like that, "Mr. Robert, how many drugs should I prescribe you? You are still so young." And, at some point, she just blocked me, I mean, it is, it seems silly and juvenile for me, my way of thinking, but, darn it, I was too blocked to go to another visit because, well, because I had no effect and even, at some point, it came from the other side and, and, and, she would not be satisfied at all. [Robert]

This internalized stigma was especially tough and painful to listen to. We understood that we should not try to change our participants' perception of their fatness, even though we applied the fat studies approach to not "blame" anyone for their body size. However, it was a complicated issue when we used some terms describing the phenomenon under study. Therefore, we tried to use the language of our participants. We started by presenting the title of our project, which included the word "fat." Later, however, we followed our participants. If they spoke about "obesity," we talked about it too.

Thirdly, the participants also described different "non-characterological" reasons for their fatness: a hormonal balance-related illness (Grażyna) or a hormonal transition towards the female sex (Anna).

Then it turned out that, first, actually, [some problems with] my thyroid came out, [the thyroid] had spoken out for a longer time already, but had not given a clinical picture, ehm… second, some endocrinal abnormalities, very diverse, not diagnosed to this day. [Grażyna]

Yes, it [gaining weight] is a standard, it is a norm on hormones, and there are no chances to avoid it without torturing yourself with diets and exercises. [Anna]

Fourth, they try to be nice and not bother their friends and family. They look at items of clothing unrelated to weight when shopping with friends: "[When my friends and I go shopping,] nobody has a problem with me looking at shoes, for example, because it's like there are no clothes in the shops we enter, right?" [Grażyna]

They also nod when other people make comments or offer unsolicited advice. Piotr does not say a word when his father carries him up the stairs and comments on his weight, while Robert, on the other hand, listens to his friend's advice on losing weight.

I often have such a relationship with [one of my friends], and sometimes such situations occur that he tries to mentor me a little bit in the context of what I should do to lose weight, but it's not because he wants me to lose weight so much, he just knows that I would like to, and somehow I look for these ideas and so on and he tries to suggest it somehow. [Robert]

Coming Out

Coming out is the voluntary disclosure of stigma (Goffman 1963:100). We wrote about a particular case of disclosing fatness and transgenderness at the same time—in the case of Anna—in the previous subsection (*Types of Stigma and the Participants' Experience of Its Visibility*). She also indicated that she was interested in the body-positivity movement, so she was closest to the coming-out strategy (compared to "activism" and "self-acceptance" resistance strategies in Joanisse and Synnott [1999:64-65]):

However, I really enjoy reading and observing [the blogger], who is just… spreading the body-positive movement…And, in fact, the way she… her way of be-

ing, her joy with herself, it appeals to me, and, in fact, maybe I also draw a little from her. [Anna]

Although Grażyna's current narrative (using the term "fat," declaring acceptance of her current weight, being a feminist, but not fat/size-acceptance activist) seems to be also close to this strategy, we do not have enough information to make such a conclusion. On the contrary, Irena's activist experience is also an opportunity to disclose her fat experience, but she does strongly medicalize fatness.

The Positive Aspects of the Fatness

According to Goffman (1963:3), some traits may be a stigma only for a certain group of people, while for others, they are neutral or can even become an advantage. Our study also showed that fatness, in specific circumstances, could have a positive dimension. This phenomenon particularly resonated in the biographies of transgender people. The narratives differ on a fundamental issue. Anna was a very thin person in her youth; other people perceived her as too thin, the process of getting fat was somehow anticipated, and fatness was a desired feature. Tymek, on the other hand, was a fat person from an early age, experiencing both the stigma of fatness and the positive aspects of a larger body size. In both narratives, however, common threads can be discovered.

Anna's Case

In Anna's case, fatness enabled her to overcome the negative perception and reactions to her thinness with which the narrator grew up: "that I stop being skinny, and that people like

it" (Anna). In women, thinness can give a sense of control over the body. In the case of the narrator, the opposite mechanism worked. Thinness was a feature pointed out by the milieu for years: "No matter if it was at work or school, ehm... there was always someone who had stupid snipes about my underweight" (Anna). It was the fatness that gave her a sense of agency in her adult life.

Fatness also made the narrator's body image correspond to her gender identity. It emphasized the features perceived as stereotypically feminine (body shape: fatty tissue around the hips, breasts, "hourglass figure") and concealed those perceived as stereotypically masculine (e.g., broader shoulders). The facial features had also changed as a result of weight gain. An increased sense of femininity was linked to an increased sense of attractiveness: "When I gained this body though, for one, I feel attractive, two, I like myself, and self-acceptance for transsexual people is really something amazing" (Anna). In conclusion, for Anna, fatness has become, first and foremost, a way of accomplishing femininity. In this case, the intersection between fatness, gender identity, and transgender experience had a positive dimension. Fatness increased the sense of femininity while reducing the stigma of transgenderness.

An interesting observation also emerges from the juxtaposition of Anna's (a transwoman) and Irena's (a ciswoman) narratives. Irena states that, in her youth, she was a "safe friend." She was considered unattractive by her peers and, in contrast to her female friends, came off better image-wise. Anna notes that her transgender female friends, from whom she distanced herself,

advised her against getting fat and threatened her with the consequences. Fatness, in both cases, means a loss of *normal* female attractiveness. On the contrary, when Anna started to get fat, her lesbian friends became spiteful and openly jealous. In this situation, in contrast to Irena, Anna became a *dangerous friend* : "They feel less feminine around me...I quote: 'Because you are more feminine than me'" (Anna). Her presence is perceived as undermining the femininity and attractiveness of others. In this case, fatness intersected with gender expression and increased *normal* female attractiveness.

It is noteworthy that the fatness affected significantly differently these two women, depending on the cis/transgender experience and whether the female peer group was heteronormative. We do not know the sexual identities of Irena's friends. Still, the narrative shows that the supposed identity of all members of the group was heterosexuality (an alleged interest in men): "I've always looked uglier ehm less pretty, I, I wasn't of interest to the boys, so they could show up somehow in my company because they always fared better against my background" (Irena). Anna, on the other hand, directly talks about a group of lesbian friends. Fatness combined with a heteronormative perception of *normal* femininity and attractiveness (attractiveness understood as thinness [Moreno-Domínguez et al. 2019]) negatively influenced Irena's perception of these features. Getting fat, she felt that she had lost her attractiveness. She was treated like a mirror, a reflection of qualities that contradicted stereotypically perceived femininity: "They looked at me a bit like that; they probably thought that they didn't look as bad as I did" (Irena). For Anna, fatness was associated with the realization of *normal* femininity and the desire to fit into the norms regarding appearance:

"I put on some flesh; I got female shapes" (Anna). At the same time, she perceives femininity not through the prism of thinness but precisely the shape of the body, the "figure." This may be due to a different understanding of female attractiveness by lesbians, not focusing so much on the stereotypical perception of femininity through the prism of thinness (Legenbauer et al., 2009; Moreno-Domínguez et al. 2019): "Other girls show interest in me, much more than before or at the very beginning of the gender reassignment" (Anna). In both of the above cases, it is the environment that convinces women whether or not their body is feminine enough, depending on the standards of a given group. This translates into the way they understand femininity and how they perceive themselves:

> I have started to accept myself because I see a woman in myself…I began to... to take on flesh and walking down the street, entering the subway, I was passed by a man who had almost killed himself on the stairs, looking back at me. So that was the first time I felt attractive. [Anna]

The sense of equating social identity with personal identity (Goffman 1963:41) and an increase in the sense of attractiveness contributed to an increase in self-acceptance and self-esteem: "But, when I acquired this body, on e that I feel attractive, two, I like myself, and in the case of transsexual people, self-acceptance is really something amazing" (Anna). A significant change that helped in self-acceptance and achieving the appearance of the body consistent with the gender identity was the change in facial features: "Only when I gained this weight, twenty kilos over my no... norm that I had during... before treatment, that is, about seventy kilos, seventy-five kilos I had, I was just begin-

ning to accept myself from the look on my face." In this fragment, the subject of acceptance is important. In the other narratives, fatness is described as a feature that must be accepted, that needs to be accepted. In the case of Anna, there is an opposite relation. The appearance of the face was accepted thanks to the fatness.

To sum up, for the narrator, fatness becomes a way of realizing femininity primarily. It is also the main point of changing one's self-image and gaining subjectivity: "I started accepting myself as a human being, in fact" (Anna). Fatness decreased the stigma of transgenderness.

Tymek's Case

In Tymek's case, the importance of fatness in the formation of gender identity is not a dominant theme. However, this may be because he has experienced the stigma of fatness and the inequality in attitudes towards female and male corporality for most of his life. Men are less expected to prove their sex and masculinity through body appearance and shape (Monaghan 2005:100; Rothblum and Solovay 2009:139).

Fatness was perceived positively by him mainly during childhood and adolescence. Tymek emphasizes that he was not perceived as a girl from an early age because he was "a fairly stocky and big child." The size of the body made it possible to leave space for the interpretation of his gender to others and did not immediately impose associations with the female gender. At the adolescent stage, fatness allowed the association of early breast development with gynecomastia. While in the case of the transwoman's experience, fatness makes it possible to gain *normal* fe-

male characteristics, in the case of the transman, it makes passing possible. Although transgender men tend to fear being accused of gynecomastia (Bell and McNaughton 2007:124) because it is a feature that takes away their masculinity, in Tymek's case, being accused of gynecomastia allowed him to gain his masculinity:

> My weight and ehm... my body build in general: broad shoulders, for example, helped me more with self-acceptance, more with covering up certain points that were female…for most of my life, childhood, and adolescence ehm... weight, overweight, and later obesity was a big advantage for me…for example, thanks ehm... to my obesity I was able to mask female maturation under the pretext of gynecomastia. [Tymek]

The intersection between fatness and gender expression contributed to the growth of the sense of masculinity and the achievement of male passing.

Fatness was also a hideout for Tymek, a safe form concealing female body features before starting hormone therapy: "I insisted on losing weight. However, in the pre-HRT [Hormone Replacement Therapy] stage, this was very disadvantageous ehm... Because come out all... ehm... very clearly come out all ehm... nuances that I wanted to hide by weight." Starting HRT resulted in fat migration and allowed him to lose weight without worrying about misgendering.

In the case of transgender narrators, referring to Goffman's (1963:44) terminology, fatness becomes a disidentifier, a feature that helps to hide the stigma (of transgenderness). Through fatness, transgenderness becomes discreditable as the level of passing regarding gender expres-

sion increases. For transgender people, body image and being recognized according to gender identity are crucial for identity formation and self-acceptance (McGuire et al. 2016:97). Therefore, the transgender stigma does not have to be a permanent trait. It can potentially be managed in one's everyday life through passing, covering, or coming out (just as fatness). Referring to Goffman's (1963:1) understanding of stigma as "bodily signs," passing can be understood as the social removal of this sign, the ceasing of "standing out." Fatness, thus, helps to remove the transgender stigma. It becomes a way to equate social identity with personal identity.

Discussion

About the Study

This project made it possible to partially fill the knowledge gap resulting from the domination of the medicalizing perspective in the scientific discourse on fatness and the lack of research in the field of fat studies in Poland. It also allowed us to report on the specific situation of transgender people in this context.

The diversity of our research team helped us analyze the collected material from an intersectional perspective. Different life experiences enabled the critical understanding of data. It was also a challenge, for example, when we discussed how very thin people experience their bodies and how they are perceived by others (in the context of Anna's weight changes).

The study has its limitations. The results cannot be generalized about the fat community in Poland as a whole. However, it does make it possi-

ble to show a spectrum of possible correlations between the variables, for example, between fatness and gender or between fatness and disability (cf. the discussion on the generalizability of qualitative research results in Patton 2015:1025-1039). The use of the qualitative method allowed us to explore the experience of the body in fat people through an in-depth approach. At the same time, the extensiveness of the form of the biographical interviews (very long transcriptions) resulted in a long time of working on it. Consequently, not all threads have been developed in this text. For example, the role of partners in the process of self-acceptance of one's fatness or the thread of parenthood (both the perspective of being a parent of a fat child and that of being a fat parent) and the issue of the stigma providers deserve further discussion.

This project also leaves the prospects open for further research. Women's caring role in the lives of fat people (e.g., partners and mothers) is a theme that needs to be explored further. The issue of intimate relationships is also worth exploring in future projects. Such an extension of our analyses could help answer the question of how fatness helps to redefine or, on the contrary, reinforce the social rules of entering into intimate relations.

About Results

Due to the multitude of issues raised, resulting from the specificity of biographical interviews, we decided to discuss in this article only a part of the analysis results. We focused on the visibility of the stigma of fatness, the management of information about stigma, and the unexpected positive aspects of fatness.

A common experience of the narrators participating in the study was the inability to be considered *normals*. Fatness is a visible and intrusive stigma, contrasting with the image of *normals*, emphasizing a lack of affiliation. What is more, the body of fat people is somehow appropriated by the remaining participants of social life. By being put on public display, it becomes a topic of public discussion. The narrators' stories imply that they feel they should limit the visibility of their bodies or adjust them to the prevailing *norms* and that *normals* have the right to expect this. A second observation is the theme of the intersection of different types of stigma. Some stigmatized traits, depending on their characteristics, may reduce the visibility of others (as in the case of disability) or increase this visibility (as in the case of disclosure of transgenderness).

All participants medicalized fatness, although men more strongly internalized the fatness stigma. The participants' narratives revealed new examples of managing the stigma of fatness absent from the literature. Concerning the general public, the participants used passing, covering, and coming out. Passing was accomplished through an appropriate choice of clothing (very tight or very loose clothes) and hiding one's weight on the Internet (photos from a period of weight loss). Covering took the form of assuming the role of an ill person, reducing weight (e.g., by dieting), presenting "non-characterological" reasons for fatness, and not bothering people around. Coming out was expressed by openly talking about being fat in a positive context (body positivity). Although all participants wholly or partly medicalized fatness and internalized the fat stigma, some aspects of resistance could be observed in Anna's narrative, which corresponds with applying a coming out strategy.

The narratives also showed some unexpected positive aspects of fatness. It appeared that, in particular circumstances, fatness could become a feature that facilitates living with another stigma (transgender experience). Fatness, in other narratives, is considered a feature that deprives one of femininity. In the case of a transwoman, it made it possible to gain femininity and hide features recognized as feminine in a transman. This phenomenon increases the level of social recognition of gender identity for transgender people; the fatness "lends" gender rather than taking it away. It can also contribute to a permanent social transition and, as a result, remove the stigma of transgenderness.

About Theoretical Perspectiv*e*

Goffman's theory, which was used in data analysis, has been developed, but also criticized a lot. One of the more frequent criticisms is the lack of a single clear definition of the concept of stigma (Link and Phelan 2001:364; Carnevale 2007:12). The definition we have adopted (the characteristic of an individual that is socially noticed/distinguished and about which the individual is treated differently [usually worse] than normals), although not explicitly given by Goffman, follows from his reflections. The theory is also subject to the criticism that Goffman (e.g., 1963:3) generally describes stigma as a characteristic that is socially regarded as inferior. In the article, we have also managed to show the positive aspects of fatness, thus developing Goffman's original considerations.

Other scholars, for example, Susanne Brandheim (2017:5), argue that one should not talk about stigma but about the process of stigmatization. Instead of focusing on the individual who possesses an undesirable trait, the focus should be on other participants in social life who stigmatize this individual in their everyday interactions (labeling theory). Also, Franco A. Carnevale (2007:12) notes that the concept of stigma in Goffman's theory is presented from a micro-sociological perspective as an individual phenomenon. The theoretician does not describe it as a wider social process. In our article, however, the individual perspective was crucial—the participants described their lives to us themselves. Therefore, in this article, we mainly presented the participants' (and not stigma providers') perspectives and experiences.

Another criticized aspect of the theory is its (only two) strategies for managing information about stigma. Researchers point out that the strategies described by Goffman fail to cover the entire spectrum of possible responses to (fat) stigma (Kwan 2009; Pausé 2012), and they reinterpret the typology in research studies about other aspects of human experience (see, e.g., Griffin 1991 on gay and lesbian educators; Toyoki and Brown 2014 on prisoners). We decided to broaden Goffman's typology by adding new examples of passing and covering, and by including the coming out strategy.

The language Goffman uses in his work is also subject to criticism. By using "I" and "we" in opposition to people with stigma, he puts himself and the reader in the position of *normals*. In his text, he merely presents himself as a "neutral" observer of reality (Tyler 2018:754-755). We

find it difficult to disagree with such criticism. In our article, however, we do not 'look' at the participants from Goffman's perspective in this way—we also adopt their perspective.

To conclude, Goffman's theory has been proven to work very well in the context of the fat body experience. Despite the passage of years and the changing socio-cultural context, it is still applicable. Most of the theory's assumptions have been confirmed in the described study, and some divergent observations are an extension rather than a contradiction of the theory.

Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality was used to show the intersections of different types of stigma. It showed not only when one stigma can decrease the other but also increase it. We presented the intersection between gender identity, transgender experience, disability, and fatness.

Living with a fat body could be easier for women and harder for men. It could decrease the stigma when women link their fatness to illnesses, while for men, the fatness stigma could be strongly internalized. Internalized stigma could result in avoiding medical personnel and necessary treatment. Then the negative psychological consequences of possessing the stigma could be higher for (some) men than for (some) women. On the contrary, a fat woman does not meet the societal norms concerning her image (more than a man). Therefore, dealing with excess skin after bariatric surgery could be more uncomfortable for women because they are expected to wear tighter clothes.

Fatness may decrease the stigma of transgenderness. In the case of a transwoman, it helped

emphasize female body features that caused an increasing sense of femininity and attractiveness. In the case of a transman, it allowed the hiding of female body features, which caused the increasing feeling of masculinity. In both cases, the fat body helped reduce the stigma of transgenderness and balance gender expression with gender identity, which increased self-acceptance and self-esteem. On the other hand, in the case of the transwoman, coming out as transgender increased the stigma of fatness. In some situations, she was seen as fat only when she informed others about her transgender experience.

Fatness could be masked by disability. Comparing fatness and disability, disability is (at least in the case of our participant) the basic stigma. Being fat "only" complicates the stigma of disability (increases the stigma), for example, when using public spaces unprepared for disability or fatness.

Acknowledgments

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Contested Discursive Framing of a Bank's Cooptative Joint CSR Model

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Abstract: There is a dearth of critical ethnographic research that focuses on the semiotic-discursive features of corporate social responsibility (CSR) framing in business and nonprofit (BUS-NPO) partnerships. This article contributes to CSR scholarship by combining ethnographic methods (participant observation, in-depth interviews, and textual materials) and semiotic analysis to demonstrate how a bank-NPO partnership is discursively framed in the context of agonistic interactions and its implications in terms of cooptation.

This article crystallizes two arguments. First, the bank's joint CSR initiatives represent a discursively framed and validated model of CSR as a commodity aiming at advancing bank interests at the cost of avoiding substantive and sustained social responsibility. Second, the joint CSR model, discursively framed as a cooptative partnership discourse, is effectively realized through the practices of the cooptative relationship between the bank and the NPOs.

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There is a dearth of ethnographic research that focuses on the semiotic-discursive features of corporate social responsibility (CSR). Using ethnographic methods (participant observation, in-depth interviews, and textual materials) and semiotic analysis of on-site negotiations between bank representatives and

nonprofit organizations (NPOs), this article critically examines the contested discursive framing of a bank's partnership model and the political implications of the contested dynamics, in which the joint CSR model is discursively framed in terms of cooptation.

During the last three decades, business-NPO (BUS-NPO) partnerships have become an essential element in CSR policy worldwide. The growth of BUS-NPO partnerships has been motivated by global economic-societal developments, including increasing public pressure on businesses to behave in responsible and accountable ways toward various stakeholders (e.g., customers, franchisees, suppliers, employees, NPOs, governmental authorities, and communities) and the proliferation of civil society organizations alongside governmental and private authorities. BUS-NPO partnerships also prospered in the context of the decline in government assistance, increased competition in private and non-private sectors, and heightened public demand for NPOs to act accountably (Bosscher 2009; Baur and Schmitz 2012; Laasonen, Fougère, and Kourula 2012; Herlin 2015; Cook and Burchell 2018).

The increase in BUS-NPO partnerships has also occurred alongside the spread of neoliberalism. Within such economic-political conditions, radical voices calling for social change, particularly in the context of anti-globalization movements, have been transformed into "a neoliberal reformist agenda emphasizing piecemeal change, framed within a capitalist framework" (Burchell and Cook 2013:745). Thus, within the framework of a CSR model underpinned by neoliberal reformist notions, relationships between business and civil society became consensual rather than conflictive (Burchell and Cook 2013).

Sociologists explain this change in light of dialectic movements in global capitalism (Shamir 2008), in which CSR represents the creative ability of firms to transform risks and public threats to corporate branding strategies into commercial opportunities (Shamir 2004).

One of the most prominent indications of the neoliberal reformist agenda in the CSR field is the business case approach (Saiia, Carroll, and Buchholtz 2003; Carroll and Shabana 2010). The underlying notion of the CSR business case is that firms can profit by doing good (Moratis 2014), whereas, in fact, firms that adopt the business case approach steer CSR through business growth rather than addressing substantive societal issues (Burchell and Cook 2013). Firms invest in CSR initiatives to reduce costs and risk, build competitive advantage, enhance brand reputation and legitimacy, and increase customer satisfaction and employee motivation (Kurucz, Colbert, and Wheeler 2008; Nijhof and Jeurissen 2010).

While the business case underpins most of today's management literature on the social responsibilities of corporations (Moratis 2014), it has recently come under increasing criticism. The leading concern is that, under the cover of business case ideas, CSR has evolved into a "marketable asset" (Nijhof and Jeurissen 2010:618). With an instrumental and utilitarian focus, CSR has become a legitimate and unquestioned strategy for firms to maximize profits while ignoring societal and ecological issues (Nijhof and Jeurissen 2010; Barnett 2019).

