

Social interactions at work: why *interactive work* should be an analytical category in its own right

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to make a conceptual argument for considering interactive work – i.e. work made up of micro-level exchanges or social interactions with third parties such as customers, patients or citizens – as a distinct analytical category in employment-related research. The argument is underpinned by the core role played by interactive work in valorisation.

Design/methodology/approach – This is a conceptual paper, with its argument based on key findings from the debates on symbolic interactionism, service work and interaction work. These are merged and combined with a valorisation perspective.

Findings – “Social interactions” and “work” have mostly been considered separately by theoretical sociology and the sociology of work. The author contends however that the two concepts should be viewed together, as social interactions at work are a constitutive feature of many occupations, jobs and tasks. This implies studying both exchange and social relationships between the different parties and their embeddedness in specific (multi-level) contexts. Moreover, there are two reasons why interactive work relates to specific working conditions: first, it involves customers or similar groups as third parties; second, it is key to valorisation. To systematically study interactive work, context-sensitive approaches spanning multiple (analytical) levels are recommended.

Originality/value – The article contributes to advancing the understanding of interactive work as a distinct form of work as yet under-theorised but deserving to be considered as a separate analytical category.

Keywords Social interaction, Interactive work, Service work, Service triangle, Valorisation, Working conditions, Labour process

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

Work as interaction is the central theme of sociological
and social psychological study of work.

Hughes (1971, p. 304)

Conceptualisations of different forms of work and employment often use dichotomies to distinguish between analytical categories: production versus service work, blue-collar versus white-collar work, paid versus unpaid work, part-time versus full-time work or permanent

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versus temporary work. While such dichotomies offer a simple way of differentiating distinct categories of work, there is a risk that some forms of work cannot be easily assigned to such dichotomous categories; moreover, certain forms of work might fit into more than one category. Challenging the value of dichotomies, such cases raise the question of whether there are forms of work outside the established dichotomies but deserving to be considered as a separate analytical category.

This conceptual article sheds light on such a case, i.e. interactive work, defined as work made up of micro-level exchanges or social interactions with third parties such as customers, patients, students, clients, citizens or similar groups (hereinafter referred to as just “customers” or “counterparts”). Interactive work is thus widespread in the labour market: while common in such sectors as hospitality, retail, education or care, it is also to be found in professions involving consulting work (e.g. among consultants, lawyers or architects). It thus involves tasks performed in different occupations, professions and sectors. I argue that interactive work should be considered as a separate analytical category despite falling through the cracks of established dichotomies.

While critics may equate interactive work with service work, I argue that interactive work is a broader category and a category in its own right. On the one hand, it exists in nearly all sectors, not just the service sector (customer services or sales work also exist in the manufacturing sector). On the other hand, interactive work is also performed within organisations, for instance in the context of managing workers or collaborating with colleagues (in line with [Eurofound, 2020a](#)). Despite overlaps, theorisations of service work often do not explicitly incorporate the role of social interactions between workers and customers (or the “social relationship” inherent to service transactions) in the labour process. Conceptually speaking, “social interactions” and “work” have often been examined separately ([Böhle and Wehrich, 2020](#)). While “social interactions” have mainly been a subject of theoretical sociology, the concept has hardly achieved prominence in the sociology of work, despite the linkages between them.

Service work is generally characterised by a relationship between a service provider – in many cases employed by an organisation – and a service recipient ([Dunkel and Wehrich, 2013](#)). The three parties – employee, organisation and customer – are the core actors in the so-called service triangle ([Leidner, 1993](#)). Irrespective of the form of the service relationship (e.g. direct or indirect; relationship or encounter, technically supported or not), a task is generally completed in exchange for money. The provider works on a “product” (i.e. the service provided) which will eventually be owned by the recipient. As the product is often only vaguely defined and subject to negotiation between the parties; social interaction – or interactive work – between provider and recipient is required ([Dunkel and Wehrich, 2013](#)). Hence, service work involves both exchange and social relationships ([Gross, 1983](#)). As yet, the exchange relationship has been the focal point of research, with only few studies highlighting the coordination through social interactions – termed “co-production” ([Gross and Badura, 1977](#)) – between both parties as being critical to accomplishing the task (leading to the service being delivered in a particular quality). On the one hand, this assigns an active role to the customer in the labour process: instead of being conceptualised as a passive or static recipient of a product/service, the customer “co-produces” it through interacting with the worker. On the other hand, this points to potential interdependence problems between service provider and recipient, to be resolved through interactive work. In sum, these considerations underline the benefits of actively including the social relationship between service provider and recipient – made up of micro-level exchanges or social interactions – in future research and emphasising that one particular feature of interactive work is the co-existence of exchange and social relationships.

