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Same job, different conditions. Comparing direct and indirect employment via procurement in public services in Italy

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Abstract

The privatisation and outsourcing of public services in Western capitalism have played a massive role in the welfare recalibration strategy. That externalization has been implemented mainly through public procurement, where public authorities buy services from private contractors. In public service offices, direct and indirect employees share duties and tasks but have access to different working conditions and protections. In our analysis, we have investigated the convergence/divergence between direct and indirect employees in public services, mainly education and social care, comparing attitudes and perceptions of 100 workers (50 direct, 50 indirect) on working conditions, level of protection, satisfaction, associational behaviour – union membership and professional organisations – and demand of representation. An 'organisational boundary' emerged, in that the work process was structured by public management without taking into account the different nature of the employees (direct and indirect) and their professionalism on the one hand; and on the other hand, direct and indirect employees share objectives and goals in the workplace, but answer to different organisations (public and contractors), each of which embodied its repertoire, values, and different working conditions.

Keywords: care work; welfare mix; public procurement; organisational boundary; representation system.

Introduction

The privatization and outsourcing of public services in Western capitalism have played a massive role in the welfare retrenchment/recalibration (Ferrera, Rhodes 2000) strategy. European states adopted austerity measures, to release the pressure on public budgets, by externalizing services through the introduction of a welfare mix system, characterized by outsourcing and quasi-markets. Externalization has been implemented mainly through public procurement, where public authorities/organisations buy services from private contractors. The definition of rules and conditions, the relation and the power between the actors involved in these partnerships (i.e. public/private/third sector) change not only between countries but also at a subnational level. The European regulation (2014/23/Ue) gives a general framework of public procurement strategy, that reflects the neo-liberal principles of marketization and free competition between private operators who participate in these public procedures. Nevertheless, the responsibility to regulate and implement the procurement process affects the regional and local administrators on one hand and significant varieties of organisations on the other (i.e. hospitals, schools, social services, etc.), causing inequalities between territories generated by different resources, both material and immaterial (i.e. institutional capacity, administrative and bureaucratic capacity, etc.). The logic that David Weil (2014) explores in his 'The Fissured Workplace', where contracting-out strategies are referred to the private corporate world, fracturing the basis of the relationship between employer-employees, and pursuing efficiencies but at the expense of employees, are applied to the public service sectors (as health, care, educations, social work). Sectors that historically have been hinged on citizens' needs, fostering democracy and translating citizenship rights into concrete actions. In public service offices, direct and indirect employees – the former dependent on the public organisation, the latter dependent or 'salaried autonomous workers' (Murgia, de Heusch 2020) of private organisations (profit and no profit, such as cooperatives) who won the contracts – share duties and tasks but have access to different working conditions and protections (Caselli *et. al.* 2019; Busso, Dagnes 2020; Franzini, Lucciarini 2022; Lucciarini, Pulignano 2023).

In this paper, we analyse the Italian case, where there is a historical dualization between public and private labour market regulation (Emmenegger 2011). In addition to this polarization, externalization strategies determine the coexistence in public service offices of direct and indirect workers. In our analysis, we have investigated the convergence/divergence between direct and indirect employees in public services (mainly education and social care) by comparing the attitudes and perceptions of 100 workers (50 direct, 50 indirect) on working conditions, level of protection, satisfaction, associational behavior (union membership, professional organisations, etc.) and demand of representation. We have used data from an extensive online survey, conducted from January to February 2022, promoted by CGIL-FP (main Italian union, Sector Public Function). The results of our analysis show elements of hybridisation between direct and indirect employees in public local services, namely in the care sector, a sector that is already burdened by the so-called care penalty (Folbre, Smith 2017). On the one hand, direct employees have lost security, mainly economically, due to wage compression in the public sector; on the other hand, under public procurement rules, indirect employees have fewer opportunities to act as autonomous workers with their contractor in terms of wage setting and scope for autonomy in the work process, nor have they gained the protection conditions to which direct employees are entitled (from job security to contractually defined social protection). Some public organisations implement austerity through emerging professionals hired indirectly – such as educators or mediators, or health workers – for economic convenience, assigning them the same tasks usually performed by established professionals. An 'organisational boundary' emerges, in that the work process is structured by public management without taking into account the different nature of the employees (direct and indirect) and their professionalism on the one hand, and on the other hand, direct and indirect employees share objectives and goals in the workplace but answer to different organisations (public and contractors), each of which embodies its repertoire, values, and different working conditions. Within a general perception of the common critical issues encountered in care work by dependent and independent workers, which unite them – albeit with some specificities – in complaints about significant gaps between workloads, remuneration, security, career prospects, and the social and public value of their profession, the needs of the two universes considered branch off in two different directions when it comes to the strategic requests submitted to the union.

The paper is organised as follows: after focusing on the debate on care work (section 1) and the configuration of public procurement as an elective policy in the reorganisation of public social work (section 2), the main empirical evidence of the analysis will be presented, divided into two sections, one descriptive and one interpretative, the latter conducted using a non-hierarchical cluster analysis (sections 3a and 3b). In section 4, this evidence is discussed and finally, in the concluding section, a few general remarks are stressed.