In their incisive criticism, Nijhof and Jeurissen (2010) argue that CSR has become detached from its ethical base. Firms not only engage in CSR opportunistically but also justify CSR using instrumen-

tal arguments (Nijhof and Jeurissen 2010). Following Nijhof and Jeurissen (2010), Moratis (2014:661) stresses that the CSR business case is increasingly "ethically defective" as firms have commodified societal issues for profit-making (Burchell and Cook 2013; Moratis 2014).

Concurrently, evolutionary CSR models based on consensus have emerged in management literature to assist firms in breaking through "a glass ceiling" (Nijhof and Jeurissen 2010:623) by incorporating "shared value" (Porter and Kramer 2006:82) into their CSR strategies, which interweaves economic considerations with ethical-societal values. The most inspiring BUS-NPO partnership model, "Collaborative Value Creation," aims to reach the highest, transformative, "win-win" stage of collaborations for both firms and NPOs (Austin 2000; Austin and Seitanidi 2012a; 2012b).

The Collaborative Value Creation and other normative frameworks conceived by ethicists and management scholars (Porter and Kramer 2006; 2011; Kurucz et al. 2008; Moratis 2014) are analytic tools that conceptualize an ideal of CSR rather than showing "what it actually looks like in practice" (Brand, Blok, and Verweij 2020:4). Since an ideal "is always counterfactual" (Brand et al. 2020:11), a more "realistic" perspective is needed to explain how CSR is shaped in the context of asymmetrical BUS-NPO power relations.

Recent CSR studies based on a conflict view have suggested agonistic regulative frameworks designed to mitigate the impact of power asymmetries on BUS-NPO relationships, leading to the potential for NPO cooptation (e.g., two of them are referred to in the literature as "an agonistic pluralism" [Dawkins 2015:8] and "agonistic deliberation" [Brand et

al. 2020:4]). These agonistic regulative frameworks are based on the underlying premise that conflict dynamics play a constructive role in arbitrating between adversarial stakeholders (Dawkins 2015; Brand et al. 2020). Put shortly, conflict-based studies designed to normalize conflictual relationships by agonistic means paradoxically legitimate the established hegemonic power relation.

In addition to these normative studies assuming conflictual relationships as a problem to be solved (Dawkins 2015; Brand et al. 2020), few conflict-based CSR studies address the political implications of market-centered CSR in terms of cooptative relationships (Burchell and Cook 2013). Cooptation occurs when firms exercise hegemonic control over powerless stakeholders "at the cost of preventing more far-reaching, structural changes" (Hamann and Acutt 2003:262). Powerless NPOs succumb to the pressure of firms to depoliticize the CSR agenda, aligning it with neoliberal notions of corporate self-regulation (Shamir 2010). Thus, cooptation ensures the perpetuation of the status quo, suppressing NPO interests and discourses (Baur and Schmitz 2012; Laasonen et al. 2012; Herlin 2015).

Within this narrow field of critical research, there are only a few ethnographic studies that critically illustrate how CSR is constructed as a commodity in the context of agonistic social dynamics (Shamir 2005; Barkay 2011). Moreover, thus far, no ethnographic research has utilized semiotic analysis to critically examine how CSR is discursively framed in BUS-NPO partnerships, nor to investigate the political consequences of this framing.

The concept of discursive framing refers to contested negotiated meanings of words, phrases, metaphors, symbolic gestures, and other discursive

signifiers of a contextual discourse (Steinberg 1999; Cornelissen and Werner 2014). Inspired by the insights of the discursive framing literature (Steinberg 1999; see also Alvesson and Kärreman 2000; Keller 2012), this study analyzes the contested discursive framing of a joint CSR model during negotiations between bank representatives and NPOs.

This study focuses on two aspects of semiotic analysis: content and formal . (1) The content-related aspect addresses such questions as; What meanings of discursive signifiers are negotiated during the discursive framing of a bank's joint CSR model? What practices do actors engage in during negotiated interactions? I address these questions by analyzing the discursive practices of talk and rhetoric (Alvesson and Kärreman 2000) used by challengers and powerholders to subvert or maintain hegemony over key discursive signifiers (Steinberg 1999; Keller 2012). (2) The formal aspect of analysis addresses such issues as how, when, and by whom things are said, in what tone, and in what order participants speak during a conversation.

Based on the formal and content-based semiotic analysis, this study identifies the term "adoption" as a key discursive signifier that underlies the bank's CSR framework. By "adoption," bank management means that it assists disadvantaged groups through joint social-outreach programs staffed by employee volunteers and with financial sponsorship. However, the multivocality of "adoption" aligns with the different discursive strategies exerted by the bank representatives and the NPOs to frame "adoption" with their interpretations and intentions. Given the significance of the term "adoption" in the bank's CSR discourse, semiotic analysis of the term could contribute to a deep understanding of how the BUS-NPO partnership

model is discursively framed and what its implications are.

Accordingly, this article advances using a twofold argument. First, backed by the CSR business case, a bank joint CSR model, discursively framed as a socially responsible investment, is designed to increase brand loyalty, corporate reputation, and employee motivation rather than achieve public good. Second, embedded in agonistic social relations, the bank-NPO partnerships are not merely commodified but are also discursively framed as cooptative. That is, through the joint projects, the cooptative CSR framework has become a diluted type of BUS-NPO partnership.

The rest of the article proceeds as follows. First, in the following three sections of the literature review, I will briefly review the literature to establish my argument. In the first section, I will review critical CSR literature on the effect of the business case approach on CSR commodification. I will also discuss how management literature on CSR theoretically deals with the problem of a lack of "shared value" in CSR practice. In the second section, I will review the conflict-based literature to understand the implications of market-centered CSR for the formation of cooptative relationships between firms and NPOs. Finally, to establish the semiotic analysis of this article, I will discuss the literature on contested discursive framing. Second, in the findings section, after a brief account of the research methods, I will demonstrate the contested discursive framing of the bank's joint CSR model through semiotic analysis of negotiations between the bank's and NPOs' representatives. Finally, in the discussion section, I will discuss the contribution to the literature, followed by a conclusion section that will discuss the political implications of these contested dynamics while suggesting a direction for future research.

Literature Review

The Reduction of CSR to the Business Case

The CSR business case, the ideological assumptions that underpin most of today's management literature on the social responsibilities of corporations, is rooted in and justified by the ideal of enlightened self-interest (Nijhof and Jeurissen 2010). Corporate advocates of the CSR business case contend that corporate injustices are remedied by acting according to free-market dictates and logic and that corporate self-regulation is a key means for CSR implementation (Dawkins 2015).

Drawing from the classical economics notion of corporate self-interest, the CSR business case conflates two orientations: financial performance with corporate social performance for the common good (Moratis 2014). According to the business case, the CSR agenda integrates values of social responsibility, citizenship, and ethics with profitability (Burchell and Cook 2013). In this approach, firms focus on bottom-line profitability while pursuing societal and ecological goals. Profits and social responsibility are not considered mutually exclusive but rather evolve together, promising a win-win for businesses and civil society (Moratis 2014). The win-win business view has evolved into the more recent interconnected concept of "shared value" (Porter and Kramer 2006:82), "which involves creating economic value in a way that also creates value for society by addressing its needs and challenges" (Porter and Kramer 2011:65).

Cook and Burchell (2018:166) have recently challenged this idea, arguing "that the notional 'win-win,'" which underlies the CSR business case, "is not inevitable and that too often the 'win' for the third sector is simply presumed rather than ana-

lyzed." In this vein, multiple CSR studies that examine the correlation between corporate financial and social performances have produced decidedly equivocal results (Kurucz et al. 2008).

As the leading approach in the management literature on CSR, the business case is increasingly criticized. Nijhof and Jeurissen (2010:618) argue that under cover of the business case, CSR has evolved into a "marketable asset." The commodification of CSR yields two profound, interconnected consequences. First, by "cherry-picking the social issues agenda" (Nijhof and Jeurissen 2010:623), profit-oriented managers and entrepreneurs choose the most profitable CSR initiatives rather than addressing the most pressing societal-ecological issues that interest their diverse stakeholders (Nijhof and Jeurissen 2010). From the perspective of the CSR business case, "Stakeholder demands are viewed less as constraints on the organization, and more as opportunities to be leveraged for the benefit of the firm" (Kurucz et al. 2008:5). Second, the CSR business case approach encourages firms to prioritize the challenges of their most powerful, influential stakeholders (Barnett 2019). This strategy leads to a narrow interpretation of CSR backed by superficial and ad hoc partnerships, especially with weaker NPOs (Barnett 2019). In the same vein, it results in neglect of cross-global issues (e.g., animal welfare, global warming, and rainforest destruction) that demand sustained responsibility (Barnett 2019).

In the meanwhile, transformative CSR models based on the consensus view have begun to emerge, reflecting scholars' attempts to instill the "shared value" principle in CSR (Kurucz et al. 2008; Nijhof and Jeurissen 2010; Moratis 2014). These models function as practical tools for managers and entrepreneurs to assess corporate maturity vis-à-vis a CSR develop-

ment scale that measures the degree of evolution of CSR (Nijhof and Jeurissen 2010) and to guide businesses toward a greater balance between ethical performance and financial gain. These alternative models suggest the dissatisfaction of CSR scholars with the conceptual limitation of the business case and a desire to build "a more robust business case for CSR" (Kurucz et al. 2008:14).

The most influential type of transformative CSR model in the realm of BUS-NPO partnerships is based on Austin and Seitanidi's Collaborative Value Creation (Kourula and Halme 2008; Seitanidi and Crane 2009; Seitanidi, Koufopoulos, and Palmer 2011; Skouloudis, Evangelinos, and Malesios 2015), which depicts partnerships as a deterministic evolution from the lowest stage of philanthropy (employee volunteering and sponsorships) to the highest win-win stage for both firms and NPOs (Austin 2000; Austin and Seitanidi 2012a; 2012b).

According to the Collaborative Value Creation framework, a firm that reaches the model's highest stage undergoes transformation by instilling a "synergistic value" (Kurucz et al. 2008:2) principle into its CSR agenda. Through their cooperation with NPOs (Kourula and Halme 2008; Seitanidi et al. 2011), businesses address the needs and challenges of multiple stakeholders while also considering self-interest values (Kurucz et al. 2008; Moratis 2014). The more CSR initiatives incorporate principles of sustained effort and self-sacrifice, the more firms tighten their relations with key stakeholders. By transformative BUS-NPO partnerships, firms have access to key resources that facilitate achieving both their financial and social performance goals (Barnett 2019).

Knowledge sharing and mutual transfer of specialized capabilities are other means for reaching transformative BUS-NPO partnerships. Through substantive cooperation with firms, NPOs acquire businesslike capabilities, enhance innovation, and improve performance and sustainability (AL-Tabbaa, Leach, and March 2014; Sanzo et al. 2015). Bosscher (2009) warns, however, that the commercialization of NPOs increasingly blurs the line between societal and private domains (Bosscher 2009).

Cooptative BUS-NPO Partnership Model

Critical CSR scholars caution that market-centered CSR poses risks to civil society (Hamann and Acutt 2003). A premise of critical CSR research is that BUS-NPO partnerships occur in the context of inevitable agonistic interests, power asymmetries (Hamann and Acutt 2003; Dawkins 2015), and potential cooptation (Bosscher 2009; Baur and Schmitz 2012; Laasonen et al. 2012; Herlin 2015). Baur and Schmitz (2012) contend that cooptation, commonly generated by philanthropic corporate sponsoring, leads to resource dependency of NPOs, comprising material and discursive dependency as two interrelated aspects of cooptation. In the context of asymmetrical power relationships, discursive dependency refers to the discourse of the subjected and powerless NPOs that are appropriated by corporate discourse.

Some conflict-based studies on CSR view the agonistic dynamics in which cooptative relationships between firms and NPOs are formed "as resistance" (Burchell and Cook 2013:751). According to Burchell and Cook (2013), adversaries strive to define CSR according to their interests to position their discourse hegemonically within the CSR partnership discourse. Thus, the meaning of CSR is not imposed absolutely by powerful firms but rather is challenged by voices that reject the corporate CSR interpretation.

Conflict-based studies usually consider NPOs "as agents of change" (Burchell and Cook 2013:752) and emphasize that they "need to maintain their critical vigilance of industry" (Hamann and Acutt 2003:267). That is, to have greater credibility and optimize their benefits, NPOs should be more proactive in their relations with companies, recognize the threat of cooptation, and protect themselves through diverse strategies (Burchell and Cook 2013) based on their interests to increase their bargaining power and rights (Hamann and Acutt 2003).

Still, by power resources, firms and their shareholders have a privileged power position relative to NPOs and, thus, a substantive role in defining CSR (Dawkins 2015). Firms appropriate the interests of NPOs in ways that align with the instrumental CSR agenda (Brand et al. 2020), which "emphasizes responsibility, but not at the expense of profitability" (Burchell and Cook 2013:746). Consequently, joint CSR initiatives increasingly turn out to be opportunistic and superficial, articulating firms' efforts to gain profits while avoiding substantive socially responsible behavior toward NPOs (Hamann and Acutt 2003; Dawkins 2015).

CSR is framed as "a depoliticized framework of market-embedded discourse" (Shamir 2010:544) that paves the way to cooptative relationships depending on the benevolence and kindness of businesses. In the context of what appears to be a market triumph, the challenging voices and needs of NPOs have been "co-opted and appropriated into a discourse in which companies are seen as providing the solutions" (Burchell and Cook 2013:746). Voluntary compliance with CSR is consistent with the neoliberal idea of corporate self-regulation (Shamir 2005).

However, only a few critical studies use ethnographic methods to examine the symbolic construction of CSR in the context of "the power structure of society" (Bass and Milosevic 2018:195). For example, Shamir's (2005) symbolic interactionist study shows how CSR, through an analysis of on-site CSR ceremonial events promoted by a corporate-friendly organization, is transformed into a risk management tool to increase employee loyalty and strengthen brand loyalty. Shamir shows how CSR is framed as a symbolic and practical commodity that firms invest in to yield managerial and marketing benefits. Another notable critical ethnographic study by Barkay (2011), who explored the CSR agenda of Coca-Cola Israel, showed that firm CSR initiatives were constructed as business-like tools while negating the particular needs of local community associations and disadvantaged groups.

Within the undertheorized body of critical CSR ethnographies (Demuijnck 2009; Moriceau and Guerillot 2012; Costas and Kärreman 2013), there is a dearth of research on the semiotic discursive features of CSR framing.

Discursive Framing of BUS-NPO Partnerships: Initial Framework

This section provides a brief conceptual review of the symbolic interactionist and constructivist sociological research traditions on contested discursive framing. Discursive framing is a meaning negotiation process of discursive symbols that usually occurs "in the form of competing politics of knowledge" (Keller 2012:59). Competing discursive framing is embedded in recursive power-based symbolic interactions between powerholders and challengers (Steinberg 1999; Kaplan 2008). While powerholders strive to create true claims, challengers seek to question the meaning of hegemonic discursive utterances, terms, and words (Steinberg 1999; Keller 2012).

Discursive framing is not natural but represents ideology because it serves as a conduit for hegemony (Steinberg 1999). By their social position, powerholders strive to inject a discourse with their preferred meaning and to enforce this meaning among the less powerful (Kaplan 2008). Through intensive and recursive attempts, powerholders seek to objectify and neutralize the meaning as if it were beneficial for all sides (Steinberg 1999; Keller 2012). In other words, powerholders "attempt to create in a 'one-sided' exchange, more of a monologue than a dialogue" (Steinberg 1999:746). Nevertheless, it is worth noting that the effect of hegemonic discourse on the constitution of social reality and subjectivity may be uncertain, weak, or temporal (Alvesson and Kärreman 2000).

As "language in social use" (Steinberg 1999:743), discourse consists of fragmentations, contradictions, and gaps, making it multi-vocal and controversial. Words, phrases, utterances, and other signifiers have multiple meanings that are conveyed and interpreted in myriad and contested ways based on actors' knowledge, intentions, and social-political standing. The controversial characteristic of discourse exposes and makes vulnerable the hegemony of discursive signifiers to subversive actions by the less powerful. Challengers consciously subvert powerholders' discursive hegemony by injecting alternative meanings. As a result, meaning undergoes a transformation in the process of counter-hegemony (Steinberg 1999).

Power standing in the production of meaning can be accessible to various actors (Kaplan 2008). Powerholders and challengers use discursive practices of talk, rhetoric, writing, and argumentation (Alvesson and Kärreman 2000) to create "a more or less explicitly known, often incorporated recipe, or knowledge script about the 'proper' way of acting"

(Keller 2012:63). For example, an actor as a "politically conscious language user" (Alvesson and Kärreman 2000:1132), can intentionally disseminate ambiguous and ambivalent statements to mobilize others to act in their favor, which, in turn, enhances their power standing (Steinberg 1999).

However, the subversive attempts of less powerful groups can be weak and provisional "since challengers do not have the institutional bases or social standing to legitimize their oppositional meanings" (Steinberg 1999:751). Additionally, while challengers try to subvert hegemonic discourse, they are also influenced by it (Steinberg 1999), which attenuates their subversive attempts.

Methodology and Design

The purpose of this study is to critically examine the contested dynamics of the discursive framing of a joint CSR model by one of the largest banks in Israel cooperating with NPOs. Using ethnographic methods combined with semiotic analysis, the article addresses two research questions: (1) How is a bank-NPO partnership discursively framed during negotiations between the bank and NPO representatives? and (2) What type of CSR partnership model is discursively framed, and what are its implications for emergent joint CSR initiatives?

This study adopts an ethnographic method; underused in CSR studies, ethnographic research is necessary to explain the culture, practices, and interactions that underpin CSR (Bass and Milosevic 2018). The study gleaned qualitative data from various sources: participant observations, in-depth interviews, and textual organizational materials, including reports, emails, press releases, printed correspondence, and the bank's webpage.

Key bank and NPO actors participated in 35 interviews averaging 75 minutes each. Representing the bank were: the chief executive officer, community relations manager, vice presidents, other executives of the Marketing and Publicity, Public Relations, and Human Resources Divisions, branch managers, and various employee volunteers. A series of interviews were also held with the bank's community relations coordinator (CRC). Representing the NPOs were coordinators who had already taken part in the bank's joint CSR initiatives. The interview questions focused on conceptual and practical topics regarding the bank-NPO collaboration. All the interviewees were Jewish, except two Muslim employee volunteers.

Table 1. In-depth interviews

Interviewee	Location	Times
Chief executive officer	Headquarters	1
Marketing and publicity division vice president	Headquarters	1
Marketing and publicity division executives	Bank offices	2
Community relations manager	Headquarters	2
CRC	Bank branches Bank offices	3 2
Former community relations manager	Bank offices	1
Human resources division vice president	Headquarters	1
Human resources division executives	Headquarters	3
Public relations division vice president	Headquarters	1
Bank bulletin editor (Human resources division senior employee)	Headquarters	2
Branch managers	Branches	5
Employee volunteers	Bank and branches	7
NPO coordinators	NPO offices Bank branches	2 2

Source: Self-elaboration.

Twelve additional on-site participant observations occurred in the same region at bank branches, at the NPO's site, and at holiday CSR events near the bank branches. The participant observations included three negotiation meetings between the bank's CRC and NPO representatives. This region was selected for fieldwork because its bank branches served as sites for the pilot CSR initiatives before implementation in branches in other regions. At the time of data collection, all 24 branches in this region had already taken part in CSR initiatives, except for the three examined in the study. The bank's goal in the observed meetings was to recruit branch employees to participate in the CSR initiatives.

Typically, the bank's CRC, an NPO representative, a branch manager, and a bank employee chosen to organize the CSR project participated in the negotiation meetings. Two meetings dealt with disadvantaged children and youth at risk, and one involved a school principal for Christian and Muslim pupils who were deaf, hard of hearing, or blind in an Arab city in northern Israel. The school principal was Muslim, and all other participants at the meetings were Jewish.

Table 2. Participant observations

Data source	Type of situation	Times
Negotiation meetings	Branches School (where a joint CSR initiative was deployed)	2 1
Managerial meetings	Branch management meetings Branch employee meetings	3 2
CSR Festive Events (bank-organized): Regional event honoring employee volunteers	Events hall	1
Bank event honoring employee volunteers	Lawns of exclusive events garden	1
Holiday events (NPO-organized): Hanukkah celebration	Events hall	1
Fundraising event	Concert hall	1

Source: Self-elaboration.

Table 3. Negotiation meetings

	First negotiation meeting	Second negotiation meeting	Third negotiation meeting
NPO characteristics (beneficiaries and activity)	A national NPO that dealt with youth at risk who had dropped out of normative educational and familial frameworks. The NPO supplied disadvantaged youth with food, temporary shelters, immediate medical support, and counseling targeted at reintegration into society.	A local NPO that dealt with disadvantaged children. The NPO usually cooperated with the municipality of a peripheral city in Israel. The city's population consisted mostly of immigrants from different historical waves of Jewish immigration to Israel (from Muslim countries immediately after Israel's foundation through more recent immigration from Ethiopia and Russia).	A school for deaf, hard of hearing, and blind pupils (Christians and Muslims) in a city with a bank branch. The employees of the bank branch and the city's residents were Christians and Muslims (except for the bank manager, who was Jewish).
Hours of fieldwork	2,5	2	3
Location	Bank branch	Bank branch	School
Source of contributions and financing	Governmental, corporate, and private Employee volunteering	Governmental, municipal, and private Employee volunteering	Governmental finance, religious philanthropic funds Volunteering of monks and the school staff

Source: Self-elaboration.