Research on service work has highlighted the presence of the customer as a constitutive feature of service relationships ([Leidner, 1993](#)). I take this argument one step further, claiming that, instead of the mere presence, it is the social interaction between service provider and recipient in the context of the service triangle that is a constitutive feature of service

relationships. Underpinning this argument, I combine insights from various debates using a valorisation perspective stemming from labour process theory. In doing so, the article contributes to advancing our understanding of interactive work as a distinct form of work that has to date remained under-theorised. It also argues for actively integrating the interaction level (and interaction order) when studying forms of work characterised by micro-level exchanges between workers and customers.

A similar demand was recently voiced by [Schneider et al. \(2022\)](#). Contending that worker agency has remained under-theorised in existing service work research, their meta-narrative review introduces the concepts of *sense-making* and *resourcing* to describe how interactive workers skilfully deal with the contingencies of working with other people. This paper takes a different angle: instead of specifically focusing on how workers deal with such contingencies, it offers a conceptual reflexion on the meaning and specific features of interactive work and their implications for working conditions in general. Accordingly, it is not only the presence of the employee's counterpart and the associated uncertainty that make interactive work a distinct form of work but also its centrality for organisations' valorisation, as explained in the following sections. Whatever the case, both papers share the view that interactive work should be given greater prominence in employment-related research and debates (both theoretically and empirically).

The article is structured as follows: It begins by sketching the roots of the study of social interactions in theoretical sociology and debates on work and employment, looking at both international and German sources (German articles are scarce in English-language journals). Based on those insights, the argument is elaborated, explaining why interactive work is distinct and should be considered as an analytical category in its own right. The conclusion provides possible directions for future research.

Social interactions in current debates within the context of work and employment

The roots of social interaction studies

In the last century, the Chicago School pioneered (theoretical) sociological research on social interactions, developing a school of thought known as symbolic interactionism which “*focuses on how people develop their concept of self through processes of communication in which symbols such as words, gestures and dress allow people to understand the expectations of others*” ([Watson, 2008](#), p. 48). One of the most renowned researchers in this tradition is Erving Goffman who conducted ethnographic research on social interactions, particularly in public spaces. According to [Goffman \(1983, p. 2\)](#), “*social interaction can be identified narrowly as that which uniquely transpires in social situations, that is, environments in which two or more individuals are physically in one another's response presence*”. Based on this definition, he concludes that “*the interaction order*” is “*a substantive domain in its own right*” ([1983, p. 2](#)). Moreover, he defined key concepts such as “impression management” or “front and back stages” ([Goffman, 1959](#)), concepts easily applicable to work-related social interactions and used in later service work research.

A clearer link between symbolic interactionism and the world of work was established by Anselm Strauss' ethnographic research in hospitals. He developed an array of concepts (i.e. *articulation*, *arrangements*, *working things out* and *stance*) for analysing “*interactional mechanics*” ([Corbin and Strauss, 1993](#)). In his view, negotiation processes in the context of work are a constitutive feature of work itself, with their sum constituting the so-called “*negotiated order*” in organisations. The order itself is thus the result of on-going negotiation processes and adjustments between organisational players interacting with each other.

Despite potential links between symbolic interactionism and the sociology of work, cross-fertilisations (like the 1993 study of Corbin and Strauss) between the two fields are scarce, possibly due to a major difference in focus: while symbolic interactionism focuses on

individuals and their roles in social life, the sociology of work pays greater attention to collective relations, structures and systems. Context has thus played a greater role in the sociology of work than in the tradition of symbolic interactionism.