1. Care work between care pay penalty and public function

To focus on the characteristics of the workers at the centre of this contribution we adopt the broad view proposed by the International Labour Office in a recent report entirely dedicated to care work. The Report observes how the production of the care needed by society is ensured by the intertwining, which varies in time and space, of paid care work in public and private (non-profit and for-profit) entities, paid and unpaid domestic care work, and finally voluntary work (International Labour Office 2018). These different forms of care work, which are closely interdependent, range from the health and educational fields to the social and socio-welfare spheres and are aimed at satisfying basic material and social needs (varying based on age and health status) and at promoting people's well-being and social skills (England *et al*. 2002); they are subject to different models of regulation, organisation, and economic valorisation, configuring proper care regimes (León 2014).

Before recalling the main elements useful for a closer understanding of the characteristics of paid care work, the subject of this study, it is appropriate to make a few brief considerations of a more general nature.

Despite the centrality of care work to the well-being of societies and the essential functions it guarantees, as the recent pandemic has offered us the opportunity to 'rediscover', in the flux of capitalist societies the terrain of care presents itself dense with conflicts and contradictions (Fraser 2016), crossed by the tension between production and social reproduction, and between public and private responsibility. The institutionalisation processes of production and social reproduction as separate spheres, as they have been articulated throughout the history of capitalism, have triggered constant 'boundary struggles' – often as a result of political contestation – between the spheres bounding 'economy' from 'society', 'production' from 'reproduction' and 'labour' from 'family' (Fraser, Jaeggi 2018). On these, the archetypal association of care with skills derived from the essence of women as mothers and 'natural' carers, as well as the ambivalence of the relationship between care and work, have played a relevant role; where in capitalist societies it has to do with economic valorisation and more generally with social mechanisms of value attribution. What is at stake in the social and political trajectories originating from this complexity is the recognition of care work in the public space and at the cultural and economic level, to emerge from its invisibility, hand in hand with the counteracting of social disqualification, stereotypes and prejudices regarding gender, ethnic origin, and socioeconomic class, as in particular the feminist reflection on the subject has long highlighted (Bhattacharya 2017). The expansion of welfare systems over the last century has seen a moment of extension (however imperfect and unfinished) of public responsibility towards the production of care, contributing to the definition of a wide range of professional figures whose work is regulated by public institutions for the realisation of citizenship rights. Care workers, in particular those who compose the street-level bureaucracy (Lipsky 1980), embody and express that 'reciprocity between strangers' that nourishes institutionalised solidarity and ultimately the social bond (De Leonardis 1998), with the task of actualising rights. In this passage, the principle of 'thirdness' that caring work embodies takes on relevance through the public labour statute, a legal regime according to which work is not governed by its market value (remuneration defined as 'economic treatment'), but by the consideration of the *function* performed, to which public relevance is attributed (Supiot 2019). On the contrary, its weakening is at the heart of the neo-liberal design that has been affirmed for over forty years, leading to a veritable 'care crisis', fuelled by the primacy of individual responsibility for the care and by powerful processes of marketisation, privatisation and re-familiarisation of care (Dowling 2021), exacerbating social inequalities and the working conditions of care workers. In light of this framework, some points on paid care work will be presented below.

In advanced capitalist societies, paid care work takes place in complex organisational contexts and caters to people with very diverse characteristics and needs, requiring the acquisition of specific skills through formal education and professionalisation pathways, recognised by law. The different areas of activity are labour-intensive and generate a low productivity growth (Baumol 1967), with a high content of relationships, interdependence, and cooperation between operators and beneficiaries and between operators (England 2005), whose effects and outcomes exceed those generated towards the direct beneficiaries, in the form of an increase in public goods. As a result of the above observations, despite the many steps forward and the differences at the territorial and sub-sector levels, we are still faced today with what scholars call the care penalty (Folbre, Smith 2017): the combination of disadvantages in terms of the positioning of the professions concerning contractual and salary levels, working conditions, power of representation and so on, that weighs on the professional figures of the sector, which are worse than others of similar qualification, present in other areas of the tertiary sector. The overall care pay penalty ranges from 4 to 40% lower than the average hourly wage (International Labour Office 2018). Due to the high proportion of women among care workers (two-thirds of the global workforce in the care sector are women), this disadvantage can be traced more generally to the so-called gender pay gap, which relates to the economic discrimination suffered by occupational sectors in which women are predominant (England *et al.* 2002). Finally, global surveys illustrate how, regardless of the level of wealth and income in different countries, the conditions and wages of care workers tend to increase in the public sector and worsen in the private sector (International Labour Office 2018).

Looking at Italy as a whole, workers employed in the care sector (health, education, social assistance) account for 18% of the total employed (4,246,000 people); among these, more than one third are employed in the social care sector (including workers hired by families to perform home care activities) and involved in the wide range of activities that make up the social welfare (Caselli, Giullari 2022); the incidence of women is 75% (80% in the social care sector), as well as a significant presence of workers in the 'older' age brackets; one worker in ten is of foreign origin (with large concentrations in some sectors, particularly in residential services and paid domestic care work); three quarters are technical figures, with high levels of professionalisation; concerning working conditions, there is a high share of part-time work, above the average for the total employment, and medium-low contractual and wage levels (Istituto Nazionale di Statistica 2022; Müller 2019). Finally, it should be emphasised that a steadily growing number of care workers are employed by third-sector organisations, following the aforementioned public services outsourcing processes via public procurement. Since the 1980s in our country too, various strategies have been implemented to reduce public spending and 'resolve' the state's fiscal crisis and the welfare state crisis, paving the way for the entry of private actors in what has been called the 'welfare mix' and for the creation of a market of social welfare services. Processes that have developed unevenly at the territorial and sub-sectoral level of care work, based on a complex intertwining of socio-political and economic conditions (Dorigatti *et. al*. 2020; Fazzi 2022). Over the last two decades, therefore, there has been a parallel 'slimming down' of the public sector, both in terms of entities – equal to -20% in the period 2000-2011 and -3.2%, (-3500 entities) in the following period (2011-17) – specifically in the health and social care sector (-4.2%) as well as of personnel hired on permanent contracts, in favour of the increase (over +90%) of autonomous personnel, specifically in the health and social care sector (Istituto Nazionale di Statistica 2014; 2019). Alongside the swelling ranks of employees of third-sector organisations, there is a universe that is vast and heterogeneous in terms of the legal nature of the various entities that make it up and the different weight they have in the use of the workforce. The reduced staffing in public bodies, corporatization of forms of management, and separation between public and private suppliers push on the one hand toward the predominantly official tasks and forms of neo-bureaucratization of work of care (Tousijn, Dellavalle 2017), especially in the public sector. On the other, to an increase in workloads, a growing indifference to the personalization of user services (Fazzi 2016; Dellavalle, Cellini 2017), de-valorisation of professional content, and an increase in the distance between the operators' professional skills and the decreasing quality conditions of services (Gori *et. al*. 2014).