In an epistemological sense, the data analysis stems from a semiotic perspective (Steinberg 1999). The discursive framing of the bank's CSR model entails examining the content and formal aspects of semiotic analysis. (1) The content-related aspect addresses questions such as what the key discursive signifiers are that comprise the bank's CSR language, what their different and controversial meanings are to opposing actors, and what discursive practices actors exert during negotiations to subvert or perpetuate hegemony over key discursive signifiers. (2) The formal aspect addresses such questions as how, when, and by whom things were said, in what tone, and in what participant order during conversations. That is, who usually opens and who usually ends the conversation? Who usually poses issues or questions? What are the responses, and by whom? When are talkers interrupted, and by whom?

These two aspects of semiotic analysis identified the term "adoption" as a key discursive signifier. The analysis also identified the bank and NPO discursive practices maintained or challenged the dominant meaning of "adoption" according to their interpretations and intentions.

Three main stages of semiotic analysis guided the inquiry. In the first stage, I analyzed the three negotiation meetings between the bank and NPO representatives. I reviewed each meeting and coded its content while tracing reiterated words, expressions, and rhetorical emphases. During this initial coding process, the word "adoption" emerged as a key discursive signifier of the joint CSR framework. I then recoded each meeting several times to identify the discursive practices the participants used to maintain or challenge the hegemonic meaning of "adoption." At this stage of analysis, multiple meanings of "adoption" and some discursive practices used by both sides in the negotiations were identified and organized in emergent subthemes, including discursive strategies involving the use of ambivalent

and vague rhetoric, and different interpretations of "adoption," such as "adoption" as occasional sponsored events and "adoption" as "tutoring."

In the second stage, I coded the content of the interviews, the remaining on-site observations, and textual materials while comparing the content of each unit of analysis with the underlying topics of the emergent subthemes. This stage of analysis stabilized and consolidated the initial subthemes. In the third stage of analysis, the established subthemes were encompassed by two main organizing themes: the controversial nature of the term "adoption" and the NPO representatives' challenging of its hegemonic meaning.

The semiotic analysis of "adoption" in the three meetings served as a foundation for studying the discursive framing of the bank's joint CSR framework in its embryonic stage in the context of power-driven symbolic interactions. The meetings also operated as an organizing construct for the findings presented in the next section.

Findings

The Bank's Joint CSR Initiatives

CSR evolved as a key element of the bank's "human banking" business strategy. The chief executive officer explained the reason for choosing this approach to CSR:

> We sought internal stimuli to propel the bank forward. We found out that humanity is the predominant character of the bank owners and employees who historically were strongly connected to the community. In this sense, a human banking strategy fits like a glove.

Existing historical studies (Galia 2016) of the bank's philanthropy show that the ideational roots of the "human banking" strategy emerged in the 1970s as a publicity campaign. Current myths about "human banking" are also rooted in longstanding benevolent traditions of the family that established the bank in 1935 (Galia 2017).

The bank's CSR model has three general characteristics that are congruent with the business case goals of maximizing profits and enhancing reputation and legitimacy (Kurucz et al. 2008). The first is corporate philanthropy which involves employee volunteering and sponsorship, which reflects the lowest philanthropic stage in the Collaborative Value Creation framework (Austin and Seitanidi 2012a; 2012b), driven by profit-making as a top priority. Management declared that the bank was willing to sponsor joint CSR initiatives on the condition that they involved employee volunteering, as explained by the vice president of Marketing and Publicity: "We do not want to be just a rich bank that contributes money… We contribute money only for joint CSR initiatives in which our workers actively volunteer." In interviews, senior bank executives proudly announced that the number of bank employee volunteers was much higher than in other Israeli companies. They also stressed that enlisting as many employee volunteers as possible is an efficient way to build "a responsible brand" (Kurucz et al. 2008:5), consistent with findings that firms focus on CSR inputs (e.g., number of employee volunteers, volunteer hours, and monetary contributions) rather than on outputs or the impact of CSR in a "community" (Veleva 2010; Barkay 2011). Furthermore, the bank's joint CSR model focused on NPOs that served disadvantaged adolescents/children and children with disabilities. CSR initiatives involving children are more common than those directed toward older people: "For

most brands, 'young' is a better brand association than 'old'" (Nijhof and Jeurissen 2010:624). Finally, the bank organized its CSR initiatives around Jewish holiday festivities.

Indeed, every CSR initiative included a modest budget for refreshments and holiday-related gifts for children/adolescents. The bank's CSR program occasionally manifested itself in three to five main Jewish holiday-related events per year, promoted by each branch in the pilot region. In some cases, the bank donated money or in-kind contributions (e.g., basic equipment for adolescent shelters or after-school child-care facilities). The bank's CRC required branch employee volunteers to photograph the events. The bank community relations manager and coordinator and three NPO coordinators noted that all bank managers and employees received these pictures through various communication channels, such as the official bank webpage. The intention was to excite employees, enhance their satisfaction, and encourage more employees to volunteer for CSR initiatives.

As mentioned, semiotic analysis of the negotiations identified the term "adoption" as a key discursive signifier underlying the bank's CSR model. The following sections analyze two aspects of the contested discursive framing of "adoption" to clarify the discursive framing of the contextual BUS-NPO partnership and the political implications of this process. The first section demonstrates how the discursive framing of "adoption" made the term controversial and incoherent. The second section demonstrates the consequence of the controversial meaning of "adoption" when challenged by NPO representatives. After a brief introduction, each section has three subsections, each focusing on one negotiation meeting and a brief conclusion.

Discursive Framing of the Controversial Meaning of "Adoption"

Actors employ multiple and often controversial rhetorical practices to convey or conceal their intentions regarding discursive signifiers while negotiating meaning. Thus, there is not necessarily any coherence between the senders' rhetoric and intentions and the receivers' interpretations (Steinberg 1999).

The findings show two controversial ways the term "adoption" was used during the meetings: the discursive gap between the statements by the bank CRC and her intention and the discursive gap between the coordinator's intention and the interpretations of NPO representatives. Moreover, the findings demonstrate how the CRC attempted to bridge the discursive gaps in the meaning of "adoption" through the discursive practice of ambivalent and vague rhetoric.

The First Negotiation Meeting

After a brief introduction, the NPO representative opened the conversation: "Before our meeting, I tried to think which joint CSR initiatives could be the most meaningful. We have programs of short-term and long-term voluntary tutoring initiatives." The bank CRC interrupted her: "I focus on 'adoption.'" This was meant to convey a clear message that she was interested in "long-term voluntary tutoring initiatives." She sought to create discursive identification between "adoption" and its meaning as "tutoring," which is typically the NPO representatives' term to describe their expectations of joint CSR initiatives.

The bank CRC succeeded. The NPO representative responded enthusiastically that the bank could em-

ploy disadvantaged youth in a long-term internship program:

I can tell you about a successful experience we have just undergone with some companies that employ adolescents once a week. The employee volunteers tutor them on what a working day is, how to keep the rules in the workplace… the adolescents can be paid or not.

The suggested CSR initiative showed the NPO representative's expectations of "adoption" as a meaningful and long-term relationship between bank volunteers and the young beneficiaries. The NPO representative assumed that her suggestion was aligned with the bank coordinator's intention and was stunned when the bank coordinator responded impatiently, "No, we cannot do it…" and immediately diverted the conversation. "Let's begin with the opening event of the renovated youth shelter, which can involve employee volunteers."

The CRC used ambivalent rhetoric—while speaking about "adoption" in the sense of "long-term voluntary tutoring initiatives," she meant "adoption" in the sense of employee volunteering at holiday events.

The Second Negotiation Meeting

The NPO representative introduced his expectations of the relationship between the beneficiaries and the employee volunteers in terms of "tutoring":

I believe that our goal is to assist disadvantaged children who have grown up in destroyed families. These children need close and stable relationships with the employee volunteers. Therefore, the joint initiative should be based on long-term and regular tutoring, once a week, or at least once every two weeks.

[During their interviews, three additional NPO representatives who had already collaborated with the bank also considered this type of relationship as "an ultimate partnership configuration between the beneficiaries and the bank."]

The bank CRC answered the NPO representative with satisfaction:

I am so delighted to hear what you say… I agree with you… my function is to connect your needs and the bank's good intentions and resources; and we, who depend on each other, come together as a great human chain.

The CRC described the relationship between the bank and the NPO as one of mutual dependence. She used flowery rhetoric to generate an atmosphere of agreement about the meaning of "adoption." Winning the NPO representative's trust was crucial to persuading him to accept the bank's meaning of "adoption."

She then immediately presented the bank's formula for successful joint CSR initiatives: "For each CSR initiative, we recruit two or three employees to adopt disadvantaged children in a form of rotation." She offered a specific CSR initiative that was based on employee volunteering at a sponsored holiday event: "On the upcoming Tu Bishvat [a Jewish holiday], a team of employees from this branch can arrive at an after-school child-care facility to distribute dried fruits to children [a holiday custom of Tu Bishvat]."

The CRC used ambivalent rhetoric, stating that she agreed with the NPO representative's suggestion of a joint CSR initiative involving "long-term and regular tutoring," yet presented a reductive meaning of "adoption" through employee volunteering in

sponsored holiday events as a platform for the bank-NPO partnership.

The Third Negotiation Meeting

The bank's CRC used the term "adoption" in a sentimental way: "I would like you to know that the bank has already adopted deaf, hard of hearing, and blind children. These children are charming; they show the employee volunteers the light."

She then presented the bank's joint CSR model in general terms: "Employees of each bank branch choose together what kind of volunteering they want to do and with whom; we then choose a suitable community partner." The school principal asked if by "adoption" she meant that the joint CSR initiative meant employee volunteering or monetary assistance. The CRC responded:

> By adoption, I mean close and lasting relationships between the employees and the children. It is the most important for us…for example, if there is a festive event at the school, volunteer employees from the branch that adopt the school can attend and celebrate with the children…the bank will sponsor the event…

The bank CRC explained "adoption" ambivalently. She stated that "adoption" meant "close and lasting relationships," yet she also implied the meaning of "adoption" in a typical bank CSR context (i.e., employees celebrating with children in a bank-sponsored event). The contradictory answer of the CRC confused the school principal, who insisted: "What amount of money are you talking about?"

The principal's question clarified that she interpreted "adoption" as "monetary assistance," as a large part of her role was raising funds for the school. Her

interpretation stemmed from her knowledge, intention, and life experience. The CRC replied reproachfully (as she usually did, according to the interviews with three NPO coordinators) when she understood that the NPO representatives were requesting a donation from the bank:

> Don't think that if it is a bank then the dollars immediately fall from the sky… I am talking about adoption of employee volunteers… like you want to take the children to a water park. If I have already rented the place and a bus, so why shouldn't I take the school's children there on this occasion?

The bank CRC again used ambivalent rhetoric, clarifying that the bank did not make monetary contributions and treating "adoption" as employee volunteers appearing at sponsored holiday events. She strove to associate the meaning of "adoption" with employee volunteering rather than the financial sponsorship.

Discursive Framing of the Controversial Meaning of "Adoption": Summary

During contested discursive framing, powerholders seek to establish hegemony over the meaning of symbolic signifiers (Steinberg 1999). The bank CRC sought to impose the bank's CSR agenda on NPO representatives using ambivalent and vague rhetoric and to bridge the gap between the bank's meaning of "adoption," that is, employee volunteering at bank-sponsored festive events and the NPO's interpretation, that is, long-term and binding "tutoring" by employee volunteers or monetary contributions.

The CRC tried to create discursive identification between "adoption" and "tutoring" to convince the

NPO representatives to embrace the bank's CSR model. In using ambivalent rhetoric about "adoption," the CRC aimed to strengthen and extend the term's meaning in a way that appropriated and neutralized "tutoring" while silencing the NPO representatives' discursive voices. Whereas ambivalent rhetoric caused confusion and uncertainty among the NPO representatives, it strengthened the power position of the bank coordinator in the meetings.

Ambivalent rhetoric regarding the meaning of "adoption" also appeared in the interviews with senior bank executives. In one case, the vice president of the Human Resources Division presented the bank's joint CSR model as a product of "a dialogue among varied stakeholders," implying a dialogue among partners of equal value. At the same time, he justified the bank's CSR model based on charity, inferring patronage and a one-sided attitude: "I think that charity is the most important element of the bank's activities in its relation with NPOs."

Paradoxically, the CRC's attempt to blur the discursive gap between competing meanings of "adoption" had an unintended consequence—the increasing exposure of the controversial meaning of "adoption" during the negotiations unexpectedly increased the term's vulnerability to the discursive challenges by the NPO representatives.

Challenging the Hegemonic Meaning of "Adoption"

At some stage of the negotiation meetings, the NPO representatives became aware of the semantic differences between their interpretation of the term "adoption" and that of the bank. The NPO representatives were also becoming aware of their power position in the discursive framing in the context of the asymmetrical-contingent relationship. Although the bank was materially much stronger, it completely depended on NPOs for implementing its CSR policy. Despite the hegemonic standing of the bank's CRC in the discursive framing, the NPO representatives tried to challenge the "adoption" meaning by using discursive practices of ambivalent rhetoric.

The First Negotiation Meeting

The bank's CRC insisted on focusing on the renovated youth shelter opening event as an initial CSR initiative: "Let's start with basic equipment for the youth shelter, and after that, we will talk about other projects." Using the term "adoption" for the first time, the NPO representative insisted on asking, "But what about long-term adoption?" suggesting she understood how the CRC was using "adoption." However, she used "adoption" literally to impress the bank representative while still interpreting it in terms of long-term tutoring. The CRC ignored the NPO representative's question and again spoke about the youth shelter opening: "You should make a list of what you need to equip the renovated youth shelter… Let's start with carpets and such things… the employee volunteers will bring them to the opening event."

The NPO representative shifted the conversation from the youth shelter, trying to broaden the meaning of "adoption" to encompass her particular interpretation:

> Okay, I will get you a list of equipment in a few days, but the renovation will begin in a few months. In the meantime, we can try to recruit bank workers to adopt adolescents on a regular basis… Maybe the workers would like to play backgammon with the youths or

tutor them in computer games. It is very significant for them.

The CRC answered cynically: "If the employee volunteers go as far as that [i.e., a close connection with the youth], I will say hallelujah." Then she offered a financial training-based CSR initiative: "Otherwise, you can use the employee volunteers to lecture on banking. They would teach the adolescents what a bank account is, how to open a bank account, et cetera."

During the interviews, two NPO coordinators and the community relations manager pointed out that in some CSR programs, the employee volunteers taught disadvantaged youth how to manage money and which financial opportunities the bank offered its customers. The bank's community relations manager and the vice president of the Human Resources Division mentioned that one of the bank's expressed goals for these initiatives was to equip adolescents with important financial knowledge that would assist them in settling down in their adult lives. Furthermore, three NPO coordinators who had previously collaborated with the bank stated that they did not consider these bank CSR initiatives as a conflict of interest.

However, the NPO representative still insisted on using "adoption" in the sense of tutoring: "But beyond this one-time project, we really need employees to adopt adolescents, to tutor them in the youth shelter at least once a week." The bank coordinator dismissed this request with a laconic: "It is possible," and then suggested sponsored holiday events as "possibilities for 'adoption'":

 We can also invite the adolescents to festive events at the bank. For example, to a Purim [a Jewish holiday] party

or similar events… the workers can celebrate the holiday with the youths... Trust me, there is no limit to the possibilities of our partnership…

The NPO representative and bank coordinator eventually agreed that employee volunteers would celebrate with disadvantaged adolescents at the coming Purim holiday event, which would be sponsored by the bank. They also agreed that the bank would sponsor the inauguration of the youth shelter and that employee volunteers would attend with refreshments and a new carpet or curtain as the bank's contribution.

The Second Negotiation Meeting

After the bank's CRC presented the bank's general CSR policy, the NPO representative challenged her by remarking: "You are talking about a material aspect of the partnership, but I mean joint initiatives that are based on supporting and maintaining tutoring of the adolescents." The bank coordinator tried to convince her that they were in agreement while repeating what she had said at the beginning of the conversation and adhering to the meaning of "adoption" that aligned with the bank's CSR agenda: "I suggest that some of the branch's employees adopt disadvantaged children at the after-school child-care facility on holidays, or do an arts-and-crafts session with the children, or any other needed activity, instead of participating in a team meeting."

The NPO representative sought to clarify his claim from the bank, but this time he used the term "adoption" in the literal sense for the first time:

We need branch employees to adopt the adolescents regularly, tutor them in how to use computer games or applications, and help them to do their homework. They can play ball games with them for fun after

school or go out with them to movies or restaurants in the evening or on weekends.

The bank representative rejected his request: "We cannot afford this… You should not have great expectations. I am attentive to your request, but reject it in advance unless employees initiate 'adoption' regularly by themselves." She then emphasized: "We should make a connection between the daily demands of work and the community needs in order to create a perfect CSR initiative."

Her interpretation of "adoption"—and thus a partnership with the NPO—implied that she prioritized the bank's daily work interests over the community interests for binding and lasting CSR initiatives. Similarly, senior bank managers declared that they would approve joint CSR initiatives on the condition that they aided in advancing the banks' business interests. The vice president of Human Resources explained the considerations for choosing CSR projects: "I would prefer that the bank be a profitable business, and less of a favorite, than going bankrupt while being popular due to its CSR initiatives."

The CRC and NPO representative eventually agreed, in principle, that employee volunteers would "adopt" an after-school child-care facility near the bank branch. They planned that during the upcoming Tu Bishvat, employee volunteers would plant seedlings with the children and share dried fruit. During their interviews, the bank's CRC and manager, and an NPO coordinator all said that a few months later, the bank sponsored a Purim Adloyada (a Jewish holiday carnival) in cooperation with the municipality in whose jurisdiction the "adopted" after-school child-care facility was located. Bank employee volunteers and disadvantaged children celebrated together at the festive carnival.

The Third Negotiation Meeting

Most of the educational and leisure volunteer activities in the school whose students were deaf, hard of hearing, or blind were conducted by the school staff and nuns from the nearby monastery. In the meetings with the bank representative, the school principal indicated that she needed monetary assistance for existing school initiatives, not employee volunteers.

The principal described a typical school program to demonstrate that she needed a financial contribution: "We have already begun an olive pressing initiative, and it is continuing until the end of the year. The children visit an olive grove; they pick and then press olives." The bank coordinator ignored the principal's request, presenting joint CSR initiatives as enjoyable activities: "Let's say you decide to do an arts-and-craft activity with the children. You can tell me, 'This activity should cost, for example, NIS 400, and I need two or three employee volunteers to adopt the children.'" In addition, she emphasized that the bank contributed money in return for publicity of the CSR initiatives: "You initiate the joint activity, the bank contributes the money, and the employee volunteers are photographed with the children."

The school principal, who now realized the CRC's meaning of "adoption," for the first time used "adoption" in the literal sense, appropriating the term for her purpose of raising money for computerizing the school's Braille library: "We need a contributor who will adopt the Braille library. We have begun to computerize it." In response, the bank coordinator offered the assistance of employee volunteers: "We can recruit some of the bank's information technology employees to adopt the library, help-

ing in computerizing it if needed." The principal gently refused, insisting on monetary assistance: "I have a blind teacher who helps with Braille in the library… and a computer teacher who helps to computerize the library…if you are interested in adopting our school, financial help is highly appreciated and beneficial."

The CRC clarified that the bank could not afford to contribute a large amount of money. The school principal tried to stretch the meaning of "adoption" by linking "adoption" with a donation, and the bank coordinator adhered to "adoption" as sponsorship-related employee volunteering:

> It could be, but not at this stage...If in the coming months you ask for about 1,000 to 2, 000 NIS for presents to the children at holiday events, then it is okay. For example, at Rosh Hashanah and Pesach [Jewish holidays] events, employee volunteers can adopt a group of 20 needy children by distributing food packages... You do not need to identify 200 children, only the worst cases.

The bank representative proposed a CSR initiative based on Jewish holidays, although the school staff and pupils were Muslims and Christians, demonstrating that its CSR model took place regardless of the ethnonational affiliation of the NPO and its beneficiaries. The principal agreed that employee volunteers from the nearby branch would celebrate during the upcoming Hanukkah with the children at the school.

During her interview, the CRC reported that a few days after the meeting, the manager of a branch near the school, accompanied by some employees, visited the school to share bags of Hanukkah candy with the students. The school organized an event in which the pupils sang and played music in honor of the bank guests, who hung a sign with the logo of the bank in the school. During their interviews, the branch manager and an employee reported that the visitors were excited after the event and decided to "adopt" the school. This bank-sponsored Hanukkah event was not unusual. Every Hanukkah, the bank held holiday events across the country for blind people who were "adopted" by employee volunteers; this was related in the interviews by two branch managers and the CRC, as well as during participant observations during Hanukkah celebrations involving employee volunteers and beneficiaries.

Challenging the Hegemonic Meaning of "Adoption": Summary

At some stage of the meetings, the NPO representatives challenged the hegemonic meaning of "adoption" using ambivalent rhetoric. Each NPO representative, as a "politically conscious language user" (Alvesson and Kärreman 2000:1132), used the term "adoption" flexibly for their interests; they also continued to interpret "adoption" in terms of "tutoring" (in cases 1 and 2) or monetary contributions (in case 3).

The NPO representatives' ambiguity suggested that they were not bested by the bank's hegemonic meaning of "adoption" but rather were aware of their discursive power; that is, the language that the NPO representatives were exposed to did not "stick" (Alvesson and Kärreman 2000:1132). Nevertheless, the NPO representatives preferred to avoid an open confrontation that probably would have reduced their chance to mold the meaning of "adoption" to suit their purposes. Thus, by embracing "adoption" outwardly, they conveyed a deceptive message to

the bank's coordinator that they shared a common understanding of "adoption."

Despite the subversive attempts of the NPO representatives, the findings showed that the bank's CRC succeeded in imposing "adoption" during the meetings in concert with the bank's CSR model, negating and silencing the discursive NPO voices.