Social interactions in international debates on work and employment

In the late 1970s, an inter-disciplinary debate on emotional labour was initiated by [Hochschild's \(1983\)](#) book "The managed heart". The still on-going debate sheds light on the role of emotions, particularly in service occupations; accordingly, "*emotional labour (. . .) is a form of social engineering in which feeling rules are organizationally prescribed*" ([Lopez, 2006](#), p. 135). Organisations may require their employees to hide their feelings and/or show particular feelings befitting organisational goals or – as Hochschild calls it – "feeling rules" despite these possibly differing from their actual feelings. While this closely corresponds to Goffman's concept of "impression management", it is the organisation which prescribes the practices contributing to generating a good impression towards customers. [Hochschild's \(1983\)](#) work also demonstrates the importance of social categories and stereotypes; for instance, her research on flight attendants shows that feeling rules in this sector largely draw upon gender stereotypes. Yet, [Bolton and Boyd \(2003\)](#) view work-related emotions in a more positive way, pointing out that frontline employees are able to manage their feelings, and even considering this to be a particular skill. Apart from using workers' emotions for organisational purposes, studies in the field of aesthetic labour underline that a worker's appearance and behaviour are increasingly being used in service work to achieve organisational goals ([Warhurst and Nickson, 2007, 2020](#)). Although social interactions between workers and customers are the means by which emotions or empathy is transferred, the debate pays no explicit attention to them.

Developing in the 1990s, the on-going debate on (the sociology of) service work accelerated in the 2000s – mainly due to tertiarisation. Many of the related studies use labour process theory as their theoretical anchor (e.g. [Bélanger and Edwards, 2013](#)), with concepts like power, control or resistance frequently investigated. A key contribution in this tradition, [Leidner's \(1993\)](#) ethnographic study on service work in an insurance company and a fast-food chain highlighted not only important facets of service work like routinisation, scripting, deskilling or emotional labour to enhance productivity but also established the concept of the service triangle, consisting of the employee, the organisation and the customer. The triangle reflects employees' challenging task (or position within the triangle) of satisfying the demands of customer and employer alike: "*the power dynamic of the workplace shifts from a tug-of-war between workers and management to a three-way contest for control between workers, management, and service recipients*" ([Leidner, 1999](#), p. 91).

[Ritzer's \(1996\)](#) McDonaldisation thesis underlines the importance of the concept of rationalisation in contemporary societies and the world of (service) work. McDonaldisation is characterised by four principles: efficiency, calculability, predictability and control. Various studies highlight the implications for service workers: for example, deskilling (e.g. [Callaghan and Thompson, 2002](#)), a lack of autonomy through scripting (e.g. [Leidner, 1993](#)) or (digital) surveillance (e.g. [Pulignano et al., 2020](#)).

The idea of the service triangle and the shift from a dyadic to a triadic view incorporating the customer in the labour process has been further developed by various scholars. [Korczynski's](#) work stresses the ambiguous role of customers "*as a key source of pleasure and pain for service workers*" ([Korczynski, 2003](#), p. 55) and the potential tensions arising for employees. His model of customer-oriented bureaucracy ([Korczynski, 2001](#)) highlights two issues: First, the mere presence of customers within the service triangle impacts all facets of work organisation ([Korczynski, 2013](#)). Second, employees have to cope with competing demands, striving for efficiency in accordance with organisational goals and fulfilling

customer demands. These demands are often contradictory; in addition, some dimensions of the service experience such as its emotional quality are difficult to measure. According to [Korczynski and Ott \(2004\)](#), employees therefore strive to maintain the “enchanted myth of customer sovereignty”, i.e. conveying the impression that customers are controlling the service interaction although the employee is actually in control. This concept corresponds to Goffman’s idea of “impression management” as the employee transfers a certain impression when interacting with the service recipient to fulfil organisational goals and resolve competing demands. A further important concept, power has been studied in conjunction with the service triangle, with focuses on the power resources of the three parties, their various constellations and the shifting alliances between them (e.g. [Leidner, 1993, 1999; Lopez, 2010](#)).

In recent years, the debate has shed light on a number of other relevant aspects of service work: gender and race have been considered, with a particular focus on inequality and discrimination ([Wharton, 1993](#)). Indirect service relationships in which the customer is ever-present but physically absent have also been explored ([Ó Riain, 2010](#)) as have subsequent service processes when a chain-logic applies to service production ([Sherman, 2011](#)). Finally, ways of coping with the potentially contradictory nature of service work have been investigated, particularly with regard to employees’ individual and collective/formal and informal coping strategies ([Korczynski, 2003](#)).