2. Public Procurement

Public procurement (hereafter referred to as PP) is defined as «an overall process of acquiring goods, civil works and services, which includes all functions from the identification of needs, selection, and solicitation of sources, preparation, and award of contract, and all phases of contract administration through the end of a service contract or the useful life of an asset» (UNDP 2010, 5). Over the last 20 years, PP has acquired an increasingly prominent place among the policy tools (Lascoumes, Le Galès 2004) used by Public Administrations (hereafter PA), in the management and delivery of a wide range of public policies. The root of this spread lies in the increasingly frequent – to the point of becoming systematic – decision by PA to deploy *buy* rather than *make* strategies in the implementation of public policies (Murray 2009). In the period of consolidation and development of European welfare capitalism, insourcing was the main mode of production of public goods and services, embodying the institutional and economic centrality and the weight of the public actor in the construction and definition of citizens' rights. Since the restructuring of the welfare regime, the choices of the public decision-maker have slowly but inexorably turned towards outsourcing. Two elements have weighed on this decision: the first resides in the public actor's ever-increasing demand for highly specialised and quality goods and services – also to align with supranational directives and indications – in line with the increase in technological and cognitive standards, which would cost too much if they were

internalised. The second element is motivated and justified by the imperative of the new public management (NPM) to make the PA more effective, through the application of rules and mechanisms borrowed from the world of private enterprise: efficiency, effectiveness, and cost-effectiveness, the latter to be pursued through competition between providers based mainly on the most advantageous economic offer. The need to curb public spending, through the NPM 'ideology', takes hold and progressively invades various sectors of the PA, increasingly involving the provision of services, in particular care (education, socio-medical, social welfare, health). This is a common trajectory in Western capitalism, where PP becomes an instrument of marketization logic (Öjehag-Pettersson, Granberg 2019). These logics produce, on the one hand, a dual market where public and private compete, and where the private outperforms the public in effectiveness and efficiency and implicitly reproduces economic inequalities in the access to services. On the other hand, the process of marketization via PP creates a market of collaboration with private actors in particular of the third sector, in the processes of management and delivery of care services. This second case is particularly relevant in Italy, where the legislature, starting in the 1990s, promoted and supported third-sector organisations, through a policy that afforded them considerable tax concessions, and systematically began the procedures for the purchase of care services, forging a connection between the PP and the third sector in the provision of care services, within a framework of roll-back of the State as the main provider. This connection made it possible to draw on a wealth rooted in the country, associationism, an ideal partner of local governments, given their increasing responsibilities in the management and delivery of services, the final parabola of a long process of decentralisation (Kazepov 2010). The closer local link between policymakers and citizens follows the electoral reforms that introduced the direct election of mayors and regional presidents, a reaction to the corruption scandals of the early 1990s, known as 'Tangentopoli'. The increasingly tight budget constraints, compliance with which was introduced into the Constitution by way of an amendment in 2012, decreed the success of this model, promoted at the European level under the Social Innovation strategy. This strategy fleshed out two narratives: a liberal one based on the hybridisation of public services through the creation of quasi-markets, capable of combining effectiveness and cost-efficiency, and a social-democratic one, revolving around the participation of civil society and the 'soundness' of subsidiarity – especially horizontal subsidiarity – capable of building territorial 'tailor-made' services. The outcome of these policies, however, the implementation of which depends on the type of interpretation that the actors in play attribute to the 'social innovation' strategy, has been a general and progressive abandonment of the centrality of the public actor in the definition and responsibility of the citizen's social rights, the object of measures and reforms with a managerial rather than substance-related slant. Some authors (Caselli *et al.* 2019; Hamilton 2022) have begun pointing out this logic. PP is considered a 'price-taker' instrument, i.e. one that is considered the most economically advantageous for the same service. However, especially in the social sector, rather than a price-taker, the PP seems to function as a 'market-shaper' (Štěrbová *et al.* 2020), because it establishes – or perpetuates – the value of the service, even in the face of major transformations. In fact, before the entry into force of the 2014 European legislation (2014/23/EU) that compares social services to any other good or service that can be purchased through tenders, they were considered 'special' services, due to their intrinsic social value, and were therefore subject to a protected tender regime, mitigating their competitiveness. The end of the protected regime in 2014 witnessed an explosion of competition with other actors who saw in this new market an opportunity, weakening in the Italian case the 'win-win' connection between public actor and third sector implanted in the early 1990s. The exit from the protected market – which kept this sector sheltered from economic logics tout court – meant that the public actor continued to purchase services uninterruptedly, with the same cost parameters – 'market-shapers' in fact – exasperating the competition between third sector actors and new for-profit actors. In the absence of other levers, labour costs and the burden on operators become the main element of competitiveness. This process is exacerbated by the nature of the tenders for the purchase of services, which, having to meet strict accountability criteria, include labour accounting instruments (Caselli *et. al.* 2021; Hamilton 2022). This accounting distances from the real working conditions, forcing workers to