The findings also showed that NPO representatives who had already collaborated with the bank were ambivalent about the bank's CSR model. In one case, an NPO coordinator even praised the bank's CSR program: "I think that the bank has an exemplary CSR initiatives agenda compared to other Israeli corporations," and gave examples of an existing initiative: "The bank employee volunteers celebrate with disadvantaged children during Purim, they give them Purim baskets [a Jewish ritual], and they raise money for poor children." The NPO, diminished, agreed to collaborate with the bank's CSR programs and finally succumbed to the hegemonic meaning of "adoption." While the CRC appeared successful in imposing the bank's CSR notion of "adoption," the literature might have another explanation for this: NPO representatives who strove to challenge the dominant interpretation of "adoption" were probably "partly captive to the truths" (Steinberg 1999:753) that were constructed.

Discussion

Drawing on ethnographic methods and semiotic analysis, this article demonstrated how a bank's collaborative CSR model was discursively framed in the context of agonistic interactions and examined the implications of the contested discursive dynamics of the cooptative bank-NPO relationship.

To examine the discursive dynamics of the bank's joint CSR model, the article analyzes how a key signifier of the bank's CSR language—the term "adoption"—is discursively framed during negotiations. "Adoption" emerged as a rhetorical tool designed to present the bank as socially responsible toward a "community" while at the same time disguising its instrumental CSR approach. The bank's representatives use "adoption" extensively to emphasize that it adopts disadvantaged children and youth in the sense of caring for and nurturing deep and sustained relationships. At the same time, the bank offered the NPO the opportunity for CSR collaboration designed to serve the bank's interests. The NPOs representatives did not generally use "adoption" literally, instead using "tutoring" to articulate their expectations of sustained and meaningful partnerships between the bank and the beneficiaries. The article shows a discursive struggle between the two sides to frame the term "adoption" in alignment with their interpretations and intentions.

Cooptative Joint CSR Initiatives Model

Inspired by symbolic interactionist and constructivist sociological research on discursive framing (Steinberg 1999; see also Alvesson and Kärreman 2000; Keller 2012), the findings present two analytical dimensions of the contested discursive framing of the bank's CSR model in its cooperation with NPOs.

The first dimension of the contested discursive framing was reflected in the CRC's attempts to reinforce the bank's interpretation of "adoption" by using discursive practices of ambivalent and vague rhetoric. Paradoxically, the CRC's attempts to blur the different meanings of "adoption" have the un-

intended consequence of increasingly exposing the contradictions in the meaning of "adoption," making it vulnerable to challenges by the NPO representatives.

The second dimension of the contested discursive framing portrayed the NPO representatives as "politically conscious language user[s]" (Alvesson and Kärreman 2000:1132) who were not cowed by the hegemonic discourse (Steinberg 1999). On the contrary, they sought to challenge the hegemonic meaning of "adoption" by using discursive practices of ambivalent rhetoric.

Nevertheless, the CRC succeeded in imposing the bank's meaning of "adoption" in its CSR model. This silenced the NPO representatives and, in turn, their beneficiaries' discursive voices. Consequently, the CRC neutralized the NPO representatives' meaning of "adoption" as "tutoring" and monetary contribution.

Paradoxically, the NPO representatives contributed to reinforcing and legitimizing the hegemonic meaning of "adoption" by their willingness to cooperate under the conditions of the bank's partnership model (although it is probably because NPOs desperately depend on a voluntary workforce and monetary contributions to survive). As a result, the bank's CSR model was depoliticized and became cooptative in the sense that it stripped away the potential opposing and subversive meanings, presenting only the bank's economic interests. Thus, although the bank's CSR model became dominant by appropriating and silencing the NPO and their beneficiaries, it eventually reflected a diminished type of partnership, which this article conceptualizes as a cooptative joint CSR model.

Contribution to the Literature

By adopting an ethnographic approach combined with semiotic analysis, this article makes an important methodological contribution to the CSR literature (Bass and Milosevic 2018). This approach contrasts with the dominant normative- and ethics-oriented view of CSR advanced by business ethicists and management scholars that focuses on developing regulative models geared toward the ethical implementation of CSR while improving relations with stakeholders (Kurucz et al. 2008; Moratis 2014; Dawkins 2015; Brand et al. 2020).

This study's findings support the contention that normative approaches to CSR tend to idealize CSR and, as a result, risk moving away from how CSR is realized in practice (Brand et al. 2020). Using Collaborative Value Creation (Austin 2000; Austin and Seitanidi 2012a; 2012b) as a measurement of CSR maturity, this article found that the bank's CSR model represented the lowest stage of philanthropy based on employee volunteering and sponsorships. This article validates the literature that claims that although corporate philanthropy is considered the least worthy type of BUS-NGO partnership in the Collaborative Value Creation framework, it is the most common type of partnership in practice (AL-Tabbaa et al. 2014; Sanzo et al. 2015).

Within the conflict-based body of CSR scholarship, there is little ethnographic research that critically demonstrates how CSR is framed as a commodity in asymmetrical power relationships (Shamir 2005; Barkay 2011). This article helps fill this research gap by showing that the bank's joint CSR model based on community outreach and employee volunteering is instrumental to advancing human resource management and branding strategies.

However, there is a dearth of symbolic interactionist research using the ethnographic method that addresses the semiotic discursive features of CSR framing. Inspired by the insights and gaps of critical CSR studies, this article advances a twofold argument. First, the bank's approach discursively framed and validated CSR as a commodity aimed at serving bank interests by engaging in occasional, superficial, and self-serving CSR initiatives that lacked substantive and sustained collaborations in the interests of its NPO partners and their beneficiaries. Second, considering the little research on market-centered CSR in terms of cooptation (Burchell and Cook 2013; Brand et al. 2020), this study shows how the bank's joint CSR model, discursively framed as a cooptative partnership, is realized through the cooptative relationships between the bank and the NPOs.

Finally, this article seeks to enrich the existing historical literature about the bank in question by completing the missing pieces of its biography. Historical studies showed that the "human banking" framework, which underpinned the bank's CSR, had existed in the bank's culture since its inception in 1935 (Galia 2017; 2020). The founder and his sons, who ran the bank after he passed away, incorporated financial and societal considerations into philanthropy and volunteering during the 50 years of their ownership (Galia 2016). Although the founding family left the bank 37 years ago, current management used the well-known family legacy to advance its CSR agenda, employing rhetoric that reflects the common faith that the bank is drawing on a longstanding culture of benevolence and giving. This study has demonstrated, however, that the bank's CSR model was discursively and socially framed as a strategic tool, "increasingly stepping aside from its moral foundation" (Nijhof and Jeurissen 2010:619).

Conclusions

This article finds that the bank's emergent cooptative joint CSR model has two political implications. The first involves the reproduction of power relations between the bank and NPOs, and the second entails the reproduction of Israel's hegemonic ethnonational discourse.

The cooptative joint CSR model articulates and simultaneously perpetuates power differences between the bank and the NPOs. The bank discursively framed the cooptative joint CSR model according to its interests—to gain as much instrumental benefit as possible through limited monetary contributions and occasional volunteering. Furthermore, the use of the term "adoption" to underpin the bank's CSR initiatives has political implications for the bank and its relationships with the NPOs. The literal meaning of "adoption" signifies possession or appropriation of something or someone. That is, "adoption" indicates patronage-based relationships that are expressed through sponsorships rather than in transformative partnerships (Austin and Seitanidi 2012a; 2012b).

The cooptative joint CSR model, organized around Jewish holidays, implies longstanding ethnonational tensions between Jews and Arabs in Israel. By emphasizing particular national-religious symbols, the CSR initiatives contribute to the reproduction of the hegemonic ethnonational discourse in Israel. In a similar vein, Barkay (2008) showed that CSR initiatives in many Israeli corporations focus on contributing to Israeli military units, Jewish immigrants, and victims of terror.

The third meeting between the bank CRC and the principal of the Arab school has great significance for future research. Although the Israeli-Palestinian conflict exceeds the scope of this article, a potentially relevant research question is: What is the effect

of Israeli ethnonational tensions on the discursive framing of CSR initiatives based on partnerships between Israeli corporations and Palestinian NPOs? That is, NPOs whose officials and beneficiaries are Palestinian citizens of Israel.

Finally, this study focuses on one particular bank's CSR program. There is an obvious need for further comparative research to explore the dialectic discursive power relationships between businesses and NPOs in the CSR realm.

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Citation

A Career in IT? The Meanings of a Career at Business Process Outsourcing Centers in Poland from a Biographical Perspective

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Abstract: The paper reconstructs the ways of attributing meanings to IT specialists' careers at BPO (Business Process Outsourcing) centers in Poland. The findings rely on empirical data, collected through autobiographical narrative interviews. The technique of analysis applied in the study was inspired by grounded theory methodology and allowed for the identification of a basic social process at the analytical stage, namely, "career planning." On the one hand, the analysis also showed how IT specialists' careers are given meanings concerning career planning; there seem to be three main ways of understanding one's career in IT: (1) in terms of reaching economic and social stability, (2) as a transition period in a career as an IT specialist, (3) with regard to becoming an expert in IT. On the other hand, the second axis of analysis has been conceptualized, which is comprised of other subjective and objective elements that may shape career planning. These include the biographical experiences of work, the context of the Polish BPO industry, and career planning resources. Furthermore, a typology consisting of three ways of attributing meanings to IT specialists' careers at BPO centers has been put forward and analyzed.

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Official reports published by the Central Statistical Office of Poland (GUS) indicate that the number of IT specialists in Poland is growing continually; for instance, during the nine-year period from 2011 to 2020, IT professionals numbered almost 250,000[1] in the Polish economy (Central Statistical Office of Poland 2011-2020). The rate of employment in the high-tech industry has more than doubled in Poland in the last near-decade. This article[2] offers new insights into these issues, and it aims to contribute to the research on highly-skilled IT workers by situating an analysis of meanings in a biographical perspective of IT specialists' careers at BPO (Business Process Outsourcing) centers in Poland within an organizational and labor market perspective. In other words, the purpose of the study is to discover career patterns and their characteristics (Prawda 1987) as inherent features within the course of a biography (Hughes 1997).

The paper begins with a literature review on the meanings of one's career and experiencing work at high-tech and multinational organizations. This is followed by an analysis of the relations among concepts of biography, career, and work; subsequently, the methodological aspect of research is introduced. The findings are then presented. These were derived based on 14 autobiographical narrative interviews with Polish and foreign IT specialists—women and men, aged between 22 and 40, conducted from August to November 2019, in Polish and multina-

tional companies operating in Wroclaw, Katowice, and Opole. A typology of IT specialists' careers at BPO centers in Poland is presented and followed by a discussion and conclusions.

The Meanings Given to IT Specialists' Careers and Work Experiences at High-Tech Companies—Literature Review

Existing research on careers indicates several factors that may influence IT specialists' career trajectories, their work experiences at high-tech companies, and their interpretations of a career (Bohdziewicz 2008; Czarkowska 2010; Postuła 2010). The most significant findings include organization and management studies among Polish and American knowledge workers (i.e., programers, software developers, and software engineers) employed at high-tech centers in Poland and the US (Bohdziewicz 2008; Jemielniak 2008a; Rosiński 2012). The studies suggest that the aspects central to meaning attribution in IT specialists' careers include, for example, individual motivation toward work at high-tech organizations (Rosiński 2012). It does not generally take the form of material incentives (wages, social benefits, or various workplace amenities), though these are among the factors that may influence the interpretation of one's career or decisions made by IT specialists as to whether or not to change their employer (Rosiński 2012:206-207); however, these are not the only deciding factors. It should be emphasized that it is the formalization of relations between the actors at the workplace (manifested in the asymmetry of power between managers and employees) that is one of the issues that may influence the behavior of IT professionals, even though the managerial discourse refers to the flattening of structures, the withdrawal of bureaucratic procedures, and the promotion of egalitarianism in companies (Jemielniak 2008a). Moreover, another factor that may influence IT specialists' career trajectories

is the category of time in the work/non-work spheres (Bohdziewicz 2008), as well as the dictate of schedules rather than the actual output and efficiency of IT specialists. The latter (the dictate of schedules) of these is perceived as a potential area of control exerted by managers (Hyman, Scholarios, and Baldry 2005) (especially in a form of remote work). What is more, IT professionals are more likely to change their employer when they feel uncomfortable with breaches in the work-life boundary (Olson 1989). This is, however, related to the conflict of social roles (in spheres of work and non-work) of professionals, which manifests itself in this industry and stems from the fact of not being disconnected from working time (Felstead and Henseke 2017). Trust is yet another key factor that may influence IT specialists' careers, as the dictum "to trust and to be trusted" is an important rule in the workplace (about the employer and the client) and beyond (participation in social networks, being seen as an expert to colleagues and the public) (Jemielniak 2008a). Others have suggested that high-tech companies and their managers apply strategies that could be understood as normative engineering of behavior (or "engineering culture"), whereby employees experience their work and perceive their careers as part of a game—"playbor" (Kunda 2006). An alternative form of ideological control over employees and their careers in high-tech workplaces is creating an interplay between imposed and assumed identities, spanning a wide spectrum of images, such as an "artist" or engineer, especially in the case of highly-qualified IT professionals (Hunter, Jemielniak, and Postuła 2010). Even though the latter group may oppose labeling of their identities/images at work, they are more easily managed when work seemingly consists of standardized, easy-to-learn, repeatable, and predictable activities (Jemielniak 2008b).

In the literature, one of the most significant aspects of IT specialists' work experience, in terms of one's career and occupational situation, is that, in addition to standard work agreements, they also tend to choose non-standard ones, for example, fixed (business-to-business) contracts with employers, mediated by third parties (contract employment agencies) (Barley, Kunda, and Evans 2002). IT professionals are inclined to become freelancers, mainly due to economic factors (if the net income from a non-standard agreement is much higher than from standard employment). Given these facts, IT specialists may experience periods of alienation and anxiety in their careers (Barley and Kunda 2004) or intensification of work and a simultaneous drop in satisfaction of it (van der Lippe and Lippényi 2019); this often stems from changing employers/projects semi-annually to raise employability (measured by technical and interpersonal skills, and by participation in social networks), and to be more competitive in the labor market. Therefore, objective levels of employment security, income, and social stability are constantly in question (Ailon and Kunda 2006; Trusson and Woods 2016).

In addition to the above, there is research into the biographies and work experience of professionals employed at multinational corporations in Poland (Haratyk, Biały, and Gońda 2017). The findings suggest that while professionals have the socio-economic conditions to acquire, for example, biographical and occupational stability, it is not unconditional: they must consent to bridge the gap between the spheres of work and non-work in their lives (Gońda 2019). This choice is related to narratives about community, openness, and the promise of self-realization if one is taking responsibility for their self-development (Biały 2015).

Biography, Career, and Work— Sociological Theory

The concepts of work and career are interconnected. However, it is important to distinguish between the work itself and the work being done with other people. The former of these is understood in a broader sense, after Strauss and colleagues (1985:290), as an "enterprise" (social activity), even if the actors engaged in it do not recognize it as such. In addition to this, work also includes an interactional aspect. Work, at the interactional level, is that, "which most of us scarcely note because action there is so implicit" (Strauss et al. 1985:132). The basis for interaction is taken-for-granted understandings, assumptions, rules, or norms that affect one's behavior. These terms consider silent contracts referring to such situations as conversation (being polite, listening carefully, etc.) or other actions like not breaking one's privacy, et cetera (Strauss et al. 1985:133). The work, in a narrow sense, according to Kozek (2018:267 [trans. SP]), "apart from its purpose of providing livelihoods, ensures an actor's anchoring in the social environment, gives a sense of usefulness, gives a social status, and a sense of self-respect." Therefore, factors internal (intraorganizational) and external (structural) to the work should be considered in influencing the attitudes toward it (Konecki 1988), as well as in the context of meaning attribution to one's career. Considering work being done with people, it is important to emphasize that "the way people see themselves and their work situation is the result of an ongoing process, never fully determined by one or another set of structural constraints. It is always a process of 'becoming' in the sense of successively shaping and transforming the subjective definition of self and society" (Konecki 1988:226 [trans. SP]). During the situation of work,

its significance and actions are constantly being negotiated, changed, or sustained within a social context that encompasses the actors' resources and identities (Domecka and Mrozowicki 2008:138). Work, as Hughes (1997) contends, is interrelated to one's career throughout the course of one's biography, especially during periods of life when the actor is carrying out wage work. Moreover, the career can be characterized by its subjective and objective aspects. The latter of these (objective aspect) is understood as participation within institutions and/or organizations, which entails voluntary or involuntary actions such as promotion or degradation in rank, or vertical/horizontal shifts of a social position. In the former sense (subjective aspect), the career is conceptualized by an actor concerning their self, identity, and one's transformation (Becker and Carper 1956:289 as cited in Domecka and Mrozowicki 2008:138). The actor interacts with others and with oneself throughout one's career. In other words, one's work is understood as a dialogue with oneself during which the actor "carries on his active life regarding other people and interprets the meaning of the one life he has to live" (Hughes 1937:413). Beyond the personal context, one's career takes place in organizations, but also some people are freelancers, though the author is interested in fixed post positions. The structural and economic contexts may have an influence, in the sense that changes within the cultural sphere (values, norms) or the company structure (e.g., due to layoffs that result in changing tasks in the remaining occupations) may entail changes within one's career pattern, its configuration, or even the termination of a career at a given company (Strauss and Becker 1956). What is more, aside from the institutional context of one's career, many other aspects may influence its patterns. These may be derived from the domain of social networks (which

comprise a set of trusted contacts), from the sphere of education (such as the diplomas one has earned), from the labor market (e.g., accumulated work experience), from other areas of social life (during which skills and competences are accumulated), one's social position, social status, and acquired power (both at the organization and outside of it). Such characteristics could be understood as capitals (cf. Bourdieu 1986—in this paper, they are alternately used as a category of resources[3]), related to the social field constituted by different relations between actors who are engaged in competition (undertakings) to acquire certain stakes (rewards) (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). The value of capital is defined according to the social positions of the actors and the relations between them. In this paper, the author will refer to cultural and social capital (Bourdieu 1986). The former is understood in three forms: an embodied state, which is "the long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body," an objectified state that is in the form of cultural goods (books, instruments, machines, etc.), and an institutionalized state, in the form of educational qualifications,[4] which increasingly leads to full efficacy on the labor market and facilitate access to several positions (Bourdieu 1986:243). The last of

these should be understood as an "aggregate of the actual or potential resources, which are linked to possession of durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintances and recognition" (Bourdieu 1986:248). Under some circumstances, which can be empirically studied, social and cultural capital can be (but is not necessarily) mutually convertible. Careers within organizations are conceptualized by Hall (1990), who presupposes an interconnection between activities within the organizational structure and subjective meanings of work, which, in turn, results in attributing meanings to work through the process of the actor's internal elaboration. Furthermore, such a definition of one's career implies that professionals, while related to other occupations at the organizational level and outside of companies, aim at achieving their personal, as well as organizational objectives. Characteristics of the career should be interpreted as subjective, on the one hand, and objective, on the other. The concept of a career on which the author wishes to elaborate is not merely a tool for obtaining social status and economic stability but also a form of self-realization, fulfilling different career-related objectives, and a mode of self-expression. Therefore, one's IT career and its likely patterns are not economically, structurally, or culturally determined, but they, perhaps, are influenced in these (economical, structural, and cultural) ways (Orpen 1994:27). Another feature of a career in an organization is that careers are becoming increasingly individualized and elasticized, not only within the organizational framework but also elsewhere (Hall 2004). This means that personal and/or organizational purposes for work are not necessarily harmonized within the framework of companies (Orpen 1994:28). The existing literature suggests that professionals take responsibility for the course of their careers more

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[3] The author presumes that resources precisely "denote potentially advantageous properties of social agents' positioning in social structures and capital, that is, properties which are actively used by the individuals involved in relations with other social agents" (Mrozowicki 2011:77).

[4] The author is aware of the Bourdieusian notion of "habitus" defined as embodied schemes of perception, thought, and action (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990:54), which are durable over time and ingrained within the actor during early childhood (and further) socialization to hold given positions in the social field, though this category will not be referred to directly. The author will instead stress the three forms of cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986:243-247). It is assumed that, in this study, such an approach would be more pertinent as it does not concentrate directly on the aspect of social class—though it should be stated that the author does not consider this issue irrelevant.

frequently than before. They adapt to the 'new spirit of capitalism' to maintain their employability; therefore, organizations lose control over the development of their employees' careers (Waterman, Waterman, and Collard 1994; Whymark and Ellis 1999; Parry and Proctor-Thomson 2003; Boltanski and Chiapello 2005). Hypothetically, these points stem from the current global economy, whose conditions lead to a high turnover rate. Moreover, as some studies have indicated, professionals are increasingly likely to focus on personal growth and individual career development, compared to those in other occupations (Lee 2002).

The Methodological Aspect of the Research

The author decided to utilize autobiographical narrative interviews to "establish typical sequences of events in the lives of specific groups of people and the structure of meanings ascribed to the former" (Rokuszewska-Pawełek 1996:41 [trans. SP]). Such an epistemological approach refers to the methodological tradition of Schütze's (1983) employment of biographical interviews. The study endeavors to explore *how* interviewees reconstruct their subjective points of view on the configuration of collective and historical events that have shaped present social formations (Kaźmierska 2016:10). The reason behind using this type of interview also included making use of biographical process structures (Schütze 1983; 2008) as sensitizing concepts in the analysis of data, to understand the work and non-work experiences of IT specialists. However, the interviews are used for data collection and do not include the entire biographical method elaborated by Schütze. The interviews consisted of three parts (Schütze 1983; Kaźmierska 1997). In the first phase, all informants were asked an initial question: *I would like to ask you to tell me the history of your life, beginning from early childhood until this moment, everything that you remember.* At the end of the informant's narrative—coda (Konecki 2000)—in the second part, the author proceeded to explain and expand stages of the biographical narrative, which have faded out, are inconsistent, or have unexpectedly been cut from the main line of the narrative. In the third part of the interview, questions regarding the theoretical part of the research were asked, which revolved around themes such as the values and meanings behind work, the values in one's life, everyday life connected with work and non-work time, and the structural and cultural context of work experiences at the BPO centers in Poland.