Implicitly, social interactions at work play a key role in the aforementioned debates. However, their focus tends to be on the presence of the customer as a third party in the service triangle and on how this (active) presence affects work organisation and working conditions. Although the debates shed light on workers’ difficult position between the organisation and the customer, ways to resolve the possibly existing tensions and contradictions are hardly considered explicitly. This is surprising, given that the success or failure of a service transaction may depend on such ways. Indeed, social interactions or interactive work are key in this respect, as they constitute the link between workers and customers. The aforementioned debates often focus on the methods used by organisations to optimise service processes and decrease the associated uncertainty, and on how workers deal with them in the sense of coping strategies and resistance. This also underlines that the main unit of analysis in these debates is the workplace and not the social interaction itself between workers and customers. This has two consequences. First, the scope to engage with questions of worker agency and the ways in which workers deal with the uncertainty inherent to social interactions with customers is quite limited ([Subramanian and Suquet, 2018](#)). Second, the debates mainly focus on the social order, sometimes neglecting the interaction order embedded in this social order ([Schneider et al., 2022](#)).

The German debate on “interaction work”

The fact that work-related social interactions have hardly been explicitly considered in research sparked an inter-disciplinary debate in Germany in the 2000s rooted in labour sociology, labour psychology and work science/ergonomics. Two interrelated claims were central: First, work involving other human beings as the subject and/or object of work (referred to as interaction work) engenders specific job demands and implications for work organisation that may differ from those of purely object-related work. Second, work-related social interactions constitute work and should be considered as such.

According to [Böhle and Wehrich \(2020\)](#), these claims result from three shortcomings in existing research. First, (service) work has often been studied through the lens of production or blue-collar work, leading to a longstanding neglect of the social aspect inherent to interaction work (i.e. the micro-level exchanges between different groups of people). Similarly, [Dunkel and Wehrich \(2013, p. 50\)](#) highlight that “*services are more than economic*

transactions", a view also reflected in current service work research. Second, sociological theory has mostly explored the concepts of "work" and "social interaction" separately. The sociology of work has predominantly studied paid work in the context of organisations, involving planned rational actions in line with specific (organisational) goals. However, social interactions are not always guided by rationality. Due to this discrepancy, both concepts – work and social interactions – have rarely been conceived as an entity (Dunkel and Weihrich, 2018). Third, service relationships are characterised by subjectivity, emotions and/or corporeality. Except for emotions, those concepts – which matter when studying interaction work – are rather new and to some extent still peripheral additions to debates on the sociology of work (Dunkel and Weihrich, 2010).

The conceptual roots of the "interaction work" debate go back to the work of Habermas (1973, 1981) that makes a distinction between work as instrumental rationality and interaction as communicative rationality, with Böhle (2018) arguing that the two are intertwined in service work. Moreover, building on symbolic interactionism, related studies investigate concrete interactional situations, often with a focus on workers' agency.

There are two conceptual approaches dominating the German debate. Rooted in labour psychology, Hacker's (2009) "dialogic-interactive labour" model highlights four characteristics of interaction work: First, it is considered not only as a form of (paid) labour but also as a social process following (ethical) norms and rules. Second, interaction work is co-produced by customers, thus limiting its level of predictability. Third, workers need to make assumptions about their customers' knowledge and desires to successfully complete a service transaction. Fourth, workers use both verbal and non-verbal forms of communication. Overall Hacker (2009) stresses, that interaction work includes complex processes of psychological regulation due to the direct involvement of customers in the labour process.

Involving several interrelated models of interaction work rooted in labour sociology (Böhle and Glaser, 2006; Böhle, 2011; Dunkel and Weihrich, 2012; Böhle and Weihrich, 2020), the other approach again features four key characteristics, whereby emotions play a major role in the first two. First, workers may (need to) influence the emotions of the service recipients, while, second, they may also need to perform emotional work in their social interactions with customers and similar groups to successfully complete service transactions. Third, interaction work is beset with uncertainty and imponderability due to the fact that social interactions with a third party are often not (fully) predictable. Fourth, interaction work is frequently characterised by the need to establish collaboration with customers to "jointly produce" the service in question. Indeed, workers and customers may even be forced to work together – this is referred to as co-production – to accomplish the common goal.

Hence, both approaches share key features: the emphasis on the social aspects inherent to service work and service transactions; the existence of uncertainty and imponderability; and the idea of co-production. Consequently, interaction work often requires negotiation processes between workers and customers as a precondition to successfully completing service transactions.

Studies in the tradition of the "interaction work" approach – which predominantly use qualitative methods – often focus on workers' strategies to gauge customer expectations in order to reduce the uncertainty inherent to customer interactions (e.g. Dunkel and Weihrich, 2006). Understanding how shared agreements between workers and customers can be achieved as a precondition to successfully completing service transactions – e.g. through establishing rules, trust or power – is crucial to understanding service work (e.g. Böhle, 2006 or Dunkel and Weihrich, 2006). Hence, in accordance with the "interaction work" tradition, interactive workers perform demanding tasks under possibly difficult conditions due to the complexities and contradictions characterising service work (Dunkel and Weihrich, 2012).

