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A Big Win in Smalltown: Demanding Dignity in an Era of Neoliberal Austerity

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Abstract This article explores the concepts of dignity at work and worker voice in the public workplace during a period of surging neoliberal austerity intended to reduce taxes, government regulations, and public services. I ask how the changing landscape of public employment in the neoliberal era has created new and exacerbated existing threats to dignity at work and how workers have responded to such threats. The question is answered by exploring how and why an unlikely group of workers in Smalltown chose to use their collective voice on the job to organize a union. Using ethnographic methods, I am able to look at the strategies of public workers coping with a changing work environment in real time. The case of Smalltown offers a window into the interplay of the global and the local by examining how macro-level neoliberal forces can shape workers' micro-level responses to attacks on their dignity at work. The findings reveal how neoliberal attacks on public workers in particular settings can trigger collective responses that confront not merely austerity but other threats to dignity as well. This study informs our understanding of dignity at work and worker resistance in the post-Great Recession economy.

Keywords Neoliberalism; Dignity at Work; Worker's Voice; Austerity; Public Sector Unionism

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It was a brisk Saturday morning in the winter of 2011 in Smalltown, New England. Piles of dirty snow along the edge of the streets served as a reminder of the recent storm, as well as the work performed by public workers to keep the roads cleared. As I drove through the center of town, I passed a row of old colonial homes, a large white congregational church, and a cemetery—iconic landmarks in countless New England towns, many of which pre-date the Revolutionary War. As I slowed to a stop at the intersection beside the town green, I noticed a Tea Party Patriot

sticker on the back of the pick-up truck in front of me. I had seen a few “Don’t Tread on Me” flags in front of homes along the way to town as well. These symbols conjured up memories of the recent Great Recession. As with many cities and towns in America, Smalltown was devastated by the Recession. Home values plummeted, jobs were lost, foreclosures skyrocketed, and many residents blamed the government and elected officials for the economic downturn.

According to economists, the economy had formally recovered by 2011 (NBER 2010). Despite this recovery, the state’s unemployment rate hovered around 9%, and the Recession felt far from over for Smalltown. Like so many other Americans, Smalltown’s residents felt they were sold out while large banks and financial institutions deemed “too big to fail” were bailed out with taxpayer dollars. This anger manifested itself in two distinct movements at the time: the Occupy Wall Street movement and the Tea Party movement (Skocpol and Williamson 2012; Braunstein 2014). Occupy took the position that the major banks, financiers, and Wall Street were to blame for the Recession and that the government needed to intervene to bail out ordinary citizens. Alternatively, the Tea Party blamed the government and rejected the idea of taxpayer bailouts of any sort. While Occupy Wall Street encampments sprang up in large and small cities across the U.S. and appealed to a young and diverse group of protestors, the Tea Party movement thrived in more rural areas, like Smalltown, and appealed overwhelmingly to older white males (Parker and Barreto 2014).

The Occupy movement, which was largely swept from public spaces by local police departments, be-

came fragmented and transformed into different modalities, but the Tea Party movement went on to run electoral campaigns funded by wealthy donors such as the Koch Brothers. In 2010, Tea Party candidates won numerous seats in state legislatures, as well as 48 seats in the U.S. House of Representatives and four seats in the U.S. Senate. The Tea Party platform codified a neoliberal faith in unfettered free markets which believed that any collective attempts to fix economic problems would only make things worse. For Tea Party adherents, austerity measures which reduced the influence of government were the key to restoring a vibrant economy.

As the truck in front of me drove off with a loud rumble and a puff of black smoke, my GPS directed me to make a left turn into the parking lot for the Smalltown public office buildings. I parked my car under a large, leafless oak tree in the mostly empty lot. I zipped up my coat before stepping out into the winter air. Across the parking lot stood my destination, an old Colonial-style building characterized by flaking white paint on the long wooden clapboards that ran horizontally around the structure. On the stairs leading up to the entrance of the building was a group of women, sipping coffee and speaking in hushed tones. These were some of the public employees who worked inside the building during the week, and they were the reason I had come to Smalltown this Saturday morning. Bundled in coats and scarves, they stood under a green sign above the doorway that read in faded gold letters “Smalltown Town Hall.”