The category of IT specialists is vast and ambivalent; for sake of the research, the author applied the ISCO-88 (1988) classification of occupations, which defines IT specialists as a major group of professionals that specialize in software engineering and programing. This category is also specified considering the Polish labor market. For this purpose, the Polish classification of professions and specializations issued by the Minister of Family, Labor, and Social Policy (Classification of Professions and Specializations in Polish Labor Market 2014:15, 22-23, 46-47) was used, in which IT specialists are recognized as programers, IT software architects/designers, IT software development specialists, IT application development specialists, or IT software analysis specialists. The interviews were conducted from August to November 2019 with female and male IT specialists, including citizens of Poland (7 men, 3 women), Ukraine (2 men), and Brazil (2 men). 14 interviews were conducted by the author in 3 Polish cities: Opole (4), Katowice (4), and Wroclaw (6), which differ, according to BPO industry experts (Pro Progressio 2016:7-8), in terms of their economic advancement in the BPO industry. Wroclaw is the

most developed; by contrast, the Katowice BPO industry is still in development, whereas Opole has the least developed BPO industry of the three. The sampling of informants was purposive and based on the following criteria: (1) length of work experience in the BPO industry, (2) citizenship, (3) legal form of employment, and (4) occupation. The author tried to select one Polish and one global BPO center in each of the cities, though it was not possible due to difficulties in reaching the informants. IT professionals were contacted via social media due to denied access by HR and management departments at the companies to use existing, formal channels of communication. The ages of the IT consultants interviewed ranged from 22 to 40. The length of work experience at the centers varied from 1 to 12 years. During the data analysis, the author made use of analytical procedures of Grounded Theory Methodology (GTM) (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Glaser 1978; Charmaz 2006). Furthermore, a two-step coding procedure was employed: (1) open coding and (2) selective coding. ATLAS.ti software was used to code emerging properties from the interview transcripts. The analysis of data was also conducted in this program using functions such as the Co-Occurrence Table, the Code-Document Table, and the Query Tool. Further to the above, the author incorporated *memoing* (Glaser 1978:83) and *the constant comparative method* (Glaser and Strauss 1967:105). Evidence, ideas, and research from other scholars were also used to identify the theoretical categories and show how they are grounded in the data (Charmaz 2006:165). The author applied *theoretical sensitivity* during data analysis (Glaser 1978:2). Extant research was consulted on experiences—their influences, processes, and phenomena—from the business services industry in Poland and elsewhere, especially those focusing on the concepts of "career" and "biography." During the coding procedure, the author identified a core

concept, herein termed "career planning." Properties were grouped into three conditions of "career planning" that may seem to shape the interpretations of careers of IT specialists in the BPO industry in Poland: (1) *biographical experiences of work*, (2) *objective context of the Polish BPO industry*, and (3) *career planning resources*. These aspects outline the typology of career meanings attributed by IT specialists, presented in the matrix below. The first condition of "career planning"—along with its meanings and the biographical experiences of work—pertains to one's interpretations of the social, cultural, and economic circumstances that directed the actions of IT specialists up to the moment of the interview. In the first condition, the author emphasized how the participant had acquired and maintained their social and economic stability, self-realization in IT as a form of personal interest, acquiring a craft or occupational prestige, or a form of entrepreneurship. On the other hand, the author highlights the development of skills, competencies, and expertise in a given field of IT, as well as in management, team building, or sometimes even business analysis. Therefore, a career in IT is perceived as a pathway to other projects, careers in IT, or work in other occupations.

Taking into account the second condition of "career planning"—the objective context of the Polish BPO industry—the framework of macrostructural determinants is central, namely, the technological or institutional changes in the industry, or the differing wages in the IT labor market; on the mezzo level, belonging to professional or student organizations is of importance, as is completing a vocational course in IT, graduating from IT studies or another related area. Other factors that may shape the understanding of the careers of IT specialists include the type of employment, the type of career path development at the company and outside, one's work-life balance,

and the technologies that are utilized at the center. Concerning the third condition of "career planning," for example, career planning resources, these are exercised following the capitals obtained by a given narrator. These properties vary in every biographical narrative, but may be differentiated within the two above-mentioned cultural and social resources. Such resources are activated during important biographical events and experiences (a change of career, or while acquiring new skills or competencies, when resources may or may not be transformed). Properties relating to social capital (established social networks), cultural capital (gained skills and expertise), and economic capital (the amount of income) have been not-

ed in the data set. The author has reconstructed three ways in which IT specialists attribute meanings to their careers at BPO centers: (1) *acquiring economic and social stability*, (2) *a transition period in an IT career*, and (3) *being an expert in IT*. While the first type pertains to the focus on social and economic stability, the second and third relate to personal development in a career trajectory. Such ways of attributing meanings to careers do not assume that IT specialists consider their careers in one condition only. It can be understood as a disjointed typology, meaning that IT specialists can move from one type to another (as it is a social process), depending on age, social position, or accumulated resources.

Table 1. Typology of attributing meanings to IT specialists' careers at business services centers in Poland

Type	Biographical experiences of work	Objective contexts of the Polish BPO industry	Career planning resources
Focus on economic and social stability	Work as an existential determinant and form of security; Holding material values; Family and relationships (priority); The path of career development at the center (anchor career); Maintaining a work-life balance	Standard employment; "Outdated" technology used at the center	Medium or high level of (declared) economic resources (income); Medium or high level of skill set and expertise in IT; Low or medium quantity of social networks
Focus on personal growth *transition period in a career*	Striving for self-development; Belief in meritocracy and entrepreneurship; Individualism; Lack of attachment to the center; Work-life imbalance	Mostly non-standard employment; "Outdated" and cutting-edge technology used at the center	Low level of (declared) economic resources (income); Low or medium level of skill set and expertise in IT; Little social networking
Focus on personal growth *being an expert in IT*	Striving for self-development; Post-material values; Craftsmanship in IT; Being active in the BPO industry and among IT "professions" outside the workplace; The path of career development inside and outside the company; Work-life imbalance	Standard and non-standard employment; The cutting-edge technology used at the center	Medium or high level of (declared) economic resources (income); Advanced level of skill set and expertise in IT; Large social networking

Source: Self-elaboration.

Focus on Economic and Social Stability

The type of focus on economic and social stability is represented by those narratives in which two main biographical structures dominate.[5] On the one hand, these are biographical patterns of action; one of the main objectives of the IT specialists interviewed is to gain an advantageous social position, which consists of predictable prospects in one's life and career, a satisfactory job, and stable employment, as well as securing existential and economic underpinnings for individual prosperity and/or that of the participant's family. Within this type, the narrators demarcate spheres of work and non-work life, at least in the case of experienced IT specialists who have several years of expertise in the labor market. On the other hand, institutional action schemes presented in the IT specialists' biographies are based on meeting the demands of completing higher education. Another aim of IT specialists is to acquire skills and competencies that are considered warrantors for obtaining a decent job and good standard of living, as well as "comfortable functioning" (Jarek, 35).[6] Simultaneously, IT professionals are putting relatively little effort (compared to other types) in further investment in cultural resources encompassing skills and competences in the business services industry. It is related to the "pattern of development" (Jar-

ek, 35) in a given company, taking into account its internal logic, which assumes periodic promotion from lower to higher rank, alternatively widening the scope of one's duties, and degree of autonomy of currently occupied position in the center.

Even though the social and economic conditions of a career are based on the predictability of professional prospects and lifestyle demands, it seems equally important that at the workplace the significance of professional prospects is often attributed to skills development (in the sense of managing a team or widening the scope of autonomy and one's responsibilities in a given position in a center). BPO companies (at least those based in Poland) tend to collaborate closely with one or several clients, or support one project. In consequence, one relies on a single technological stack, which may limit the scope of technical development. Notably, IT specialists are mainly trying to develop their interpersonal skill sets; technical expertise is not as desirable. On the one hand, this approach implies taking on a wider spectrum of duties in project management, contact with clients, and bureaucratic, as well as administrative tasks, besides programing, which is emphasized in an excerpt of Mariusz's narrative. He is the leader of a team of programers in one of the Polish companies in Katowice: "If you are 35 and you're not a leader, it means that you're a loser. So you have to evolve in this direction, whether you want it, or not." On the other hand, due to professional development within a given organization, IT specialists have the opportunity to increase their autonomy at work and prioritize their scope of duties, which can prevent routinization and cases of professional burnout that are symptomatic of the IT sector, but not only. Jarek, a participant who combines the responsibilities of an IT architect and business analyst in a branch of a global company

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[5] In some of the collected biographies, one can observe the presence of trajectory as one of the biographical processes (Schütze 2008); it particularly pertains to biographical experiences (violence during childhood, break-ups in relationships, psychotherapy), but it is also related to a lack of coherent plans during education and in forming professional prospects. It can be related to a so-called patchwork career (Alheit 1995; Domecka and Mrozowicki 2008). It is only mentioned to underline this aspect, though because of the short form of this article, this issue will not be elaborated upon further.

[6] The brackets next to every quotation contain anonymized names and ages of interview participants (narrators).

in Wroclaw, characterizes work organization as follows: "you go to work in the morning, you check the email box, you set tasks for a given day, you check when you have scheduled meetings, and you do your job…Some of these tasks require computer-related work or calling, some others require meeting scheduling" (Jarek 35). The type of focus on social and economic stability is based on education, and cultural and (sometimes) social resources acquired during childhood. Not all of the biographies collected in this study represent social backgrounds from urban, highly educated families (so-called "intelligentsia"); most of the narrators obtained higher education in the form of degrees or attended university courses, though in some cases, these plans were canceled. Additionally, the presence of personal computers, game consoles, or programing and gaming activities comprise another central area within the IT specialists' narratives, of childhood and education. It can be related to entering IT professions, and the social background of the families into which the participants were born. In the 1990s, PCs were very expensive, and not all families could afford such a purchase (most of the IT specialists of this type grew up in those years). Moreover, educational strategies in middle school and high school are not purposefully planned to lead to work in IT, to program, design, and develop software, or work in the business services industry. The education patterns of IT professionals of this type are very similar in the context of attending a science-related profile (e.g., math, physics, computer science) and having an interest within the scope of these subjects. These (technical and science) studies are not always continued in the curriculum during university-level education. It can be shown in an excerpt of a narrative by Jarek, who graduated from robotics and automation at one of the technical universities in Lower Silesia in Poland:

I didn't want to go to work in a factory or somewhere below my expectations. I wanted to work either as a programer, or whoever. I thought back then that programing is a very wide notion, so to speak, so I didn't know what I wanted to do. But, it paid off when I went to the first job interview where some guy told me that programing could be learned by everyone, and learning to speak communicatively in two languages, English and German, is something big, so learning languages eventually paid off. [Jarek, 35]

The meaning of work is found in its instrumental value in this type. Work is needed for sustenance and living at a relatively high level of consumption, typical of aspirational, middle-class status in Poland. Employment in the business services industry is perceived by Mariusz as a "perfect way to generate income…there are no ideals and I don't want to do anything just for fun" (Mariusz, 34). As far as the value of work is concerned, taking into account biographical experiences of this type, it does:

not necessarily [have a crucial value], it is just a way of earning my living. I do not have any high-profile approach to work. No, I don't force myself to make programing my passion, and thereby after work, like many of my other colleagues, still tinker and improve my code, and, therefore, work for free, you know. There is something that needs to be done for a client, we need to do this, et cetera. In that sense, they can sit until midnight—I cannot, I log out; see you later; goodbye; that's all. [Tadek, 35]

Even though the labor market in business services is absorptive because "work [in IT sector] will always be, that's for sure, the job can always be found, especially in these times" (Jarek, 35), when having

pertinent work experience and appropriate skills, IT specialists more or less actively and/or reflexively plan their further career development in a given industry/sector. These prospects are fully present in a narrative by Juan, 29, who is a programer in one of the global BPO companies in Katowice. His narrative can be characterized by trajectory, chaos, and suffering. He emigrated from Brazil two years before the interview, after a breakup with his long-term partner. In the beginning, he worked briefly at an IT company in Bucharest, Romania, where he was attending psychotherapy sessions and taking anti-depressants. After a year, he had to leave Romania due to legal issues concerning his employment status. He then settled in Poland, where he was still working at the time of the interview. He is not interested in getting a promotion from his current employer because he perceives his workplace as a "sweet spot," where he occupies a senior IT engineer position. It allows him to satisfy his needs and reflexively plan his career in the IT sector (on the path of technical coaching) and life plans (having a family in the future):

> I used to think like going fast, starting as a developer, then becoming a team leader, then an architect or a manager. But, a few months earlier I thought, okay, I don't have time to do everything I want to do. So I have to focus on what's important, and a career is not as important as…having a family or things like that. So the former is on the lower priority level…I will not sacrifice my family for a career…Maybe I can get promoted, but maybe not. It's not like I need to, because the current level of salary I'm at is good. It's not like, okay, I have to because I need more money, and I don't have a sufficient amount of it. No, it's okay. So the only reason to be promoted is a position. You gain more status, you gain more responsibilities and a better position. The salary…

doesn't compensate for the amount of work and responsibilities you have. [Juan, 29]

Narratives presenting the type of focus on economic and social stability in IT professionals' biographies attest to general attempts at strategizing career planning (which are presumed to be highly predictable) in relation to accumulated capital (Bourdieu 1986); the objective conditions of the labor market in Poland and the meanings and biographical experiences of work of the narrators related most often to the sphere of ontological and economic security (which is lacking in some cases due to the presence of trajectory, chaos, and suffering). This can be seen in the case of the aforementioned Tadek, a former debt collector, who, due to professional burnout caused by the physical violence he sometimes encountered and hearing about the personal tragedies of clients in his previous job, attended psychotherapy sessions. He stated that "I'm already burnt out, after 7 years," nonetheless, the money he earned in this job was very satisfactory. While attending the session, the narrator tried to open his business by running an online shop. Ultimately this idea failed, but during that time, he learned a lot about programing from various sources, which allowed him to enter the IT job market, starting from the position of a junior programer. Tadek is currently engaged in nurturing his relationship with his wife and buying a house with her. In terms of values that he holds dear, he just wants to be happy because "I can have a lot of money and be happy and he can have no money and be happy." A career in his current company is not as important as having an economically stable job. Despite the fact that work is a source of money for him, he does not consider it his passion, but more an activity that can help develop skills and make friends without necessarily advancing his career.

Focus on Personal Growth—Transition Period in a Career

This type of meaning-making of a career is represented mostly in the narratives of young IT specialists (students or graduates of computer science) who are trying to follow individualized patterns of planning and development of their careers in the labor market. They also have an atypical work agreement (e.g., civil law contracts, fixed-term employment contracts, etc.) These characterizations of the biographical and professional experiences of IT professionals of this type are reminiscent of the strategies of young precarious workers employed under flexible, unstable forms of the employment contract. The dominant strategy in the labor market and in career planning seems to be the "normalization" (Mrozowicki 2016) of unstable employment on flexible forms, being the result of taking for granted the effectiveness of such a way of developing one's career.

In the narratives that are part of the analyzed type of assigning meanings to careers, it is possible to observe, at the level of analysis of the communicative structure, the predominance of argumentative communicative patterns rather than narrative ones. The coda in the form of a long summary of the life and its assessment from the current perspective is not always elaborate and most often has the character of a lengthy argumentative or theoretical commentary, which may indicate biographical problems that the narrator has not worked through, or to present them to the researcher in the best possible way. In this type, the biographical experiences of work and participating in the labor market seem to be differentiated in terms of the occupations the narrators held. Most of them had already worked in industries outside of IT before

entering the business services industry. Bruno and Irek worked physically during their school and university years, the former as a factory worker for a few months, the latter as a postman and security guard, earning extra money for their studies. Ivan was in a similar situation and after coming to Poland from Ukraine to study computer science, he worked physically (e.g., restocking shelves in a supermarket), without a contract, to collect the money he needed for his studies. While working as a strawberry vendor in a parking lot, he tried to use this time to learn English and read books on cognitive science. He then enrolled in a work and travel program in the USA, where he could develop his language skills and earn some extra money for his studies, and to visit places. Sylwia, on the other hand, had been working after her matriculation for a few years in a state-owned company selling insurance, which she thought was a "rat race." She did not like the working conditions and relations between co-workers there. As a result, she decided to look for a more developmental job with a better salary and the possibility of living in a bigger city, Opole. Eventually, she decided to learn programming to become an application developer, and then to study computer science to obtain her degree. Bruno had a similar experience and decided to look for a more developmental and secure job in his country of origin, Brazil. Therefore, he decided to study computer science, which would allow him to get his dream job and international career in software development. Irek's original educational plan was to study history, but he finally decided to study computer science after he took a one-year break from high school. At the time of the interview, he worked as a software developer. A good example showing the biographical meaning of work of this type is an excerpt from the narrative of Sylwia, an IT specialist working for a multinational compa-

ny with a branch in Opole. When asked about the meaning of work in her life, she replies:

> work is very important to me. I like my job very much. It gives me a lot of satisfaction. For example, I get a task; I have to do something, so I do it and my team leader tells me, for example, that, "It's a great job." It's so much fun…[The work should be] well paid, developmental, and it should give creativity, and openness, so that you can do things, and achieve a goal, in many ways. No one should tell me how because I don't like being told, for example, someone has to do so and so and so, but I have, for example, several options to choose from, that I can go this way or that way, that I have to, for example, do some thinking. This stimulates such creativity that you can prove yourself. [Sylwia, 27]

In the already mentioned case of Sylwia, the narrator talks about being bored in her workplace and in the city where she lives. She does not see the possibility of further development there, both professionally and in terms of her private life. She would like to emigrate to the Netherlands to work in her profession and to develop her career (become an IT professional in a company outside of the BPO industry). A similar structure can be observed in the biography of Irek, who also talks about plans to emigrate to Scandinavian or Anglo-Saxon countries because he sees no future for himself in terms of professional development and quality of life in Poland. He would also like to learn about new cultures and visit the world. Ivan and Bruno, whose biographical experiences in terms of work and education have been described, are immigrants who have temporarily settled in Poland. Bruno emigrated from Brazil to build an international career, which began with several months of exchange studies in Canada, where he learned the country's culture and customs.

Material resources seem to have an instrumental value in this type of assigning meanings to a career in IT. They serve the purpose of achieving an assumed goal (making an international career, temporary or permanent settlement in another country, traveling). Work, in turn, serves to improve one's qualifications, both technical and interpersonal. Such activities aim to increase the possibility of being mobile in the labor market. Such properties are illustrated in the fragment of Irek's narrative.

> Why do we work? Not for pleasure, but to have something from it, to develop oneself, educate oneself. I wouldn't want, for sure, to work just to go on with it, and that's it, though I'd consider it when they'd pay me extra cool. I want work to be interesting, developing, somehow deepening, not just profitable…Everyone would want this, it's obvious, but it will never be like that. Work itself doesn't hold any value in my life. [Irek, 23]

In a sense, what Irek is perhaps saying here is that work is for making money and developing the skills needed to build social and economic capital or change employers and/or industries. Possibly, it is through the biographical experience of work that IT professionals choose to make a change that gives them a sense of fulfillment and self-realization of a career.

IT specialists' narratives that constitute this type of focus on personal growth are linked mainly with characteristics such as work flexibility and lack of attachment to companies. A stable path of career development in just one company is not attractive when considering the accumulation of cultural and social resources that could be transformed in the future to achieve other goals. In their biographical plans, the interviewees include changing em-

ployers in search of better employment conditions or career prospects, or they strategize shifting to another industry, related to the IT sector. The case of Maciek, employed on a business-to-business contract in one of the Polish business service outsourcing companies in Katowice, embodies these characteristics. Arguing why he chose such a career path, he asserts that:

> a lot of kids [during elementary education] say that they wanted to be a garbage collector, a policeman, or something. I never had anything like that. Well, when I chose to study computer science, I wasn't planning on going away from computer work. So I became a programer. And according to what was said in those days [when he was a student], it's best to have 2 years of experience after graduation, I started working in my third year. And I studied and worked practically full-time because I did about 140 hours to earn enough money to support myself. And that's how it stayed. And simply since the third year of studies. [Maciek, 35]

During his career, which lasted for about 12 years, Maciek changed employers about 6 times, working in the business services industry and other areas (i.e., international start-ups, orders for web design) within the IT industry. The narrator considers full-time employment "nonsense" for purely economic reasons. He decided to "earn real money" with an atypical work agreement. He thinks of himself as valuable, entrepreneurial, and resourceful, unlike professional IT lecturers in academia. Thus, he can easily change jobs, employers, or even industries. A passage of Maciek's narrative from the interview may demonstrate this attitude.

> It's not that I hate what I do but, you know, in the morning, I would rather get up and go to the moun-

tains than go to work. So, well, it is a necessary evil. But, to some extent, I'm telling myself: "If you're doing it, then do it right, do it with a smile on your face, and when it doesn't suit you, change it." And so I do, and so I change. And, well, unfortunately, this IT industry, being an IT aristocracy, allows me to do that. And that's the truth, it's an employee's market, not an employer's market, so they should be honest, open, and forthright in what they expect, what they tell me it will be. If they lie, what do they expect?... The kind of job I want should be here, not me for a job.