operate under conditions quite different from those so rigidly drawn up in the calls for tenders, and with the social cost on the one hand of increasing unpaid workloads in a high-pressure system, and on the other of mortgaging the quality and adequacy of the service received by users. This process, among others, has brought into the national and international debate a reflection not only on the care penalty but also on the intra-sectoral differences concerning the provider in which workers are contractualised (public, private, and third sector).

3. Methodology
3.a Descriptive

General features of the sample
The sample analysed is a sub-sample of a survey conducted between January and February 2022, on public work conditions, carried out by the association Roma Ricerca Roma for the national and territorial CGIL Funzione Pubblica, aiming an assessment of public workers' perception of their conditions, needs, and satisfaction. The online structured questionnaire, divided into 5 sections (working conditions, income, satisfaction, safety, and demand for representation), voluntary and self-completed, involved about 700 workers of the Civil Service of the Municipality of Rome. While this system does not provide a reliable statistical representation of the general universe, it does collect the positions of workers who show greater organisational involvement and an active and reflective attitude towards the union. The majority of the workers are indeed union members and are already aware of the union's activities. Despite the bias of the sample, and the *caveat* due to the mechanism of auto-selection, the survey permits to investigate and compare working perceptions and conditions quite extensively. The creaming effect of the interviewed, driven by their motivation, appears clear if we consider the low number of non-responses (less than 1%).
The sample analysed here is composed of 96 care workers active within the welfare system of Rome, equally distributed between direct employees of the Municipality of Rome (dipcdrs) and those of cooperatives (dipcoops) operating under outsourcing arrangements[1].
These workers belong to the socio-educational (more than two-thirds) socio-assistance and socio-healthcare sectors (just under 20% each), and are so divided into both groups. The professions represented are social workers (of whom 8 dipcdrs and 5 dipcoops, equal to 14% of the total), socio-educational workers (teachers, educators, socio-educational workers, of whom 28 dipcdrs and 33 dipcoops, i.e. 64% of the total), socio-health workers (of whom 8 dipcdrs and 8 dipcoops, so 17% of the total), plus two psychologists (dipcoops) and three administrative instructors (dipcdrs).
Although it is clear that the professions in question are different in terms of content and context of action, the direction taken in this contribution is to observe the care sector in its complexity, to highlight, through the lens of the working conditions, the characteristics and critical issues that refer more generally to the relationship between care work, the mechanisms and logics of allocation and the society of reference.
The socio-personal profile shows a clear preponderance of female workers (more than 80%), belonging to the more adult age groups (almost 60% in the 36-55 age cohort, with a concentration in the 46-55 age range, particularly among dipcdrs, social workers and socio-health workers, the youngest being those in the socio-educational sector), with a high level of education (just under half have a tertiary degree, with a slightly higher incidence among dipcoops, and the educational qualification decreases as the age increases), living in small households (four out of ten workers live in households of two people and only two out of ten households have children present).

Contracts and the economic dimension

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[1] These cooperatives encourage their workers to also become members of the organisation. However, this membership does not necessarily imply a sense of ownership and participation. Instead, it primarily serves financial and organisational conveniences. and the cooperatives act as any enterprise (see Franzini, Lucciarini 2022; Lucciarini, Pulignano 2023).

If what the workers in question have in common is the permanent employment relationship (94% of the total, which reaches 96% among the dipcoops), their 'careers' differ in terms of seniority: higher among the dipcdr, partly because of the higher age of this group (among whom more than half with the same qualification have no other work experience apart from their current one), compared with more fragmented paths among the dipcoops and a certain impermeability between the public and private sectors as regards previous work experience.

The distribution of the net monthly wages differs quite significantly between the two groups of workers, the dipcoops are concentrated (85%) in the middle-income brackets (750-999 euro and 1000-1499 euro) and in the lower (less than 750 euro), while the dipcdrs are in the middle and highest ones (1500-1999 euro).

In light of the information on the amount of wages, it is interesting to read the data on the workers' opinions about the adequacy of their income to support their household needs, and more generally their level of satisfaction with their income. The data show the very negative opinion expressed in this regard by the dipcoops. It is not, however, sharply contrasted by the views of the dipcdrs (more than 80% are equally distributed between slightly and fairly satisfied).

The picture sketched so far is confirmed by the incidence of over 80% of dipcoops declaring themselves dissatisfied with their income from work (compared to 56% of the dpcdrs); in both groups, dissatisfaction decreases as the age of respondents increases.

In addition to this information, it is useful to add the findings relating to the respondents' perceptions of the stability level of their jobs, in respect of which dipcoops express more negative opinions (65% consider their job insecure or not at all) than dipcdrs (27%), although the latter also express significant levels of concern.

When observed in the light of the age variable, it emerges that the workers in the middle age brackets in both groups express the highest levels of concern in this regard.