Overall, the “interaction work” debate identifies distinct features of interactive work not found in traditional production work, thereby underlining the complexity of this form of work. The debate promotes a micro-level view, using social interactions between workers and their counterparts as the unit of analysis and highlighting worker agency. It sheds light on how workers seek to gauge what customers want, how they develop a shared understanding about the service to be provided and establish co-operation to achieve a successful outcome. However, the debate’s dominant focus on workers and the interaction level has one limitation: the context in which interactive work is performed is of secondary importance, despite the fact that it may either constrain the workers concerned or provide them with (power) resources. This aspect relates particularly to the organisational context and the regulatory structures at various levels (workplace/company, sector and country); in addition, cultural norms and values should not be neglected, especially in comparative studies.

Interactive work as an analytical category in its own right

The overview of relevant literature emphasises that interactive work is often implicitly part of various debates rooted in various disciplines. Hence, knowledge is at best fragmented, with hardly any synergies created between the aforementioned debates. I argued that merging the key findings of these debates adds value, in line with [Vincent *et al.*’s \(2020\)](#) recent call for developing approaches integrating multiple (theoretical) perspectives.

While symbolic interactionism highlights the key role of social interactions as micro-level exchanges in everyday life, it focuses primarily on individuals and not on the context. Moreover, studies explicitly investigating the “interaction order” in the world of work are relatively scarce. The international debate on service work investigates this type of work in the context of the service triangle, stressing the challenges and potential contradictions faced by service workers when attempting to balance organisational and customer demands. Context thus plays a key role, in particular in reference to frequently changing organisational processes (e.g. through standardisation or scripts) and the associated consequences of the presence of customers within the service triangle. However, the key nature of social interactions linking workers and customers are often only considered implicitly. The German debate on “interaction work” spotlights the social interactions between the two (or the interaction level). Worker agency is a key concept, with the debate exploring how workers skilfully deal with the uncertainty and imponderability inherent to their work. The clear focus on workers and their micro-level exchanges with customers or similar groups goes along with the fact that the context (or structures) in which interactive work is performed is of secondary importance.

To underline the distinctiveness of interactive work and justify why it should become an analytical category in its own right, key features of all of the aforementioned debates need to be merged and – as I argue – combined with a valorisation perspective stemming from labour process theory due to the key valorising role of interactive work in organisations. This also means considering context (structure) – as highlighted by the service work debate and labour process theory – and worker agency – as stressed in the interaction work debate – on a par when studying interactive work. Combining this with a valorisation perspective is useful as it contributes to better understanding the key role of interactive work and its associated working conditions. Overall, this merging and combining allows us to advance our understanding of interactive work as a distinct form of work to date under-theorised.

Valorisation and interactive work

It is argued that valorisation – defined as “the process of creating surplus value” ([Thompson, 1983](#), p. 41) – is a concept key to understanding the distinctiveness and centrality of

interactive work. At the same time, a valorisation perspective is useful in better comprehending the working conditions of interactive workers.

In accordance with labour process approaches, profit – the ultimate goal of capitalist companies – is accumulated in two stages: first, surplus value of labour is extracted from the production process and second, value is realised once a product is sold on the market (Thompson, 1983). Organisations aim to optimise both stages in the function of valorisation. However, in (interactive) service work, there is only one stage of accumulation, as production and consumption happen simultaneously (Bélanger and Edwards, 2013). This implies that both worker(s) and customer(s) are present when the service is produced. What are the implications of this particular feature for the three parties in the service triangle?

According to Ó Riain (2010, p. 325), *“the significance of the customer’s presence in service interactions is that the pressures of product markets are brought directly into the interactional world of the service worker. In the classic dyadic view of the workplace, workers were subject to the pressures of organizational hierarchies and labor markets but remained somewhat insulated from the competitive pressures in product markets, which loomed large for their employers”*. In other words, interactive workers are constantly confronted with “product market” or valorisation pressures, as their micro-level exchanges with customers and similar groups are key to fulfilling this goal. This may confront them with a quandary, requiring them to fulfil two competing sets of demands – those of the organisation and those of the customer. Existing research underlines that, employees’ aspirations to provide high-quality services to customers could be constrained by organisations’ efficiency goals (e.g. Korczynski, 2001). Consequently, balancing such potentially competing demands may not be straightforward (Macdonald and Korczynski, 2008).