This way of arguing in the narratives of IT professionals in the analyzed type of attributing meanings to their careers is closely related to the issue of individualization and belief in meritocracy. It can be linked to neo-liberal practices of self-development: improving one's skills is one of the most important values in the narratives. The belief in one's talent and accumulated technical expertise can reinforce one's drive toward career planning. It can be seen quite clearly in the case of Ivan, 22, a junior programer from Ukraine, who works in a global company with a branch in Opole. He contends that "even if you are a graduate of technical high school or high school, even if you are 15, but you have the knowledge, they will employ you in the IT sector without any experience or any particular diploma."

Another characteristic of this type of career path is the presence of an intentional disturbance of the balance between studying and life, or work-life, observed in IT specialists' narratives. Such choices are consciously made and accepted as a trade-off for career development in the IT sector and business services industry. The case of Irek employed in one of the Polish BPO companies in Opole seems

to verify that claim. He is in the middle of finishing an engineering degree at one of the universities in Opole, but to be competitive in the labor market, he simultaneously learns new skills on his own, studies full-time, and works on an atypical work agreement. He is aware of the consequences of this career development strategy: he neglects his relationship with his partner, and, to some extent, he misses out on his studies. Irek describes his day at work as follows:

> I get up at 6:00, I have a bus to work at 7:10, I come to work, make tea, sit down, look at what needs to be done, look at the news, and slowly start doing things for myself. At 9:00, we have a conversation with a client and we say what we did, what we didn't do, and so on. I do these tasks more or less until 15:30, there around 15:00, I don't feel like it, so I slow down, put in the code, and so on, around 15:20, I pack up because I have a bus at 15:48, and I go. I go to my room in the dorm. Sometimes I have classes, 3 days a week, or 4 days a week, so I go straight to the class, I sit until 18:00, and then, at 20:00, I'm, let's say, in the room, because I live nearby, I eat something, I sit down, then it is around 21:00, I do my engineering work, assignments. Sometimes I need to go out with my girlfriend, and I'm completely out of time… OK, well, maybe it's nice because I earn money and everything goes smoothly here. It would be best to both work and have a relationship, but I'm exhausted, it's driving me crazy.

Despite that Irek feels tired of his lifestyle, he believes there is no other way to achieve professional success. It can be hypothesized that meanings attributed to work of this type that hold the greatest value include striving for the development of qualifications and competencies, which can be illustrated by the following fragment of Irek's narrative.

> If I will not help myself, then no one will, goddamn it! I must educate myself, get work experience myself, go study myself, go to work myself…If I were an employer and wanted to employ me [without work experience], then I would have no skills…One must educate and work in [IT] profession, you can even earn 1000 zloty, but in one's learned profession. Why does one want to be a bartender during [computer science] study?

This fragment can be interpreted by referring to the concept of ontological security. As Anthony Giddens asserts, "to be ontologically secure is to possess, on the level of the unconscious and practical consciousness, 'answers' to fundamental existential questions which all human life in some way addresses" (Giddens 1991:47). In other words, ontological security means feeling a fundamental safety based on a basic trust in other people, which provides a sense of well-being and freedom from anxiety (Giddens 1991). Irek seems to be deprived of such a feeling, considering the excerpt from his narrative.

Yet another feature of narratives presented in this type is the lack of attachment to a particular company. Furthermore, they can be characterized by hyper geographical and labor market mobility (Van Maanen and Kunda 1999; Barley and Kunda 2004). The case of Bruno, 29, a Brazilian man who came to Europe to build his international career and improve his language skills can portray this characteristic. He is employed in one of the global companies in Katowice as a senior programer. Some parts of his narrative relate to social and economic changes on a macro level (labor market conditions) in the context of planning his career. After leaving the job at the start-up company where Bruno had been working, he was offered a job in Brazil with

a higher salary than in other European countries. Though he could have worked for his previous employer (a start-up IT enterprise in Germany), he decided to move to Poland.

> Yes, but it [the start-up company] was part of the European company because it was, like, going here [Europe] to work in Germany. I have wanted to work as a researcher in Germany, but the European company just cut the costs of IT positions here and relocated them back to Brazil because it was cheaper to employ one German. The European company can hire, like, ten Brazilians, and one Brazilian does the same amount of work as one German. So it was cheap for this company to employ me. And the research start-up became a normal IT company. So, for me, there was no difference to work here or there, it's the same. And I have wanted to pursue my international career and also to improve my English because I have a strong accent that you can hear. [Bruno, 29]

Outsourcing business processes presumes the transfer of production processes, tasks, and also occupations to less developed, semi-peripheral, or peripheral economies. Therefore, companies can focus on core responsibilities, preserve operational flexibility, and cut operational costs (Kakabadse and Kakabadse 2002; Tas and Sunder 2004).

IT specialists' narratives within this type of career meaning attribution are characterized by career planning concerning finding the optimal (the most profitable and developmental) job offers in terms of salary and following the accumulation of cultural resources, that is, required certificates or scarce skill sets. This may have consequences in the form of work-life imbalance. One of the most substantial forms of career meaning attribution is a subjective aspect linked to career instrumen-

talization. One's goal is to preserve the material means to an end. What seems important is that biographical experiences linked to work are characterized by individualism, entrepreneurship, belief in qualifications, and flexibility, which can be observed in the narratives. Flexibility in particular seems to have negative side effects, which is the (generally accepted) price for personal growth during the transition period in an IT professional career Sylwia mentions when asked how she spends her typical weekday.

> I get up in the morning at whatever time I want without an alarm clock. So I get up at what time I want to start work. Then I start, then we have somehow a daily [meeting], between 10 AM and 11 AM. Well, we always say to each other what we did, what we are going to do, what we are working on, and, well, nothing. I do my job, I do not sit for 8 hours, for sure, I just do what I have to do and I do my job. Then [programing] the application. In general, when I get up in the morning, I sit at the computer and I program until the evening…It is around 11 PM or 12 AM. [Sylwia, 27]

Focus on Personal Growth—Being an Expert in IT

This type is mainly seen in the narratives of IT specialists born in well-educated families ("intelligentsia") or in families where a higher social status was acquired, that is, school teachers, military men, economists, psychologists, et cetera. The collected cases differ in age and level of education. Narrators within this type may hold higher qualifications than a master's degree. This type is focused on personal growth in the sense of being a professional, though in some narratives, especially among married IT specialists or those with

lengthy experience in the labor market, one can observe a drive towards economic and employment stability. The stage of starting work in the IT industry in most collected cases falling into this type is the stage of higher education.

In general, institutional patterns of expectation might be evident in the narratives, mainly related to attending the schools chosen by the parents, fulfilling their will in terms of career choice, as well as other biographical plans. As has been said, significant others are influencing this type of career meaning-making in the narratives of interviewees. For example, Piotr, who was brought up by a pair of teachers, had all his needs provided for, similarly for Wiola, Fiodor, and Ala. They all went on to higher education and started working in the industry during or immediately after graduation of studies. The contrasting case is Franek, who does not come from an intellectual family but rather from a working-class family. All of these cases will be elaborated on broadly in this section.

Meanings attributed to careers are related to cultural resources drawn from the social background of the narrators. On the one hand, a career is perceived concerning a decent lifestyle; it provides ontological security and has specific ethics (such as professionalism). Moreover, it "contributes surplus value in society" (Ala, 40) or fits in with middle-class values. In a general sense, the sphere related to work and its ethics is highly exposed in the communicative schemes of narratives. On the other hand, the meaning of a career is related to the development of one's (technical and interpersonal) skills, combined with technologies of self-development in the Foucauldian theorem of technologies of the self (Foucault 2008), and individual responsibility for one's personal growth

("reaching beyond one's boundaries," "going out of one's comfort zone" [Wiola, 27]). These characteristics are aptly illustrated in an excerpt from Wiola's narrative. She is 27, and a mid-level programer employed by one of the global companies in Wroclaw. Additionally, she leads IT non-profit projects and participates in the local activities of IT associations (industry meetings, workshops for her colleagues in the company where she works, and elsewhere). Her case is indicative of being involved in programing, as well as management, marketing, and code testing, which often leads to health issues and neglect of her private life.

> I have got this since my childhood. I have always wanted to learn new information, and read new books, first, second, third, and next. I do not like to be bored in the sense that I can go on holidays and do totally nothing for a while, but, in general, I tend to keep my mind occupied, I like to be occupied. I like to be tired and, you know, and, in the evening, have this kind of feeling that, oh, I have worked myself hard today, haven't I? And then that kind of leisure gives you way more fun.

Development of skills can be facilitated by participating in projects that meet such criteria as implementing technical solutions that offer various opportunities for skill set advancement or give more outlets for creativity, innovation, and self-realization at work, which are desirable traits of this type. Within this type, economic gains are not as central as in the other types, though these capitals have a secondary priority, which could be illustrated by Ala's case. She is 40, and a senior application programer in one of the global firms in Wroclaw. She conceptualizes programing as "a creative activity, especially if one can create some new area of application, new application, and one can get a chance

to participate in designing such functionality." What is vital in this type is the meaning ascribed to applications, and in a wider sense—to technologies used at the workplace. Having to choose between higher wages or "outdated" technology and unattractive projects, narrators tend to prefer an employer who offers better employment conditions, that is, where the technology and projects give opportunities to enhance one's competencies or skill set, and the chance to achieve self-fulfillment. Meanings attributed to careers of this type are linked to influencing the expansion or growth of a company or leading and managing a team. Careers are not perceived in this type as instrumental but more autotelic. It is a passion and a kind of craft. Thus one needs to do as well as one can. The software produced may attest to one's skill, label, reputation, and personal involvement in this craft. These characteristics can be found in the case of Piotr, 35, an IT specialist and business analyst employed in one of the global centers in Wroclaw, and in the case of Fiodor, 22, a junior programer in one of the Polish companies in Opole. The latter narrator plans to establish his business after he gains sufficient work experience from his present employer. The former participant tried to start his firm during his master's and doctoral studies, though unsuccessfully; in his narrative, he emphasizes the importance of self-development and that of his colleagues in the team he leads, and also highlights the aspect of improving the quality of products and produced software. On the other hand, he strives to be an authority (not only in technical but also organizational and social areas) in IT associations, so it can be hypothesized that his reputation plays an indispensable role in this type of meaning-making. In this sense, stable income and employment could be valued as highly as being viewed as a professional in IT industry

organizations and companies. It can also be interpreted as a symbolic resource, which can be exchanged for employability when someone starts a career in IT. It can be noted in an excerpt from Franek's narrative. He is 25 and employed as a junior programer in one of the Polish BPO centers in Wroclaw. He is also involved in activities related to the university field, such as participation in several scientific student associations. In the past, he also conducted classes for younger students at his university. Franek is an active participant in an IT sector association, which consists of popular programing language users. His narrative seems to reflect some qualities of the *New Spirit of Capitalism* (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005).

> I developed there [in one of the scientific student associations] my interpersonal skills, too. [Now I deal with] internal project management in our company, [I gave] lectures for my colleagues, [I did] some kind of social action. I've never been a person who is doing it just for the sake of the certificate itself, just to have a paper out of it, but I consider it as a means to an end.

Activity in organizations outside the workplace is also a biographical plan, realized based on available capital and resources accumulated during life, as may be indicated by the fragment of Franek's narrative.

Meanings attributed to careers in this particular type are connected with autotelic values. Work is recognized as an activity that contributes value to society in general. This attribute related to work can be observed in Wiola's fragment of narrative: "You do your duty, you write a program that can save somebody's life, or can help to improve something, economize something" (Wiola, 27). The case

of Ala, in turn, can reflect the ethos of work, which resembles the one attributed to the Polish "young intelligentsia" elites.[7]

> Work constitutes our image and our place in society and defines our function in the latter. I do not claim, though, that functioning as a developer is less worthy than being an IT architect. I think that more precious is the fact that someone was able to build oneself professional capital and acquire this profession and skills, which allows someone to find oneself in society and satisfy the demands of the latter. I think it defines human capabilities more accurately. [Ala, 40]

Within this type, a career can be conceptualized in a twofold manner. On the one hand, it is realized and planned in a narrow sense, within companies, but also in a wider scope, within an industry's organizations and associations related to the IT sector, which brings together experts and professionals. The latter form of career in IT is described in terms such as participation and involvement in these organizations, getting promoted within structures of associations, being recognized as a talented speaker at conferences, being an event organizer, being a technical or interpersonal coach, et cetera, and not only a gifted IT professional in terms of having a wide technical skill set. These characteristics were apparent in other cases, especially when IT professionals were re-

sponsible for several technical leadership or business duties in various forms (e.g., scrum mastering and business analytics). Some narrators reported that they were attending to other tasks after work hours, such as running workshops for professionals outside of the company or organizing seminars during meetings of IT associations. These traits are aptly reflected in the case of Piotr, 35, who has a Ph.D. in IT. He has been employed for one year in one of the global companies in Wroclaw. He is accountable for three roles in his company: technical duties, team coaching, and business analysis. Piotr is also engaged in activities related to IT associations—participating in and co-organizing meet-ups and workshops whose main aim is to develop the technical and interpersonal skills of IT professionals through numerous techniques of gamification.

> The company [where he works] was a sweet spot, taking into account satisfactory financial and employment conditions…So I assume that I, and the modern labor market a little bit, look for team shape, that one has a wide spectrum of knowledge, but simultaneously one can dive deeply…these two things allow me a wider scope of flexibility. [Piotr, 35]

In the narratives, phenomena related to suffering and chaos can be identified, such as relationship breakdowns and divorces caused by the lack of balance between life and work. Piotr is an example of such characteristics as he got divorced during his Ph.D. studies. He tried to cope with the aftermath of divorce using various self-development techniques, for example, solving Gallup tests. At the time, he was teaching classes at the university, which he tried to organize in such a way that they were useful to the students in a practical sense. The narrator himself expected

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[7] Research conducted among young representatives of the elite in Poland shows that members of this group do not identify with either the traditional intelligentsia ethos or the lifestyle of the middle class. Young intelligentsia representatives consider themselves to be well-educated professionals who feel responsible for their environment, institutions, family, and work. They are characterized by a peculiar yet separate lifestyle and self-defined ethos. They are convinced of the purpose of their action and the sense of the existence of their group (Kulas 2017).

this during his studies. At the same time, he did not feel satisfied with the classes he was teaching, even though he put an adequate, and even sometimes higher than required, amount of energy into them. This may indicate a process of professional burnout linked to the suffering of going through a divorce.

IT professionals representing this type tend to plan their careers according to cultural resources linked to "intelligentsia" work ethics while focusing on the development of skills (through advanced technology and attractive projects) and symbolic resources, such as reputation. These assets seem to be prioritized in this type. Thus, economic resources have an instrumental role and employment stability appears to hold a similar level of significance. Social resources play an indispensable role in relation to career planning, both within the industry and within expert organizations in the IT sector—especially considering being located in the social networks that emerge in this field. Biographical experiences and meanings of work are connected both with narrators' social backgrounds and with biographical action schemes, which often leads to work-life imbalances.

To sum up, it could be hypothesized that this particular type of meaning-making of a career in IT combines the characteristics of the previous two. On the one hand, the narrators look for companies that provide adequate conditions for the development of their skills (valued more than the material conditions of work), and, on the other hand, they are not permanently attached to a particular company and look for another employer when they feel that they stop developing their skills.

Discussion and Conclusions

The paper aimed to reconstruct the ways of attributing meanings to IT specialists' careers at the business process outsourcing centers in Poland, from a biographical standpoint. The analysis of the life stories of IT specialists allowed the author to highlight the role of three reconstructed types in career planning as a basic social process that has been discovered during the data analysis stage. Those three types are as follows: (1) a focus on economic and social stability, (2) a focus on personal growth—such as a transition period in a career, and (3) a focus on personal growth—becoming an expert in IT. Moreover, the biographical analysis allowed the author to note three (subjective and objective) influences, which may play indispensable roles in attributing meanings to IT specialists' careers at BPO companies in Poland: meanings and biographical experiences at work, the objective context of working in the Polish BPO industry, and career planning resources. Combined with the pathways of following IT specialists' patterns of building careers, the conditions of the study permitted the author to construct a typology of attributing meanings to work at BPO centers in Poland. It has been shown that when various structural (micro, mezzo, and macro level), economic, and cultural aspects were simultaneously present in either type, the focus was on economic and social stability, or both subtypes of personal growth while planning one's career. The last aspect, which might influence the basic social process (life project), was shown to be the resources owned by IT specialists. Another feature of the mechanisms for attributing meanings (when considering structural, cultural, and economic facilitation or impediments to achieving one's plans) has been defined as the resources owned

by IT specialists. As mentioned above, the created typology of career meanings is ideal-typical in the sense that IT specialists assign, reflexively, all of the identified ways of attributing meanings to their "career planning" process.

Although the research on biographical meanings of work at multinational corporations in Poland (Biały 2015; Haratyk, Biały, and Gońda 2017; Gońda 2019) suggests that inherent socio-economic conditions given by this type of employer facilitate achieving occupational and biographical stability, it seems that among IT specialists who have been interviewed, it is pertinent only to those narrators who have families and strive to anchor their careers in one company, or those who are trying to achieve stability due to biographical events that generated suffering and chaos in their lives. Their narratives focus on economic and social stability. What is more, these IT professionals are intentionally separating the spheres of work and non-work, which results from their personal goals and private concerns (a particular focus on family, building relationships, etc.). Those interviewees seem to follow the widespread discourse of self-development, but only do so to a limited extent—that which brings an optimal level of employability and competitiveness in the labor market. Younger IT professionals (without families or formal relationships) seem to lean towards self-development discourse (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005) to build their future careers (not necessarily in the IT sector) or to become an expert in IT. These narratives resemble being an expert in IT and the transition period type. To achieve their plans, IT specialists falling into this type intentionally bridge the gap between work and non-work life with flexibility that has further biographical consequences and costs, such as dissolving bonds with their rel-

atives, occupational burnout, health problems, and so forth. As far as the economic aspect of careers in business services in Poland is concerned, IT specialists do not tend to act according to the *homo oeconomicus* (or rational choice theory) by choosing the best possible offers in the context of wages and type of work agreement (non-standard contracts or freelance employment) that allow for the highest net income (Barley and Kunda 2004; Ailon and Kunda 2006). Though it is pertinent to the participants who are focused on accumulating economic resources (focused on economic and social stability), the majority of IT professionals interviewed tend to value more cutting-edge technology used at centers over high wages provided by the employer, as they perceive technological conditions to be conducive to improving their future employability and social resources. However, the former group has changed employers and projects more often, on average, than the rest of the interviewees, though they are not as focused on being participants in social networks. While the research on IT specialists employed at Polish and American high-tech companies (Jemielniak 2008a; Czarkowska 2010; Postuła 2010) advocates non-material ways of perceiving careers and work experience, this approach does not seem applicable among the IT professionals interviewed by the author. As mentioned above, the material aspect of a career still plays an indispensable (and, in some circumstances, decisive) role, taking into account the focus on economic and social stability and the transition period type, which tends to accumulate economic and social resources. The same can be hypothesized about the work-life balance as a constitutive factor of meaning in the case of narrators' careers; their narratives reflect the type of being an IT expert and the transition period. They do perceive intentional bridging of

the work-life boundary as something unavoidable and "normal" in the current social and economic conditions to achieve one's life goals. In that vein, they do not see the formalization of relations as detrimental to their careers or as a tool for control by managers over the work of the IT specialists. Those narrators most often emphasize aspects of the agency of employees, a participatory approach in making decisions at firms, egalitarianism, as well as flattening of the structures at workplaces. Trust among colleagues, employers, and clients, however, is perceived by them as conducive to shaping the meaning of one's career at the center. The narratives that are typical of experts in IT focus on maintaining relations with all the actors, though the other two types seem to concentrate on being trusted by clients and/or employers, as this can preserve or increase the level of one's employability. Considering the normative strategies of employers and ideological control of managers over IT specialists in the form of identity choices (Jemielniak 2008a), it can be hypothesized that the "playbor" and other managerial tactics that are apparently "hidden" (Kunda 2006; Hunter, Jemielniak, and Postuła 2010) are rather far-fetched in the Polish context. Based on all of the interviewees' narratives, most of the IT professionals are well aware of the control that may be exercised over them at workplaces, though the author does not claim that the interviewees openly oppose such methods of control; however, sometimes they take an ironic or cynical stance on it, and other times, conform to it as a kind of status quo in this type of industry or organization.

While contributing to existing research on experiences of work and studies on careers, this paper has certain limitations. First of all, it was restricted to only three Polish cities that experts have identified as exhibiting different degrees of development in the business services industry in one of the Central-Eastern European countries. It could be beneficial to study the experience of work and career meanings of IT specialists originating from other cities, states, or core economies, where the business services industry is relatively more advanced, compared to that in Poland. Second of all, it would be necessary to study in more detail the biographies of IT specialists who are involved in activities related to non-profit or project work outside of companies in the area of IT, as factors that contribute to career planning and meaning attribution. Third of all, the sample consisted predominantly of men and young people, due to objective barriers in reaching out to women, older IT specialists, and foreign IT professionals. It would be valuable to understand the role of sex, age, and citizenship in relation to life plans, including career planning, biographical experiences, and individual resources.

Acknowledgments

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Citation

Skill and Deskilling in Two Automotive Assembly Plants in South Africa

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Abstract: This article presents research on skills development and workplace change complexities within two automotive assembly plants in Pretoria, South Africa. Auto assembly companies are also termed Original Equipment Manufacturers (OEMs). Since 1995, South African OEMs have become fully integrated into the global networks of their foreign parent companies. As South Africa's leading manufacturing sector, the automotive industry's increasing importance is reflected in its exports, investments, and contribution to the country's gross domestic product. The two companies are global multinationals situated in one of South Africa's most globally integrated sectors that have undergone significant mechanization and automation since the 1990s. Therefore, these companies present a relevant site for studying changes in the labor process and the tendencies of deskilling in these workplace environments.