How is the future perceived?
To understand the greatest concerns regarding the near future work, the respondents were asked to comment on several aspects. Because of the incidence of responses expressing high levels of apprehension, while it is true that in general, it is the dipcoops who are most represented, particularly about the fear of losing their jobs (65% compared to 25% of the dipcdrs) and the continuity of income/employment (85% compared to 52%), even among the dipcdrs there are also signs of strong concern for the future of their working condition; the risk of not keeping up with the level of knowledge and skills required for the exercise of their profession is the one perceived with the least concern by both groups. Regarding age, the younger workers and those up to 45 years of age express the greatest concerns. The two groups of workers also share similar and very high levels of apprehension about the more distant future and in particular about pension adequacy.

Work organisation
Where and how much work
The more 'sedentary' of the workers analysed are the dipcdrs (just under 70% indicate the institution's headquarters as their actual place of work), the more mobile are the dipcoops (about half perform their duties at the service user's home or educational institutions).

The level of salubrity (light, humidity, noise) and in general the quality of their workplaces is of particular concern to the dipcdrs, who express the lowest levels of satisfaction with this dimension.

The working time arrangements tend to benefit the dipcrs compared to the dipcoops, for whom hourly flexibility seems to be a condition that is tolerated rather than seen as supportive of a lifetime: only 25% state that they work the same number of hours per day (54% of the dpcdr), 46% use working time accounts, only 44% (79% of the dpcdr) take time off to make up overtime and 42% (52% of the dpcdrs) take economic compensation or rest. Shift work involves dipcdrs (65%) more than dipcoops (35%), similar between the two aggregates is the incidence (around 15%) of those who say they do not have the same weekly schedule.

Consequently, it is not surprising that the level of satisfaction about the conciliation of working time and non-working commitments and in general about one's own working time sees dipcoops on average more dissatisfied than their dipcdr 'colleagues'.

The street-level bureaucrats at the centre of this study operate in strongly user-driven organisational contexts, so much so that there is a high incidence of those who state that their work rhythms are dictated by the 'flow of access/demand from service recipients', even if this occurs with not insignificant differences between the two groups (77% dipcoops, compared to 52% dipcdrs); whereas the two groups share the same incidence (around 20%) of those who state that 'direct control by superiors' is the main way in which their activity is regulated. Lastly, it should be noted that just over a fifth of the dipcdrs state that the rhythm of their work is marked by the 'achievement of production and performance objectives' set by the department to which they belong, through the definition of performance standards.

Overall, more than half of the sample (56%) expresses no or minimal satisfaction with the organisation of their work. Let us look in more detail below at several dimensions that can help shed light on this widespread discomfort.

The interpersonal dimension

From the information gathered it emerges on the one hand that both groups of workers share particularly critical opinions on their relations with the higher levels (60% of dipcdrs and 80% of dipcoop), in comparison with relations with colleagues, which are judged satisfactory by more than half of the dipcdrs and 45% of the dipcoops; on the other hand, the opinion on relations with service users registers the highest level of satisfaction, which is significantly high in the case of dipcoops (more than 60%, compared to just over half of the dipcdrs), who, moreover, operate more frequently than their dipcdr colleagues in the service users' homes.

Professional recognition, career prospects, job variety

From an overview of aspects ranging from the level of recognition of the work performed (which may concern both the relevance of the function and the individual's contribution) and of the professionalism employed to carry it out, to career prospects emerges a significant picture of dissatisfaction, specifically to the latter, in both groups (88% among the dipcdrs and 93% of the dipcoops), with a strong accentuation in the 'older' age groups among the dipcdrs, while among the dipcoops, 100% of the younger ones are 'pessimistic'.

So-called 'flat careers' characterise the professional figures involved; however, if one associate this data with that of the respondents' dissatisfaction with the recognition of the work carried out and their professionalism, a picture of dissatisfaction emerges in which characteristics intrinsic to the professional family are added to criticalities that the subjects tend to trace back to organisational contexts incapable of 'valorising' the figures present.

Autonomy and the opportunity to voice one's views

A further set of aspects investigated concerns the levels of attribution of responsibility and organisational autonomy and 'the opportunity to voice one's views' in the workplace.

If in general, the dipcoops express higher levels of dissatisfaction, it is in particular on the degree of organisational autonomy (70% compared to 30% of dipcdrs) and participation in company decisions (93% of dicpcoops, compared to 87% of dipcdrs) that the dissatisfaction is most concentrated, and thus represent a striking result if we consider the alleged centrality of workers/members voice in the cooperatives.

Finally, workers in both groups strongly support the social usefulness of their work (the incidence of those who do not share this opinion of their work is under 10% for both groups).

The system of representation

The relationship with trade union representation was explored by taking into account several aspects, to understand the main expectations of this social actor and about collective action strategies. With more than 83% of the sample being trade union members (90% of dipcoops and 77% of dipscdrs), the most preferred motivation for membership is the union's role in 'defending workers' rights', followed by 'dissatisfaction with one's work situation', while 'ideological closeness' is the motivation indicated by 10% of the sample. The reaction of the two groups to the questions in this part of the questionnaire is rather homogeneous. To summarise, we could say that priority (97%) is given to concerted actions that the union should undertake in a unified manner to 'professionally' (competently) support the interests of workers (82%), not least by providing services to support the various individual needs (70%); the two items that meet with the least interest concern forms of union action aimed at fuelling social and 'class' conflict (37%), as well as strictly political action (28%), showing how disenchantment with the political dimension is the common denominator of this group of workers, which in various respects presents different traits.