Organisations employing interactive workers strive to optimise service production to increase valorisation. However, interactive work is not as predictable as (standardised) production processes in manufacturing, with other human beings introducing uncertainty and imponderability into the process. Organisations may thus seek ways to decrease the uncertainty linked to micro-level exchanges with customers, for instance by standardising work processes, providing detailed scripts or by defining feeling rules for employees. They may also already apply specific criteria when recruiting staff (e.g. friendliness, politeness, aesthetic requirements) and offer training on interacting with customers. Organisations are dependent on their staff’s actions and performance when interacting with customers to fulfil their valorisation goals. Hence, they seek to alter the context in which interactive work is performed to decrease the inherent uncertainty. However, workers do not necessarily act in accordance with the (standardised and scripted) structures built around them, making room for worker agency.

Customers generally expect to be treated in a friendly, competent and polite way. Depending on the service they seek, they may for instance want to be consulted, pampered, taught or served in a professional way. They might also expect highly individualised treatment, seen as a sign of service quality. Valorisation goals can thus hardly be achieved without workers fulfilling such customer expectations.

These three perspectives have one thing in common: the centrality of interactive work. Organisations are in need of employees able to successfully perform interactive work to fulfil their valorisation goals; customers require successful interactive work to be satisfied with the service and its quality; and employees may want to perform successful interactive work to not only satisfy their customers and their organisation but also themselves. This consideration highlights the ample space for worker agency in the context of interactive work.

There is no simple answer to the question whether all those involved in the service triangle can achieve their goals; according to Leidner (1993), power relations (and constellations

within the service triangle) and the (power) resources available to the different players are crucial in this respect.

The availability of resources and the practices governing interactive work depend on the context in which it is performed. As this context spans multiple levels, multi-level approaches are best suited to studying such work. Interactive work – and the ways in which it is operationalized in concrete work practices – is embedded in and shaped by different contexts, particularly those of the organisation and of sectoral and national institutions (Vincent *et al.*, 2020; Pulignano and Doerflinger, 2018). Whereas the service work debate has largely explored the organisation as a meso-context in which interactive work is performed, the German “interaction work” debate clearly focuses on the interaction level, relegating the context to a secondary position. Yet, context relates to relevant structures, for instance regulatory institutions such as collective agreements at workplace, company or sectoral levels or legislation on employment or occupational safety and health. As socio-economic, socio-political and cultural contexts vary, it can be expected that work practices governing interactive work will also vary. Accordingly, configurations of work practices not only reflect an organisation’s strategy, but also the “external world”, including – but not limited to – features of the product and labour market (Vincent *et al.*, 2020). For example, market imperatives might force organisations operating in price-competitive segments to cut staff costs and increase work intensity. While such a strategy may follow an organisation’s goal of valorisation, it could constrain interactive employees in their (personal) goal of satisfying customers. Overall, an organisation’s strategic decisions and the related work practices governing interactive work respond to the contextual conditions in which it is embedded. Due to differences in context and strategic choices, variation with regard to work organisation and working conditions is thus to be expected.

Interactive work, work organisation and working conditions

Based on those considerations, the question arises as to what the distinctiveness of interactive work and its crucial valorisation role mean for the workers performing interactive work and their organisations. I argue that the core valorisation function of interactive work goes hand in hand with specific demands and challenges in terms of work organisation and working conditions. According to labour process theory, management strives to control the labour process in its drive for valorisation (Thompson, 1983). This is easier in traditional production processes involving objects. In interactive work, however, production and consumption happen simultaneously and in the presence of the customer, patient, client or similar groups. This adds uncertainty and imponderability to the labour process, meaning that organisations and their workforces need to find ways to deal with it. This in turn affects work organisation and working conditions, contributing to making interactive work – in combination with its core role for valorisation – a distinct analytical category.