The research is based on a qualitative research design that used semi-structured interviews with workers, supervisors, and managers across two plants that assemble motor vehicles in South Africa. The objective of the research was to understand the nature of changes to workplace production methods that influence the character of skills amongst the workforce. This paper studies workers' experiences on how changes in work processes have impacted their work skills and contributed to the processes of deskilling. Present studies of skills in South Africa have prioritized large-scale labor market aggregate data analysis or reforms in education and training policies of the state. This paper brings a perspective on the labor process changes that are informed by concrete analysis of the production process and how technological changes shape the character of skills formation within automotive assembly plants. The value of such an approach is that it brings to the discussion of technology and workplace change a more specific set of experiences that transcends the often speculative and mythical discussion about the impact of technology on work. This article highlights the importance of understanding workers' voices, shift supervisors, and managers on the contested nature of skills development within capitalist enterprises. The findings illustrate the contradictory nature of technological change and skills development. This is shown by discussing the following themes that emerged from the findings: 1) worker responses to the introduction of robots in the workplace environment, 2) the deskilling challenge on the two plants, and 3) grappling with the turnover times of capitalist production. I conclude the paper by revisiting the key findings of the research and showing the implications for future studies of deskilling in contemporary capitalist enterprises. The significance of these findings ultimately points to the importance of locating labor processes and deskilling in the context of the political economy of the capitalist mode of production and how it is reshaping the content of work in modern automotive assembly plants.

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This article emerges from questions surrounding the skills implications of workplace changes within modern capitalist production enterprises. The research is situated within the broad field of sociology of work and the study of processes of skills and deskilling (Previtali and Fagiani 2015; Chen and Sonn 2019; Leslie and Rantisi 2019; Kenny and Webster 2021). In this study, two auto assembly companies in the Pretoria auto cluster were visited, and interviews were conducted with workers and management regarding production skills. The two companies are global multinationals situated in one of South Africa's most globally integrated sectors that have undergone significant mechanization and automation since the 1990s. They were selected based on the leading role they have played in terms of the introduction of robotics since the 1980s, various forms of technology, and the intensification of work through methodologies such as the multi-modal production of vehicles. As South Africa's leading manufacturing sector, the automotive industry's increasing importance is reflected in its exports and investments and contributes to the country's gross domestic product.

This research brings a critical dimension to the field of skills research as it seeks to grapple with the intricacies of workplace change in production and its impact on skills. The micro-level dimension of the research helps to unravel an aspect of skills research that tends to be dominated by myths and speculation. Following Sawchuk (2006), skill in this paper is understood to have three dimensions: i) includes internalized capacities resident in the individual worker; ii) includes job design, divisions of labor, technology, and control; and iii) is socially constructed. The article covers the following issues: contextualizes the skills debate in South Africa, technology, and deskilling, outlines the methodology, and discusses findings related to worker responses to the introduction of robots, a depiction of the skills and deskilling challenge in the two automotive assembly plants, and grappling with the turnover times of capitalist production. The discussion and conclusion section brings the article together by analyzing key themes that have emerged in the research and the conceptualization of the study.

Contextualizing the Skills Debate in South Africa

In South Africa, at the core of the skills question under apartheid was the migrant labor system. The migrant labor system kept Africans subservient to a white economy to which they had to provide services and cheap labor. Apartheid ensured the protection of Whites in the labor market, segregated education, separated communities, and established

a Bantustan (homeland) system for blacks in rural areas. These enforced divisions and other measures underpinned the notion of skill under apartheid. As Kenny and Webster (2021:3) have argued, initially, the concept of colonial or racial despotism emerged as a way of capturing the notion that in apartheid South Africa, work was characterized by coercion rather than consent and by the domination of one racial group by another. Apartheid created a labor market hierarchy through the migrant labor system and Bantu education, which deliberately created a layer of black workers for specific purposes of use by capital. This labor market structure has left a legacy that resonates up till the current period when the racialized divisions of labor are still visible in the economy. Black African and Colored[1] workers are largely in lower-level occupations while White and Indian workers tend to occupy professional levels or higher-level occupations (Ngcwangu 2016:287).

The period of the 1990s saw intensive work within the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) around building research capacity and con-

tribution to economic policy debates for a democratic South Africa. In trade unions such as the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA), there was a growing realization that skills training would provide a better basis for their members to demand higher wages considering the increase in skilled foreign workers being imported into the country at a higher rate of pay during the early 1990s. As Forrest (2011:217) states: "There was also a realization in Numsa that its semi-skilled and unskilled membership base was becoming disposable. The acquisition of skills would bring higher pay and give the retrenched a better chance of finding work." This shows that skill is not a mere technical issue of application of acquired knowledge to types of work—it is informed of the dominant economic forces at a given time. The democratic government established in 1994 brought in new legislation, such as the Skills Development Act of 1998 and the Skills Levies Act of 1999, to regulate the skills system in the country and bring in a new skills dispensation and institutional apparatus to regulate funding, accreditation, and delivery of skills development.

Technology and Deskilling

Scholars have contested the nature of technology's impact influenced by their theoretical outlooks on understanding the structure of global capitalism across various industries (Chen and Sonn 2019; Leslie and Rantisi 2019; Machacek and Hess 2019; Richardson and Bissell 2019). According to Aneesh (2001), the impact of technology on work is variable, lowering skills requirements in one respect while upgrading others; these are simultaneous processes occurring in workplaces under capitalism. While Thompson and Smith (2009) argue that the supposed need for skills in the new economy and paradigm shifts in production and markets were

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[1] In South Africa, the population of Colored people refers to a mixed-race group; it is a category that is strongly contested since it has its origins in the apartheid classification system, which created "four nations" in South Africa: Black African, Colored, White, and Indian. This is unlike in many Northern societies where colored means Black or African. This classification has been rejected on grounds of the Black Consciousness thoughts of the late Stephen Bantu Biko, who articulated a view that we are all one race and that subscribing to the notion of a colored grouping within the Black population merely affirms the discriminatory practices of the past. On the other hand, the term "Black African" is used within nationalist-orientated political approaches such as those of the ruling African National Congress (ANC), which still uses the notion of a "National Question" in its analysis of South Africa's social formation, that national question speaks of Blacks in general and Africans in particular. The result of this contestation is that many from the colored community reject the generally used ascriptive category of being called Colored because of its oppressive historical origins. While others use that identification despite the past discrimination, it is also still used in official statistical data and general parlance in South Africa.

seen to have positive implications for workers in the labor process. Team working in production implied a broadening of skills and devolution of job discretion from management to workers; contested mass markets required product differentiation and accompanying upskilling of workers to match more bespoke product markets; and new economic activity, especially ICTs and creative industries, increased demand for flexible and skilled workers, not detailed and skill-diminished ones (Thompson and Smith 2009:255).

The literature on technology and skills emphasizes both the negative and positive consequences of new technology (Brynjolfsson and McAfee 2014; Spencer 2016). The argument over whether the new technology will create more jobs or result in higher levels of unemployment is quite tenuous in the academic literature. Spencer (2016), for example, argues that outcomes of digital technologies for workers are often negative. The perpetuation of low-paid and low-skilled work can go together with the advance of digital technologies. Inequalities of income, gender, and status can also be reproduced, despite and potentially, because of digital technologies advancing. The regressive implications and impacts of digital technologies, in essence, stem from the class nature of the ownership and the drive for surplus value—they are necessary features of the progress of digital technologies under capitalism (Spencer 2016). This is related strongly to my findings in the sense that the insertion of technological changes in the workplace is almost always tied to efficiency improvements, cost reduction, and quality checks, which are essential to profit maximization by companies. This brings into focus how class relations are reproduced under capitalism whereby the system requires new technology to fragment and cheapen the cost of labor, which ultimately results in deskilling.

Brynjolfsson and McAfee (2014) acknowledge the negative and positive effects of new technologies on societies while also encouraging policymakers to harness digital technologies to create a better future for work and human society. In an optimistic tone, Brynjolfsson and McAfee (2014) state that what they see as a rapid recent acceleration in digital improvement is robotics—building machines that can navigate through and interact with the physical world of factories and warehouses, battlefields, and offices. In this sense, for them, change will be very gradual, than sudden. Critical to understand is that these authors are focusing on the power of the computer instrumentally, but are not considering the wider political context in which such technologies develop and the implications these advancements can have for ordinary working people.

It is against this backdrop that deskilling can be understood on a conceptually different plane—as a process revolving around autonomy/control and not skills per se. It is a concept that theorizes formal disempowerment, appropriation, and, in a wider sense, cultural disinheritance, as old skills forms are displaced and the new ones that emerge are both limited and limiting in terms of anything but exchange value generation (Sawchuk 2006:611). In this sense, deskilling occurs in a context where workers are progressively reduced to performing simplified and routinized tasks. In this new context, a deskilled worker can learn in a few weeks to produce something that previously required years for a skilled worker to learn (Previtali and Fagiani 2015:80). My discussion on how workers in the automotive assembly industry respond and experience robotics technology in the workplace shows a mixed reaction to the enabling and the disabling features of the robotics that are being used on their factory floors. The findings section shows how the tendency

of robots contributing to job losses is often best observable in the long term, spanning decades rather than short-term cycles.

With lean production and flexible specialization, the content of work performed by employees is affected. Developing countries are under constant pressure to keep up with global trends of new technology and to show their international counterparts that they are developing the necessary skills to partake in contemporary globalization processes. As one research report of a South African state entity, the Manufacturing, Engineering, and Related Services Sector Education and Training Authority (merSETA[2]) states:

Global competitiveness among SA [South Africa] manufacturers is hindered by their inability to keep up with global advances in technology such as computer-aided design (CAD), computer-aided modeling (CAM), and Computer Numerical Control (CNC). The failure to keep up with the last of these has impacted dramatically on the productivity and quality of sheet metal fabricators. Combined with policies that seek to promote the use of local content, this has resulted in local OEMs persuading international first-tier suppliers to set up Greenfields operations in SA. [The] industry has expressed concerns that while it is easy to import technology in this way, SA needs to have the skills base to maintain it if it is to be used productively and efficiently. [merSETA 2013:48]

Mashilo (2010:27) states, "Our modern-day automotive industry reflects the state-of-the-art of automation. This applies both to automotive assembly plants and to components manufacturing plants, with exception of some labor-intensive methods in the latter. In addition, the production process is continuous not just within plants but between assembly plants and components manufacturing plants which supply the means of production to assembly plants." With lean production emphasizing teamwork and "multi-skilling," the content of skill is also aggregated within a team.

Skills development directed at workers, therefore, must take into account the power imbalance between workers and employers. In the twentieth century and the late nineteenth century, skilled work implied a certain degree of autonomy and control over work. This control meant that skilled artisans, for example, also had control over the tools and basic machinery they used for work. Thompson and Smith (2009:258) have pointed out that the limitations of Braverman's craft-orientated understandings of skill remind us that we need to maintain a focus on how the major economic actors seek to transform and utilize labor power rather than read skills through a particular time and template. The advent of technology and the separation of the worker from the product through the distribution and sales system meant that the power of the skilled worker had been reshaped.

As stated by Chen and Sonn (2019:255), deskilling is highly affected by external conditions, especially the quality and quantity of demand. This is the context in which robotics are introduced in the production process to improve quality, increase the speed of production, and minimize ergonomic challenges in the production process. While the question of deskilling is well covered in the theoretical literature, many scholars generally do not provide sufficient qualitative research to demonstrate concrete

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[2] The Manufacturing, Engineering, and Related Services Sector Education and Training Authority (merSETA) is one of 21 Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs) established to promote skills development in terms of the Skills Development Act of 1998 (as amended). The 21 SETAs broadly reflect different sectors of the South African economy. MerSETA encompasses manufacturing, engineering, and related services.

evidence about changes in the workplace that contribute to deskilling. I drew on the tensions and contestations in the literature to look at how empirical evidence drawn from qualitative research in production factories can contribute to a more concrete understanding of how technology and deskilling manifest in the workplace environment.

Methodological Outline

The research for this study combined semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and observations in the two auto assembly plants. The research process itself lasted eighteen months, not consecutive but done in different phases due to the logistical challenges of doing fieldwork. The two companies have been anonymized as per the ethical requirements of the research and the request by the participants to be anonymized.

"Company A"

This company is a subsidiary of a global manufacturing company that started in Japan. The company was the leading motor vehicle seller in South Africa during the 1980s. The company's production consisted of seven platforms and, up to 1995, had manufactured two passenger car models. In 2008, the company only had three platforms. R1 billion (approx. 68382528.00 EUR) was invested to build the company's right-hand drive versions. The manufacturing methodology driving the company's increased productivity is encapsulated in its vision of being quality-driven and waste-free.

"Company B"

This company originated in the United States of America and started its operations in South Africa

during the early twentieth century. The company is considered the most technologically advanced car manufacturer in the country. It was the first to introduce robots in 1987 in its body shops, followed by its paint shops. Its complex, multi-model production outline performs on a highly diversified output, having a product range that consists of eleven models with more than one hundred and thirty variants.

Accessing the field involved a departure from conventional methods of calling up or emailing a potential interviewee. Like Cruz and Monteiro (2017:124), I realized the importance and benefits of privileged contacts, which facilitated a significant number of other interviews by mobilizing their network of interpersonal relationships. At times, previous contacts were used to secure appointments with the targeted interviewees. 'Textbook style methodology' tends to emphasize several rules, regulations, fieldwork protocols, and a structured way of doing qualitative fieldwork. Interestingly, in some instances, non-conventional (which are ethical) ways of gathering data and accessing the field operated as effectively as conventional prescriptions. "Without successfully negotiating access, research comes to a screeching halt. As well, access is not simply a one-shot deal that is negotiated once and for all; rather, it is negotiated and renegotiated throughout the research and is thus an ongoing process" (Lofland et al. 2006:21). For instance, the requirements of calling up participants, setting up appointments, and similar logistical approaches were not always effective for me in this study, the research required constant renegotiation of access. Through personal contacts and networks within the trade union, participants were approached directly and interviewed anywhere at the plants, during training sessions, in the staff office, between a march/protest, and at the soccer grounds where the workers play games on Friday afternoons.

Access to the participants took three forms. First-ly, I spoke to supervisors and shop stewards who were willing to participate in the research and ini-tially had key informant interviews with them and informal discussions about my research. Secondly, those who were interviewed suggested that I try to cover as much of the plants as possible to gain a more holistic picture of the production processes and skills training. Thirdly, I conducted interviews with workers I could speak to during their breaks and at the Friday afternoon soccer sessions and so-cial events at one of the plants. On the other plant, I was able to interview workers during the down-time training sessions held off-site and between the strikes that took place at the plant.

The world of industrial production and the auto-motive sector was not entirely new to me as I had previously worked for two years (2001-2002) as a production and export planner at Leoni Wiring Systems in East London, a company that produces motor car harnesses (electronic wiring), supplying them to various automotive assemblers in South Africa and internationally. The experience gained working at Leoni Wiring placed me in good stead when encountering the production jargon and the physical structure of the two plants. Basic knowl-edge of the production efficiency calculations, the feasibility planning, and the language of 'line re-balancing' allowed for an easy flow of conversation and interaction with the various workers and man-agers within the two production plants. However, the rapid changes in technology and the might of the *logistics revolution*[3] struck me as major changes

since I had last been in a production plant around 2002.

In the context of this research, I was both an 'in-sider' and an 'outsider' given that, for instance, amongst the workers in the plants, I was unknown to them prior to engaging in the research. So, the language and terminologies they used in re-sponding to questions were framed according to what they thought would be a level required for research purposes. In other words, it tended to be formalistic as some of the concepts are technical and require a deep understanding of their work to appreciate the jargon linked to them. As an ex-ample, the language of robotics and production scheduling assumes one has experience in pro-duction about how the content of the work is done. 'Outsiderness' also has its disadvantages because to grasp the broader meaning, one needs a basic knowledge of the various technologies in produc-tion. However, at the same time, the 'insiders' (the workers) seemed to appreciate the critical way in which I questioned the outcomes or content of the production processes in their workplaces and the related restructuring of production.

I visited these two plants about two times each to conduct visits and to gain a sense of how pro-duction is working and to speak with some of the workers on the lines to ascertain their views on the production process. During these visits, I conduct-ed observations based on looking at the organi-zation of the production processes and the ware-housing system; how operators insert parts into the vehicles on a moving assembly line, the paint shop, as well as the body shop, which are crucial to

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[3] By this I mean the extensive network and power of logistics over the production process. Logistics handles the materials, delivery, and supplies to and from the plants. Over recent years, the phenomenon of logistics and supply value chains has been seen as central to the changing modes of capital-ist accumulation, as transport networks are also affected by the wide logistics systems that form the backbone of modern economies. See: Bonacich and Wilson (2008) for further elabo-ration on the concept of the *logistics revolution*.

the quality of the final product. This is tied closely to the rigid ways in which time is regulated in the plants. Whether it is the timing of the breaks, the timing of production output in line with efficiency, which translates into 'unit production' per segment of the plant, or whether it has to do with the 'best time' to make for interviews is all largely centered on time. The availability of workers who work on the production line is regulated by these structures of time. Shift workers at both plants start work at 06h00 or so, have the first break at 09h00, and finally knock off shift at around 14h00.

My first impression of the plants is that they are highly securitized with tall fences, electronic detection devices, and a few other checkpoints. The plants are clearly on high-speed production schedules with various signboards showing production cycles and daily targets of the plant. Entering the plant also has a literally cold atmosphere with workers spread in line with their operational duties within the various segments, which are demarcated. The movement of hysters and shifting of production components in and out of the plant was coupled with loud noise and screeching of these machines. I have used the richness of these observations to inform the analysis of the data, which I cover in the sections below.

The conventional setup of appointments, which is familiar amongst white-collar workers, had to change for the interviews with the training manager and the training supervisor, as they are also aligned with shift times that link to the production schedules of the plant. The visits did not last long as there are rules on how people access the plants and the safety requirements for visitors. I, therefore, had to access informal groups of workers, which gather on Fridays and during a more social atmosphere, to

do further interviews and extend areas of research I may have missed through formal interviews. I was able to keep descriptive notes as I was taken for the tours by the training facilitators.

Interviews with the workers at both plants were aimed at soliciting the workers' experiences related to skills development / training at a practical level at the point of production. What stands out as a significant feature is that production philosophies are similar across the two companies and vary mainly on the branding and the type of product manufactured. The workers interviewed seemed to have a strong sense of a need for improved working conditions in their respective plants, as well as greater opportunities to empower themselves educationally for life beyond the plant. Workers do use the space created by researchers to express their general frustrations with some aspects of work as they view it as an opportunity to describe such frustrations to an outsider.

The approach to the analysis of the data was based on thematic analysis. This is due to the research questions that are open-ended and are meant to elicit a broad range of responses. Unlike a survey method, the semi-structured interviews generated data that are more suitable to analyze thematically. Just as Silva, Gillmann, and Tate (2018) have stated, I was less concerned with finding a representative sample; my idea was to get data through open-ended questions, which would show meanings, attitudes, and subjective factors that are critical in producing findings that are relevant to the objectives of the research. The thematic analysis allows for themes, patterns, convergences, paradoxes, and contrasts to be identified. In the research, six steps were followed in the thematic analysis, as shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Six steps in the thematic analysis

Step No.	Description of theme	Activities
Step 1	Familiarity with data	18 interviews were transcribed, and the author revisited them before writing them out . The audio tape was double-checked for accuracy.
Step 2	Generate initial codes	Coding was done manually and considered the context of the interviews. Returning to the literature was critical in informing the nature of the codes developed.
Step 3	Discovering themes/ searching for themes	Initially, a mind map of the codes was developed, which was iterative. This informed the development of sub-themes in the write-up of the research.
Step 4	Reviewing themes	The focus was on internal coherence within the themes; these are discussed in the findings section.
Step 5	Definition and naming of themes	The naming of themes was based on narrowing the focus of a theme. The goal was to capture the essence of a theme.
Step 6	Writing the analysis	The final write-up followed the themes emerging from the analysis.

Source: Adapted from Ruggunan (2013).

Interviews were transcribed and a three-step process of coding was followed—*open*, *axial*, and *selective coding*. Open coding involves the researcher assigning initial codes in a first attempt to condense the data into categories. Corbin and Strauss (2012) maintain that open coding involves data analysis, which forms categories of information and a grouping of the statements into broad ideas. Axial coding is a second pass through the data whereby the focus is on the initial codes rather than the data. Selective coding involves scanning all the data and previous codes; major themes are then generated with this phase of the coding process (Neuman 2006). The idea of the coding strategy was to reduce the large data into a manageable size, which follows the themes generated through the interviews.

Corbin and Strauss (2012:66) argue that coding is more than just paraphrasing. It is more than just noting concepts in the margins of the field notes or making a list of codes as in a computer program. It involves interacting with data (analysis) using techniques such as asking questions about the data, making comparisons between data, and so on, and in doing so, deriving concepts to stand for those data, then developing those concepts in terms of their properties and dimensions.

Questions of Race, Class, and Gender in the Field

South Africa comes from a history of colonial and apartheid oppression in which racial oppression of the Black majority by both White colonial settlers

and successive governments of National Party administrations of the apartheid system was crucial in the marginalization of Black people from the economic mainstream of the country. Apartheid and colonization, however, did not only assume a racial form but also assumed a gender and class form. Black women suffered what is commonly referred to as "triple oppression," as they have been oppressed as a race, a class, and a gender. Questions of race, gender, and class can never be overlooked by a social science researcher in South Africa; while doing fieldwork, these issues manifested through ongoing engagement with different interviewees.