The answers to the questions formulated to sound out the level of proximity to a representative organisation and the aspects considered to be priorities in the sector or territorial representation activities are in line with the findings observed above. Concerning the role of a trade union or sectoral activity, almost half of the responses (48%) express needs that can be classed as an 'average' level of representation, wishing for a 'point of reference for workers' problems and to think of their interests', carrying out an extensive and targeted problem-solving action, alongside a quarter who consider 'frequent contacts with workers and trade union reps in individual contexts' to be fundamental, to the detriment of both more wide-ranging actions (e.g. 'dialogue and negotiation activities and maintaining relations with the counterpart'), as well as purely individual protection.

We summarize the boundary between direct (dipcd) and indirect (dipcoop) workers in the following synoptic table (1).

Tab. 1. – Working perceptions and conditions for direct and indirect workers.

	Dpcdr	*Dipcoop*
Contracts and economic dimension		
not at all/low satisfied with the adequacy of pay for family life	56%	86%
not at all satisfied with own income	29%	63%
low/not at all satisfied with stability of own job	27%	65%
Future		
high apprehension of losing one's job	25%	67%
high apprehension of not having continuity of work/income in the future	52%	85%
high apprehension of not having an adequate pension	92%	97%
high apprehension of not maintaining the current standard of living	73%	77%
Work organisation		
shift work	65%	35%
fixed daily hours	54%	25%
hours bank	29%	46%
work rhythms determined by demand/user flow	52%	77%
work rhythms determined by production/performance targets	23%	2%
Interpersonal dimension		
high satisfaction for the relationship with users	52%	62%
high satisfaction with the relationship with bosses	41%	19%
Professional recognition		
low/not at all satisfied with job recognition	60%	60%
low/no satisfaction with career prospects	88%	93%
Autonomy and opportunity to voice one's views		
low/not at all satisfied with participation in organisational decisions	87%	93%
low/not at all satisfied with opportunity of proposing changes	61%	67%
low/not at all satisfied with opportunity of organising work	39%	70%
The system of representation (claims)		
more contractual action	100%	94%
more unity	88%	77%
more competence	84%	92%
more services	75%	65%

more reasonableness	69%	69%
more conflict	44%	29%
more politics	27%	29%
Territorial representation activities (claims)		
responding to workers' problems	52%	44%
frequent contact with RSUs	25%	27%
social dialogue	13%	15%
contacts with counterparts	4%	8%
individual protection	6%	4%

Source: Authors' elaboration on data from our survey.

3.b Clusters

The descriptive analysis showed how care workers employed in municipal facilities, for the same work and net of a frictional variety, declare different conditions and problems that can be attributed to their status as direct or indirect public workers. Rather than an occupation effect in sub-categories of care, or to gender or age, the boundary (Molnar, Lamont 2002) along which the workers are divided appears to be referred to the organisation in which they are contracted. To test the validity and better understand this 'organisational boundary' (a concept that will be taken up in the discussion section) we decided to proceed with non-hierarchical cluster analysis. The intention is to understand whether and to what extent the workers' opinions and perceptions have a certain level of homogeneity to allow a synthesis of the cases (n=100) into a few groups, characterised by a high level of internal coherence and maximum dissimilarity between clusters, and to observe whether these groups maintain the organisational boundary, or whether homogeneous groups composed internally of both indirect and direct workers are created.

Given the many variables (items = 88), a set of criterion variables on which to base the typology was selected. These variables were indexed using factorial reduction (PCA), identifying the most relevant dimensions underlying the set of items representing the various interconnected properties. Five dimensions were identified and explained 70% of the variance: career, income, satisfaction, professionalism/recognition, and demand for representation. Following the circular input-output testing and verification procedures (Di Franco 2005) in the synthesis of variables and cases, 4 groups were identified, named according to their scores on the dimensions analysed. In polarised positions are the 'secure' group, in which are largely direct workers (19 cases, including 15dipcrs and 4 dipcoops), and at the other pole the 'insecure' group in which are concentrated the indirect workers 30 cases, including 9 dipcdrs and 21 dipcoops). In the intermediate positions, where there is an equal distribution of direct and indirect workers, both the 'stable' group (18 cases, including 9 dipcdrs and 9 dipcoops) and the 'concerned' group (26 cases, including 13 dipcdrs and 13 dipcoops) are represented. The 'organisational boundary' emerges in the profiles characterized by the highest or lowest levels of negativity and positivity in workers' perceptions and opinions.

The profiles can be summarised as follows.

'Secure' workers: This group consists of a majority of direct workers. They are in the middle-upper income bracket, they perceive their jobs as safe from risks (i.e. redundancies, demotions), and in which they have attained a senior position, mostly directly employed by the municipality. The 'secure' can cope satisfactorily with their own and their family's needs in the present and say they are confident that they will continue to do so in the future. They have a good level of autonomy over their work: although the rhythms are largely dictated by the flow of users, they declare that they have discretion in their management and are not subject to close control by their superiors. Although public recognition of their work is low, the 'secure' claim to have high regard for the social utility of their work, partly due to the direct contact with users from which they derive satisfaction. The 'secure' ask the union for a greater presence in all 4 areas investigated: more politics, more services, more unity, and more competence. It is a general call to strengthen the link between workers and trade union representatives.