Underlining the specific characteristics of interactive work in practice, the model of Böhle and Wehrich (2020) is helpful because the identified core characteristics can be linked to working conditions and aspects of work organisation. First, the model stresses the role of the emotions of both employees and their counterparts, as confirmed by the large body of literature shedding light on emotional labour, the need for and consequences of hiding personal feelings, as well as such concepts as deep and surface acting (e.g. Hochschild, 1983; Bolton and Boyd, 2003). Organisations may prescribe feeling rules in their attempt to make social interactions more predictable or controllable. Following such literature, it is argued that emotional demands are a specific feature of interactive work. Emotional labour could be one essential aspect contributing to successful interactive work appreciated by customers – in the sense of customer satisfaction – and the organisation – in the sense of valorisation – alike. However, employees may feel torn between competing customer and organisational demands. Moreover, complying

with organisational feeling rules can result in alienation, possibly with adverse health and safety consequences (Wharton, 2009). This is different to production work where an employee's emotional performance has no impact on valorisation.

Furthermore, due to the involvement of at least one other person (i.e. the worker's counterpart), interactive work is hardly predictable. Customers or similar groups are not to be considered as passive or static; they have power and can greatly influence interactional situations. Contingent upon each situation, employees need to decide how to deal with every single customer. To facilitate this, organisations often define specific structures and standards (like processes or scripts) in an attempt to maintain control. Yet, even if organisations create such structures, employees have agency regarding the micro-level exchanges with their counterparts. Moreover, there is mixed evidence about the effects of such structures (Leidner, 1993): on the one hand, they can relieve staff of the burden of deciding how to act in every single interactional situation, thereby protecting them. On the other hand, standardised or even scripted interactive work can result in monotony and adversely affect an employee's well-being. In addition, organisations may seek to reduce uncertainty through targeted recruitment strategies (hiring workers showing a so-called "service aptitude") or regular customer interaction training aimed at empowering workers to successfully deal with customers and possibly challenging interactional situations (Hampson and Junor, 2010). While such initiatives can help employees in their daily work, they primarily follow an organisation's goal of maintaining control to foster valorisation. According to Böhle and Wehrich (2020), the best way to reduce the uncertainty and imponderability inherent to interactive work is to develop "experiential knowledge" helping workers to gauge what customers demand – a precondition to successful service transactions. In the same vein, in a recent paper, Schneider *et al.* (2022) introduce the concepts of *sensemaking* and *resourcing* to describe how interactive workers perform their work. The former refers to the constant decoding of structures throughout the course of the interaction with a view to adopting a certain path or action, while the latter highlights worker agency and their ability to draw upon structures to legitimise their action. Whatever the case, interactive workers may need to be able to deal with a certain degree of imponderability, accepting the possible contingencies of working with other people.

Finally, interactive work is often characterised by the need to establish collaboration with customers to "co-produce" the service in question, with workers and customers possibly even being forced to collaborate – as is often the case in care work. Such collaboration is established through social interactions and requires "*inferential labour*", described as a process "*in which staff and customers organize their conduct and make sense of each other's actions for the practical purposes at hand. This includes how verbal, bodily and material resources are deployed in the coordination of work and organizational practice*" (Llewellyn and Hindmarch, 2013, p. 1403). Employees performing interactive work are thus not only in need of particular skills and competencies but also require the co-operation of their counterparts. Llewellyn and Hindmarch (2013, p. 1405) point out that the latter can be "*more or less emotionally needy and demanding; they can be more or less competent and knowledgeable*". Therefore, the diversity in customer characteristics and (potentially complex) needs again adds imponderability to the labour process. It is up to workers to solve this.

Due to these characteristics of interactive work, the related job demands and potential health and safety risks are different to those associated with non-interactive work. Alongside higher emotional demands, they include such issues as verbal and physical abuse, aggression or violence as well as disrespectful or humiliating treatment. Interactive workers may also find themselves confronted with the potentially difficult situation of their counterpart (e.g. in the care sector or social services) or with competing demands between customer service and organisational efficiency and sales goals (e.g. in sales work or consulting). Data from a large German trade union survey (*DGB Index Gute Arbeit*) conducted in 2018 highlights that 91 %

of interactive workers identify themselves with their work, with the majority of them considering it as meaningful (Holler and Doerflinger, 2021). Hence, apart from specific job demands, working with other people may also involve job resources.

The aforementioned characteristics of interactive work affect all facets of work and its practical organisation. Although the micro-level exchanges between workers and their sometimes erratic counterparts are at best partially controllable, organisations aim to maintain control over the labour process to promote valorisation. Alongside structuring practices like standardisation or scripting, new technologies offer further opportunities to control the labour process and/or increase labour productivity, for instance through digital surveillance (e.g. Pulignano *et al.*, 2020). On the other hand, the use of new technologies also has the potential to free up time for staff to spend with customers, patients or similar groups. For example, Eurofound (2020b) reports that the reduction of administrative tasks through automation enables care staff to invest more time in care-related or interactional tasks.