Lofland and colleagues (2006) maintain that virtually all social orders place emphasis, although in varying degrees, on ascriptive categories such as gender, age, race, or ethnicity as important criteria for differentiating among people. Sociologists doing research in South Africa have to be aware of this context regardless of which research is being conducted. Of the 18 respondents, three were females, and 15 were males; only one of the females interviewed was in a management or supervisory position, while of the males, five were in supervisory or management positions and others were general workers in the production operations.

Table 2. Information about the sample

Gender	Race	Position held	Years of employment	Total
Female	Black/African	Supervisor	12	1
Female	Black/African	Worker-operator	8	1
Female	Black/African	Worker-operator	5	1
Male	White	Management/Supervisor	14	1
Male	White	Management/Supervisor	6	1
Male	White	Management/Supervisor	25	1
Male	Black/African	Management/Supervisor	11	1
Male	Black/African	Management/Supervisor	7	1
Male	Black/African	Worker-operator	11	1
Male	Black/African	Worker-operator	30	1
Male	Black/African	Worker-operator	6	1
Male	Black/African	Worker-operator	18	1
Male	Black/African	Worker-operator	12	1
Male	Black/African	Worker-operator	9	1
Male	Black/African	Worker-operator	8	1
Male	Black/African	Worker-operator	16	1
Male	Black/African	Worker-operator	5	1
Male	Black/African	Worker-operator	9	1
Total				**18**

Source: Self-elaboration.

The 'color' of research, publications, and intellectual voice remains an issue even in the post-apartheid context in South Africa. The subjugation of Blacks and the provision of poor education were meant to reduce Blacks to positions of factory laborers and administrators of apartheid's Bantustans (Hlatshwayo 2013:165). The result is that research output is influenced by dynamics of racial inequalities and 'fields' that tend to focus on Blacks as objects of research. The result is that researchers are constantly reflecting on race within the context of sociological research. As one leading critic stated:

> The rubbishing of race has a long history in South African scholarship. The academy refuses to engage race as a legitimate scholarly pursuit. New field studies lack sufficient critical theoretical grounding as they continue the patronizing focus on blacks as objects of study. Sociology seems to suffer from an acute case of identity crisis. [Mngxitama 2009]

These assertions have raised extensive debates in South African sociology, particularly as they relate to the categories of "race" and "class" in the field. The gender dynamic in South Africa manifests quite significantly within sites of decision-making in which males have historically dominated; the gender make up of decision-making and policy influence has a bearing on the sensitivities towards gender. Feminism as a philosophy is not necessarily confined to biological make up; it is a question of engaging with a masculine power structure, which expresses itself in broader societal relations and the capitalist economic order. Tshoaedi (2008:47) further argues:

> Women, particularly African working-class women, are often excluded from this process either as knowledge producers or full participants in the process of knowledge production. Research and knowledge production processes as arenas that are still exclusively dominated by the privileged few have implications for the research frameworks that are often followed in the process of gathering data. The binary oppositions of dominant and powerful versus marginal and weak, or educated and articulate versus less educated and inarticulate influence such frameworks. Approaching research from this standpoint already assigns research informants a less important role in the research process. It also assigns value to the different social worlds of the researcher and the research informants.

"Race" mattered together with language in my accessing the workers. Fluency in isiXhosa and conversational understanding of Setswana (which are amongst African indigenous languages within South Africa) facilitated easier access to the workers. Language is critical in providing access to the proletarian classes. It bridges the alienating effects of English and creates a space for first-language speakers to truly 'speak their minds.' It is one thing to enter a plant and be given permission, but completely another matter to build rapport with the interviewees. Being a Black person among these workers made navigating the research process far easier. The research of this study is cognizant and took into account the race, gender, and class questions as a triumvirate of issues that define the social formation of present-day South Africa. For example, my participants reflect the still existing racial inequalities in the country where Blacks are largely workers in elementary and less skilled occupations whereas, to a large extent, their White counterparts are in managerial and supervisory positions. It was against this background that the findings of the study emerged and the perspectives of workers on skills discerned.

Hearing Workers' Voices on Processes of Technology, Skills, and Deskilling in the Production Process

This section aims to understand the reflections of the workers to questions over skills development and work restructuring at their respective plants. The interview questions included: 1) Skills Development / Training is considered critical to the success of production in companies such as yours. How are you experiencing the various training programs offered by your company? 2) How have changes in production methods affected workplace training, in particular technical training? 3) What challenges/problems do you foresee due to workplace restructuring? 4) What role has technology played in affecting the skills training practices at your company? 5) How effective is the Training / Workplace forum in guiding workers' exposure to training opportunities? A critical issue in the writing out of the findings was to show anomalies or surprises that arose from the analysis. This involves going back to the literature and pointing out areas of convergence, divergence, and common patterns.

The idea is to acknowledge the 'voices' of the participants because the research process was not merely about communicating the authoritative knowledge of the researcher but involved learning from the interviewees. As Burawoy (2009) has stated, the key issue about qualitative research is the extension of theory by identifying anomalies and intellectual 'puzzles' that come from the findings and impact theory. There are three thematic areas that are discussed: 1) worker responses to the introduction of robots in the workplace environment; 2) the deskilling challenge on the two plants; and 3) grappling with the turnover times of capitalist production.

Theme 1: Worker Responses to the Introduction of Robots in the Workplace Environment

Within global production systems of companies, it appears that the usage of technology is uneven or mitigated by state policy intervention in certain countries. For instance, some workers believe that less technology has been introduced in their plant compared to other plants of their company in other parts of the world.

> In our case, here, like our plants in South Africa, we don't have so many automated machines, we are more, like, depending on manual labor—on people, you see, there are only a few automations here. So, for a company whereby they are depending on automation, there will be an impact on quality, there is an impact on quality. The quality from automation compared to the human's quality, produced by quality, will differ obviously because that one of the automation—it will be always constant because that thing is programed and then it will always produce the same result; and then when coming to a human being, he is sometimes tired—get tired and sometimes having his own problems. [Participant 2, 2013, interview]

There are mixed reactions among workers over the extent of the usage of technology and automation in production within their respective companies. Some maintain that many operations still require human labor while robots are placed in strategic areas.

> Speaking of our company specifically, it is not as automated. Almost 80% of our operations require human labor. Robots are in strategic areas, there are only 10 robots on the plant. In the body shop alone, there are 300 workers or so. The work is primarily done by human labor. [Participant 4, 2013, interview]

While this usage of robots in the body shop is consistent among the two plants, one employee worker defines the challenge as being about the consequences of the usage of technology for "re-balancing," which is a reduction of staff and distribution of work through many workers. In this regard one operator in plant A stated:

> Robots are only in the body shop; this is part of lean manufacturing resulting in rebalancing. This is basically a reduction of staff and distributing of a job or spreading of the work amongst workers. Some people only put the sides, the maintenance guy puts the panel, and the other repairs/programs the robots. [Participant 3, 2013, interview]

One worker in plant A argues that it makes no difference that other workers have degrees and diplomas because the machines are already programed to do the work, and matric (grade 12) level education is sufficient (to do the work).

> Someone with a matric should be able to survive in our workplace. It doesn't make much of a difference that some people have diplomas. The machine has been programed to work in a certain way, in Japanese plants, the robot can fit the door and measure the gaps, which means fewer worries about quality. [Participant 14, 2013, interview]

So, when some workers view the introduction of robots with trepidation, they are responding to a concrete situation based on their visual observation of the overall reduction of staff in their environment. Specialist in-plant engineers or technicians come with specialist knowledge of technical subject areas on which they are retrained to meet the specific requirements of the company.

Theme 2: The Deskilling Challenge in the Two Plants

Drawing from the findings of the research and the plant visits at the two auto plants, it appears that while Braverman's (1974) theory of deskilling remains perhaps the most seminal critique of the labor process under capitalism, there is a need to transcend this theory and enrich it with newer findings. My findings reflect that the phenomenon of deskilling is prevalent in both plants, which has an effect both internally in the plant and externally in society. The education system is, therefore, integrated into the debate of skill and deskilling in the sense that the knowledge content of all employees begins with education at both school and post-school institutions. Previtali and Fagiani (2015: 87) argue that when we analyze educated workers, we can argue that they are also subject to a process of proletarianization because their work, through the rationalization imposed by capital, is increasingly portrayed as manual rather than intellectual. Here, too, is a deskilling of labor and a flattening of wage levels, increasingly leading to the devaluation of work, both symbolically and materially.

Using Braverman's notions of conception and execution, I maintain that 'deskilling' occurs within the area of execution that is the internal plant level, while skill acquisition is largely external through education and the multinational production planning philosophies of large automotive companies. "Braverman's thesis on skill degradation through the continued separation between head and hand (conceptual and operational skills) misses new areas of accumulation that are constantly innovated within capitalism through its international expansion and technological dynamism. One key area

is the qualitative intensification of labor through more flexible and expanded use of worker capacities and tacit knowledge" (Thompson and Smith 2009:260). Braverman's thesis is useful, however, if we require modifications and augmentation of his theory to make better sense of the intersection between skill and production in the automotive assembly space.

Auto plants have a greater number of operator-level workers within the various segments of the plant, who are a combination of experienced, skilled, and so-called "unskilled" workers in relation to the work requirements of their plants. But, the deskilling that occurs intensifies due to the extensive introduction of technology, which is discussed in the section above on the impact of technological changes and work restructuring on skills development. Central to this technological intensification is the reduction in overall employment over time, which is a key feature of capitalism's production of a 'reserve army' of the unemployed.

To truly appreciate the complex nature of the skills issue, I argue that we should realize that, on the one hand, is a 'deskilling' component, the effects of which are felt on a large scale. Typically, operators in assembly lines remain largely involved in repetitive tasks and routine work. The education levels of these workers at both plants have improved dramatically since 1994 with the opening of a democratic education system in South Africa. On the other hand, there is a component of 'execution' in the sense that Braverman would describe it, which is the actual doing of the work where an assembly is critical.

This deskilling is occurring at a large scale because there is a greater concentration of workers at these lower levels of automotive assembly. Drawing on the findings, deskilling occurs both internally within the plant, but also externally in society. Deskilling in society occurs as the effects of technological intensification increase almost concurrently with a rise in youth unemployment, as an example. The unemployed youth include qualified graduates who simply are not being absorbed in large enough numbers into the industry. Some including artisans have been used on the assembly lines, as one plant-level supervisor states:

> Due to line rebalancing at many auto assembly plants, we are also seeing artisans having to work on the lines due to a lack of relevant work for them. This is the situation that is occurring frequently as companies face pressure to reduce costs and lay off staff. Artisans end up taking operator-level work to at least remain in employment rather than be retrenched. [Participant 17, 2013, interview]

Beyond these categories there exists a more skill-intensive and autonomous range of skill acquisition and application. This area is where higher-level University or University of Technology educated workers operate. These include engineers, procurement managers, cost accountants, and such who are brought into the entire process of planning for production. Their skills are often utilized to ensure that cost reduction is implemented through lean production, the introduction of new technology through innovation, and ultimately reduction in employment. The external dimension of the production planning regimes of multinational companies tends to be standardized across plants within a multinational system of a company. These production regimes impact directly on how skills are utilized and which technologies are introduced. Braverman would have described this

as the "conception" domain. In this way, when we discuss skills development in the economy, this approach can be useful in understanding where and how skills are inserted within the broader political economy of work.

Theme 3: Grappling with the Turnover Times of Capitalist Production

Interviews with the workers at both plants were aimed at soliciting the worker's experiences related to skills development at a practical level at the point of production. Interviews concentrated on specific segments of the plant: body shop and paint shop & trim and body. What stands out as a significant feature is that production philosophies are similar across the two companies and vary mainly on the branding and the type of product manufactured. The workers interviewed seemed to have a strong sense of a need for improved working conditions in their respective plants, as well as greater opportunities to empower themselves educationally for life beyond the plant. Workers do use the space created by researchers as a form of expressing their general frustrations with some aspects of work as they view it as an opportunity to describe such frustrations to an outsider.

Paint Shop & Trim and Body

It has been stated above that speed is critical in the production process, wherein efficiencies and time-based production methods are central to the organization of work. In addition to this, robotics has become more widely used in the South African automotive assembly sector. Speed is so critical to a point that one worker says it takes three minutes and three seconds to complete a work cycle in the paint shop and trim and body segment, which in-

cludes fitting in seatbelts, brakes, and other final trimmings to a car.

> Our cycle times are 3.3 compared to the 1.1 of our UK company's takt time. [This] means that [it takes] 3 and half minutes to produce the car in the trim area. The complexity is that while trimming the customer is in mind because that's what they feel. Importance A—tightness of brakes can cause an accident. Importance B—is the safety belt, for example, so that if A fails, the safety belt will kick in. Other issues like color are also important as per the standard it shouldn't be "off-color;" only after training you can see and differentiate between these colors. [Participant 10, 2013, interview]

Considering the speed at which this production takes place, one would have to include skill and knowledge within the pace of production. With experience, workers also add their tacit knowledge to the production process. Skills are not acquired or applied in the abstract—they emerge concretely within this production arrangement. New employees are trained in the philosophy of *Genba Kanri* and respect for standards on the shop floor, which is key to cost savings strategies. There are now fewer workers in the paint shop at plant B, given the ongoing cost reductions.

> There are manual application spray painters, which will only concentrate on the interiors of the car, and then the robotics will spray on the outside part of the car, and then the same in a top coat we have manual spray painters, which are the human being, they will concentrate on the interiors of the car because the robot cannot open the door and spray, so they will spray inside the car and then the robots will spray the outside of the car—the bigger part of the car—it will be the robots. [Participant 13, 2013, interview]

In this sense, we see the extent to which robots have taken over significant parts of the work of employees in the paint shop, as in the manual processes of painting the external parts of the shell of a car. The workers still do the manual painting internally, but for how long will this be maintained? Once the innovation systems can produce robots that can do internal painting, the possibilities are high for further reductions in staff due to technological changes.

Body Shop

This entire organization of the production process from body shop assembly to paint, trim, and final quality checks express the deepest fault lines of capitalist accumulation. Workers are being increasingly sidelined from their actual work because of technology and innovations. Through this process, we can see the bipolar dynamic of skills within the capitalist production system. Fewer workers at a higher level of skill, together with management, determine the templates on which production is structured; the rest of the workers, largely operators, simply follow these templates. To have a full discussion on skills we must account for this bipolar dynamic in skills.

The body shop is a segment in which the "shell" of a car is assembled. It has spot welders, operators, and panel beating. It is where a car "takes shape" and the metal sheet is formed into the design of the car to be finally assembled. Most of the work in this segment is simple repetitive work.

> Body, well, everyone will argue that his area is the most important because that's what I will also say because I am responsible for the body shop and stumping, where every sheet is flat, and then they press it into different sizes and shapes for the car, and then it comes to the body shop where we use spot-knives to join all these metal systems. The shape—the car, so it works more like a stapler, you know, a stapler when you staple pages and all of those, so we staple metal sheets to form the shape of the body of the car. [Participant 10, 2013, interview]

The importance of technical subjects and mathematics is often stressed as critical to acquiring skills that are relevant in the workplace. However, some jobs do not always require these skills, even though they are within the technical production process. The work in the body shop varies between technical and operational work. Typical operator work requires a minimum of grade 10 and good English language skills. Where training is required, it is in areas such as panel beating. One team leader described the work operations in the body shop as follows:

> Operations in the body shop vary. There are operators and technical people; there are spot welders who assemble the vehicle and join parts. The minimum requirement for a typical operator is standard 8 and good English. Math [is] not necessarily important. Build vehicles through spot welding, before painting and fitting the doors. CO_2 welding in the plant is divided into grades, so other jobs require skills such as panel beating, which takes four weeks to train. [Participant 11, 2013, interview]

What this means is that in a critical section, such as the body shop, there are varied skills required for production. The fact that the training can be done within four weeks or so implies that the work may not be as complex and may be simpler than some may be assumed by surveying the plant from the outside.

The most dominant philosophy of overproduction is quality or Total Quality Management (TQM),

which ensures that all specifications are complied with by workers. Skills are 'governed' by these production systems and philosophies, which influence how skills development occurs across the different segments of production. What we see from the body shop interview feedback is that the materials being used are changing and that workers, for instance in welding, embark on short-term, four-week-long courses to close the gap. In other words, they are acquiring skills on the job. The significance of these findings is that we learn about key tendencies in the internal logic of capitalist accumulation and how skill is simultaneously central to the production process, but, in other ways, skill is undermined by modern technological innovations.

Qualitative Analysis of the Interactions between the Participants

The experiences of workers with work restructuring and its implications for skill are not purely technical but also involve social processes that reflect interactions between people and the dilemmas that arise due to their location within a capitalist production enterprise. As Barchiesie (1998:107) argues, restructuring is not a neutral concept belonging to the field of managerial prerogatives. It is rather inseparable from the social construction of meanings that workers attach to industrial change and that they utilize to articulate responses along a continuum between acceptance and resistance that ultimately influence the direction of restructuring itself.

Based on the research I conducted on the two plants, I have identified two key thematic areas that are critical for qualitative analysis of skill and deskilling within modern production plants: (1) relationships between people and (2) interactions between workers and dilemmas that arise. On *relationships between*

people, I found that technologies bring new types of relations between workers familiar with technology and those with less knowledge of technology. This was critical given that the two plants had different orientations to technology and automation; company A was highly automated with high levels of technology utilized in production resulting in large-scale restructuring, while company B was still largely labor-intensive and had less automation in its operations.

What this implied was that at company A, younger workers who are technologically savvy tend to appear as being fast-tracked and given better remuneration packages compared to their older co-workers who have a lot of experience but not as much general technological exposure. This reshapes the terms of the relationships between the workers at both plants as the quest for technological upgrading has a knock-on effect on questions of grading, pay scale, and wages. Whilst this is negotiated by unions at the level of labor bargaining forums, it is still a matter of importance in shaping social relations on the factory floor. One employee complained that the skills training offered on many occasions pre-supposes a new worker or takes the form of general induction.

> Some training is geared towards induction, but termed "skills training,' but it doesn't facilitate adequate upward mobility for workers. They tend to involve safety, team building, kaizen, et cetera, but these are daily issues. Not issues that facilitate the upward mobility of workers in terms of the pay scale. [Participant 4, 2013, interview]

The other critical dimension is *interactions between workers and dilemmas that arise*. In my interviews with the participants, I found that, contrary to gen-

eral views, skill is not a purely technical or linear set of processes because it produces spaces for workers to interact in complex ways, often producing contestations and challenges to the insertion of new technology. Barchiesie (1998:107) maintains, contending perspectives and paradigms have often shared a view of production under capitalism as an area of disarticulation of individual lives and meanings and new articulations around the specific organizational, spatial, and temporal requirements of factory life. As I have shown above, in Company A, the high levels of automation led to intense restructuring, which led to the reorganization of work and, in some areas, the reduction of staff.

The company adopted a strategy of *line rebalancing* to divide the work of one employee among four employees. This meant that even highly skilled workers had to be downgraded to the level of operators just to keep their jobs. This undermines the principle of solidarity among the workers and sees skill as a matter of hierarchies rather than a basis of uniting the workers as a social force. These tensions that arise because of restructuring demonstrate that beyond conflict and control there is a range of other areas of contestation within factory life that are relevant to the skills of workers and circumscribe the nature of social relations amongst workers. The quest for skills often results in recruits being perceived to have greater benefits than longer-serving employees. One worker suggests that:

> Certain skills, like inspectors or metal finishers, don't seem to enjoy the same recognition as the new recruits who are technologically advanced. As a result, the union has had to bring in expert advice to assist in negotiations with management about the content of skills and the link to pay grades. [Participant 5, 2013]

The skills issue is tightly connected to recognition and progression and is, therefore, a real issue of contestation between workers, but workers are also able to use it as a terrain of confrontation of the management within the continuum of acceptance and resistance that Barchiesie (1998) suggests.

Discussion and Conclusion

In this paper, I have shown how the deskilling thesis remains relevant in the context of automotive assembly in South Africa. Skills researchers have tended to study the relationship between education and work in ways that explore collaboration and responsiveness without providing us with perspectives on the changes in the actual content of work. As Thompson and Smith (2009) have argued, Braverman's thesis on skill degradation through the continued separation between head and hand (conceptual and operational skills) misses new areas of accumulation that are constantly innovated within capitalism through its international expansion and technological dynamism. One key area is the qualitative intensification of labor through more flexible and expanded use of worker capacities and tacit knowledge (Thompson and Smith 2009:260). The deskilling debate has tended to be confined to a much narrower set of institutional relationships of work and, as a result, much of the contemporary research in labor studies tends to overlook the complexities of the social and political context that shapes the labor process, as well as experiences of workers. For example, some recent writing on deskilling (Machacek and Hess 2019; Richardson and Bissell 2019) concentrate on issues such as value chains, manufacturing and services industries, digital skills need, et cetera. However, developing countries face the acute challenge of the need for a link and extension of the concepts of technology and deskilling beyond traditional institutions of work.

Deskilling is central and endogenous to the broader processes of capitalist accumulation and, therefore, cannot be treated as a purely technical development as it is tied to the political-economic structures that shape society.

The evidence coming out of the findings points us to an interesting perspective about the degree to which automation technologies are labor-saving or labor-augmenting. Concerning the environment of vehicle assembly, Benanav (2019:9) states that "With labor-augmenting technologies, a given job category will continue to exist, but each worker in that category will be more productive. For example, adding new machines to an assembly-line producing cars may make line workers more productive without abolishing line work as such. However, fewer workers will be needed in total to produce any given number of automobiles. Whether that results in fewer jobs will then depend on how much output—the total number of cars—also increases." This points to the long-term tendencies I referred to in the con-ceptual discussion, as well as the views expressed by some workers that I interviewed. At the core of this is what Spencer (2016) highlights—that the political-economy context is important in understanding the role of technology in society and helps us to transcend a narrow focus on the instrumental aspects of the power of computers, as these computers never operate outside of the wider societal context.

Acknowledgments

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