'Stable' workers: This group includes direct and indirect workers in equal measure. It is a group characterised by workers with average incomes, about which they do not declare satisfaction, but consider them sufficient to guarantee the fulfillment of their needs. Their perception of career advancement possibilities is low, while their perception of job security is high both in the present and in the future. They state that they are dissatisfied with the control over their work by their superiors, especially in the imposition of rhythms and hours. A condition that is partly compensated by the autonomy they have in dealing with users. Like the 'secure', they feel that their work and professionalism have little public recognition and that a good part of the intrinsic reward is provided by their relationship with users. The 'stable' workers ask the union for more politics, i.e. the ability to represent their social demand before the institutions and more services. A link with the trade union that recalls its influence on the one hand and its ability to respond to the needs of its members on the other.

'Concerned' workers: In this group, we find both direct and indirect workers. What they have in common is a growing concern, especially about the future, due to a perception of less job security, accompanied by a lack of confidence in being able to re-enter the labour market should they lose their current position. These workers are in the lower-middle income bracket and state that they are not fully able to meet their own and their family's needs. They are satisfied with their relationship with their users and colleagues, but they are impacted by an organisational rigidity that results in the imposition by superiors of their work rhythms and low autonomy in the management of their tasks. The relationship with users is also a positive and satisfying element for these workers, while they feel more strongly about a public devaluation of their profession and their social value. The concerned workers ask the union for more unity, to take more incisive action in dealings with the political decision-maker, and more services, to support and help their members.

'Insecure' workers: This group consists of a majority of indirect workers. They are the workers who show the greatest dissatisfaction and perception of insecurity, both in the present and in the future. Faced with low to medium and low incomes, which are perceived as insufficient for their own and their family's living needs, these workers state that they feel their jobs are uncertain, and that they feel sure they would have great difficulty in finding a job in the event of unemployment. They are workers who have a level of skills and qualifications similar on average to that of the previous groups, yet they perceive themselves to have little autonomy in their work, and to be subject to strong control by their superiors, who impose work rhythms perceived as demanding and difficult to achieve. Also for these workers, transversally across all profiles, the low public recognition of their work is accompanied by a high consideration of their social function and a good degree of reward derived from the relationship with users. The 'insecure' demand greater competence from the union, a demand that indicates the denouncement by these workers of a misalignment in the union's interpretation of their needs.

4. Discussion

The descriptive and cluster analysis can be interpreted firstly in the light of the debate on care work (see section 2), with particular reference to the high presence of women, the critical issues of wage levels, the tensions between working conditions, professional recognition and the relevance of the relational dimension. Secondly, how the various dimensions examined take on the most critical elements among the outsourced workers than the direct ones. Therefore, the coexistence of direct and indirect workers, determined by the PP implementation, can be read in terms of a 'fissured workplace' (Weil 2014). The 'double mechanism' of employment, direct and indirect, creates an 'organisational boundary' within the social service, with an impact on working conditions and worker's attitudes and perceptions. We can identify two types of 'organisational boundary'. The first type, which we might call 'vertical' since it acts on the cleavage between direct/indirect employees, where indirect employees experience worse working conditions than direct employees, in terms of pay, organisation, and security, as evidenced by the profiles located at the poles of satisfaction/ dissatisfaction, the

'secure' and the 'insecure' workers; the latter express a generalised perception of insecurity despite a 'secure' (i.e. standard) employment contract.

The in-depth analysis has allowed us to grasp further borderlines and risks of fractures that lead to the emergence of a second 'organisational boundary' that act in a transversal – 'horizontal' – manner, based on workers' subjectivities, manifesting themselves with different intensities in the profiles we have identified, which affect motivation, working practices and attitude on collective action. Two useful categories for reasoning about this are the dimensions of 'organisational involvement' (Romzek 1985) and of 'work engagement' (Purcell 2014). These categories hold together the subjective dimensions of the work by linking them to organisational practices on the one hand and the other to the contractual configuration and functioning that depends on the type of employer – public or cooperatives – overcoming the boundary between standard and non-standard workers, as we've considered only workers with a permanent contract. 'Organisational involvement' refers, within the dyadic relationship between organisation and worker, to the level of sharing of norms, values, and practices and to the presence of tools and procedures that leverage coordination rather than exclusively hierarchy. Regarding public work (Romzek 1985), it thus depends on aspects that combine job security, career prospects, and public recognition of one's professionalism. The 'worker engagement' partly depends on the level of organisational involvement: it is directly linked to the autonomy and control perceived and acted upon by the worker in carrying out his or her work, that is, on the subjective perception of not being mere executors, but also decision-makers or policy entrepreneurs (Rizza, Lucciarini 2021). In sum, these dimensions move on the boundaries between the functions recognised in the institutional and organisational context of belonging, the norms and values of professional knowledge and responsibility towards the community in which one works (Bevir, Rhodes 2006).