The possibility of using specific work practices is often context-bound. As mentioned earlier, this context spans various levels. Contingent upon the regulatory system, implementation of specific work practices may not be subject to unilateral management decisions but may involve employee representatives armed with information, consultation or even co-determination rights. Thus, work practices may need to be locally negotiated, with negotiations reflecting possible power asymmetries between those involved. Therefore, context-sensitive approaches to studying interactive work are required. The organisational, sectoral and institutional context may offer both opportunities and constraints with regard to an organisation's goal of maximising valorisation.

Conclusion

This conceptual article advocates considering interactive work as an analytical category in its own right. The argument is underpinned by combining key findings from different streams of literature and merging them with a valorisation perspective. While debates in theoretical sociology on symbolic interactionism highlight the role of social interactions in everyday life, their focus is often rather individualistic, with context only playing a minor role and social interactions at work only marginally considered. Debates on service work in the sociology of work hardly explicitly study social interactions in a work context, instead focusing on workers' challenging position within the service triangle and the consequences of the presence of customers as the third party in this triangle. The interdisciplinary German debate on "interaction work" seeks to unite the concepts of "work" and "social interaction", stressing the complex nature of work-related social interactions characterised by uncertainty and imponderability, and the ways in which workers deal with them.

The article argues that key features of these debates should be merged and combined with a valorisation perspective, as successful interactive work is often the precondition for valorisation (particularly in service work), the main goal of organisations in capitalist systems. In doing so, the article underlines the distinctiveness of interactive work and contributes to advancing theory-building on this particular form of work. Due to the distinct features of interactive work, the conceptual article makes a plea for considering it as an analytical category in its own right. This plea is in line with the recent work of Vincent *et al.* (2020) highlighting the benefits of combining different (theoretical) approaches with a view to developing a better and more contextualised understanding of practices governing the world of work and involving contexts at different analytical levels. It is also in line with the recent demand of Schneider *et al.* (2022) to advance theory-building on interactive work.

To date, social interactions at work or interactive work have often not been explicitly and systematically considered as a core feature of certain occupations, jobs or tasks, despite their

key valorisation role and the features making interactive work distinct from other (mainly production-oriented) forms of work. This has led to a situation in which the complexities of work-related social interactions and “interactional competencies” have frequently remained invisible (and also not reflected in pay structures). However, the COVID-19 pandemic has helped spotlight interactive work in current debates, particularly due to the manifold health and safety risks (e.g. related to contagion, excessive workloads and emotional exhaustion) faced by workers. While research on healthy and safe interactive work is certainly desirable (not only in the context of the pandemic), there are further areas to which future research could contribute.

First, future research should shed light on concepts like power relations and resources, inequality and inter-sectionality related to interactive work. To what extent and how do these concepts affect the working conditions of interactive workers? Answering such questions could result in important findings related to job quality and contribute to generating high-quality interactive jobs in practice. Yet, this also points to the question of regulation, i.e. how should the regulatory system at different levels (workplace, organisation, sector and country) be designed to generate high-quality interactive jobs, and how can workers be empowered to perform healthy and safe interactive work? Second, and related to the former, the role of the social partners and collective bargaining for interactive work should be investigated more systematically. On the one hand, this relates to the fact that interactive work is often performed in rather deregulated or unregulated sectors (particularly in private services). On the other hand, it points to the question of how interactional competencies and interactive work can be included in job evaluations in collective agreements and subsequently be reflected in pay structures and working conditions. Third, more comparative research is needed to find out how different (socio-economic, socio-political and cultural) contexts affect interactive work. Research in this direction could help in answering the question as to which features of interactive work are context-bound and which exist relatively independent of different contexts. Finally, research initiating a debate on (the combination of) suitable methods to study interactive work would be beneficial. Are workplace ethnographies suitable or is an ethno-methodological approach to be preferred? Relatedly, this touches upon ethical and data protection issues. As data protection regulations have become stricter in recent years, observations of social interactions at work could get more difficult as informed consent rules not only involve workers, but also customers. How to deal with such requirements is another question to be addressed.

Future studies providing answers to the aforementioned and other questions related to interactive work could contribute to highlighting the distinctiveness of this particular form of work. This would be an important step towards positioning interactive work as a distinct analytical category in employment-related research and towards making this form of work more visible in current academic and policy debates.

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