The organisational contexts the care workers investigated belong to, both in the public and private sectors, albeit with different characteristics, seem to affect processes of misalignment (Esposto *et al.* 2019) between the different constituent dimensions of organisational involvement and worker engagement. The strengthening of managerial supervision, the standardised measurement of performance, and the rationalisation of resources seem to reduce both the spaces of decision-making autonomy and the opportunity to voice one's views, as well as the prospects for professional growth and recognition of individual contribution. In different manners, the public workers witness trajectories of declining conditions in public employment, such as rising workload and/or evaluation and accountability, and compromised autonomy and control, which is accompanied by a persistent condition of low wages or slow wage increase. Elements that combine with a high awareness of the social utility of the work performed and a strong crushing of professional satisfaction on the relational dimension and its quality. The relationship with users is almost unanimously described as by far the most significant element to the satisfaction with one's work, followed by that with colleagues, where the recomposition of the various dimensions is a subjective responsibility, acted upon based on the differences in the individual 'resources' available (as the various profiles identified have allowed us to highlight). In this context the so-called 'prisoner of love' dilemma (Folbre 2001) takes on the appearance of a true 'servitude of the passions' (Busso, Lanunziata 2016) – the belief that the altruistic motivations and intrinsic rewards of care work lead workers to accept low pay – involving, in particular, the indirect workers: many employers use the specific occupational ethos of care workers to normalise poor wages as an integral part of care work. At the same time, the permanent contractualisation and seniority levels testify to 'belonging' mechanisms between outsourced workers and the cooperative to which they operate (the 'direct' employer), which originate to avoid shifts between different municipal structures and services, coinciding with the expiry of contracts. Despite the introduction of the so-called 'social clauses' to protect the outsourced worker when changing the contractor, in practice workers are inclined to 'follow' the cooperative in which they are contracted. This is also due to internal dynamics linked to practices and worker learning that make it less risky to change workplace rather than employer, in a system where the employer (cooperative) is external to the organisation in which the work is performed, i.e. the municipal structure.

Likewise, explicitly, demands are emerging for the trade unions to place at the centre of collective bargaining in the public sector elements that do not comprise it at the organisation level, such as careers, wages, and autonomy, an exclusion that today reinforces the sense of disillusionment and disengagement with the organisational context. Even if implicitly, demands are emerging for 'political' support on the part of the trade union for the recognition of its social role. These generally worse conditions affect both organisation involvement and work engagement (Romzek 1985), as we were arguing, which are directly linked with collective action and power (Ganz 2011). These elements are directly correlated with each other: organisation involvement and work engagement determine a stronger collective action (Purcell 2014) diversifying union membership behaviour (Newton, Shore 1992).

Following Newton and Shore's union membership behaviour model (1992), which identifies three possible relationships between worker and union, 'instrumental', 'commitment', and 'opposition', a 'high organisational involvement and engagement' of the worker corresponds to an attitude towards the union of belonging and 'commitment'. The profile of the 'secure workers' in our cluster comes closest to this position, because these workers show greater satisfaction in terms of income, stability, and autonomy, and demand more political weight from the union, which, as members, they intend to support. The other profiles, on the other hand, flatten out more on an instrumental position, asking the union for a greater offer of services, in terms of both guidance and assistance, to have more advantages in a work setting that they perceive as diminishing (for dipcdrs) and precarious (for dipcoops). The high perception of the social utility of their work seems to shelter workers from opportunistic attitudes towards the union, which is perceived as a necessary collective actor by both the interviewees ascribable to the 'committed' orientation and the 'instrumental' one.

Conclusion

The evidence gathered in the field research and the proposed interpretative keys allow us to make some summary considerations.

In a context of system reconfiguration according to welfare mix logics and of persistent underfunding of social spending, the mechanisms of public procurement have accentuated the economic competition between the actors in the play, in an overall weakening of the welfare infrastructure (in quantity and quality) and of the conditions in which the workers who support it operate, historically affected by weak social and economic recognition (care penalty), particularly in the front workers component (Lipsky 1980). The hybridisation between (public and private) actors in the production of welfare goods and services has occurred in parallel with a progressive uniformity of allocation mechanisms, increasingly oriented towards the principles of economic efficiency. In this context, the role of care workers increasingly represents a commodity to be purchased and/or a cost to be contained.

The study presented illustrates how the care workers analysed show a high level of engagement in their job, and especially the valuable relationship between them and the users, combined with critical working conditions. On one hand, direct workers witness wage compression and career ceiling, combined with a low degree of autonomy and control over their work organisation. On the other hand, indirect workers show various gaps from direct workers' conditions, mainly in terms of wages and social protection. Moreover, the outsourcing process has been compressing the capacity of cooperatives workers to set their wages with their contractor, or to control their workload, as they have to respect the terms of the bid, in the downward process of the public expenditure and the austerity diktat.

The union's interest in acquiring tools to read the workers' needs, which includes both direct and indirect vision, is a necessary step to rethink the collective action of this actor. To date, indeed, elbow room for bargaining at the organisational level represents a barrier to overcoming the boundary between direct and indirect workers. This requires addressing collective action towards the recasting of the broader regulatory system of public services since it is their very subsistence that is at stake. In

addition to the individual risks on work and life trajectories, the different levels of fracture highlighted are to be inscribed in the progressive weakening of the relevance assigned to the *public function* as a distinctive feature of the role of care workers and the organisations to which they belong, as the 'intermediary' of the general interest, with the risks of privatism that this entails (De Leonardis 1998) for the entire welfare system.

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Same job, different conditions. Comparing direct and indirect employment via procurement in public services in Italy

Abstract

The privatisation and outsourcing of public services in Western capitalism have played a massive role in the welfare recalibration strategy. That externalization has been implemented mainly through public procurement, where public authorities buy services from private contractors. In public service offices, direct and indirect employees share duties and tasks but have access to different working conditions and protections. In our analysis, we have investigated the convergence/divergence between direct and indirect employees in public services, mainly education and social care, comparing attitudes and perceptions of 100 workers (50 direct, 50 indirect) on working conditions, level of protection, satisfaction, associational behaviour – union membership and professional organisations – and demand of representation. An 'organisational boundary' emerged, in that the work process was structured by public management without taking into account the different nature of the employees (direct and indirect) and their professionalism on the one hand; and on the other hand, direct and indirect employees share objectives and goals in the workplace, but answer to different organisations (public and contractors), each of which embodied its repertoire, values, and different working conditions.

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