As I approached the group, I overheard them discussing comments made recently by the town’s First

Selectman—the New England equivalent of a mayor—on the local AM radio station about the need to reduce taxes and cut spending in Smalltown. He even went so far as to discuss reducing positions. The group was clearly worried about the prospects of their jobs being eliminated, but rather than expressing fear, the conversation alternated between anger and dark humor—perhaps the best coping mechanisms when faced with such uncertainties. “He’s no leader. He’s a farmer. And not a very good one at that!” said Jessica, the Assistant Town Clerk, to the laughter of the others congregated at the entrance. Altogether, there were eight white-collar workers employed at the Smalltown Town Hall—seven women and one man, all white and ranging from 40-65 years in age. These employees were at the town hall on their day off because they had just voted to form a union and now it was time to sit down with their bosses, the town’s Board of Selectmen, and negotiate their first contract. I came to join them in this process to learn more about why they chose to organize a union.

The group of workers was comprised of Karen, the Town Clerk, who was a very outspoken champion for the union and spoke passionately about the stability that a union contract could offer them; Melody, the Secretary to the First Selectman and first President of the new union, an outspoken advocate who was not afraid to openly confront management during negotiations; Jessica, the Assistant Town Clerk, an animated storyteller; Dave, the mellow-tempered Fire Marshall, the only man in the group; Grace, the Tax Collector, who was generally quiet, but always conveyed a sense of annoyance with the actions of the Board of Selectmen; Maureen, the Assistant Tax

Collector, whose job was most commonly threatened by budget cuts; Janet, the Director of Youth and Social Services and Secretary of the new union; and Beverly, the Assessor and Treasurer of the new union. Karen, Melody, Jessica, and Dave along with Tom, a representative from the national union, made up the union’s bargaining team which sat down regularly with the town’s Board of Selectmen over 18 months to negotiate the first union contract.

The Board of Selectmen—a somewhat antiquated and arcane, yet typical form of government in New England towns—was comprised of the First Selectman, Arthur, who was a Republican, and four additional Selectmen, Stanley, John, Phil, and Norm—all men. The Smalltown town charter, dating back to the 1700s, mandates minority political representation on the board, which translates into two Democrats and two Republicans with the First Selectman being the tie-breaker and the executive leader of the town. Only the First Selectman is a paid position; the other Selectmen serve on a voluntary basis. Town policy decisions are handled by the entire board, but the First Selectman serves as the immediate supervisor for the town employees on a day-to-day basis.¹ All of the Board of Selectmen positions are up for election every two years, making for an unusual employment arrangement for the town employees who generally outlast their bosses on the job and provide continuity in the town offices.

In addition to the town hall workers, several blue-collar workers were also employed by Small-

¹ This is in contrast to the Town Manager form of government in which a professional manager is hired to manage the town workforce.

town—they worked on the town road crew and for the parks department, doing a variety of maintenance work. Unlike the town hall workers, the maintenance workers were exclusively men and they had an easy, jocular relationship with the Selectmen. Like the town hall workers and the Selectmen, the maintenance workers were all white—an unsurprising fact considering the general lack of diversity in Smalltown and its neighboring towns.

The maintenance workers, like the blue-collar employees of most other towns surrounding Smalltown, have been unionized for decades. Smalltown's home state passed a law in the early 1970s that allowed public workers to form unions in order to bargain collectively over wages, hours, and working conditions.² By the early 1980s, the percent of public employees who belonged to unions skyrocketed to over 50% in the state. Despite the surge in unionization, the Smalltown town hall employees, like in most other small, white-collar workplaces, never elected to form a union. In 2011, the national rate of unionization for public utility, sanitation, and maintenance workers was 40%, more than double that for legislative office workers who were just 14% organized (Hirsch and Macpherson 2017). In general, women have also been less likely to be unionized than men, although the gap has closed significantly in recent decades due to the disappearance of typically male-occupied manufacturing jobs and the rise of unionization in the female-dominated teaching occupation (Bureau of Labor Statistics³). Workers in small workplaces such as the Smalltown town hall

are also less likely to unionize due to the close proximity of management and often personal nature of relations with managers (Even and Macpherson 1990). Thus, in this study, I ask the question: “Why did the town hall workers of Smalltown decide to use their voice and organize a union in the most unlikely of places, a small, white-collar, predominantly female workplace during a time when taxpayers and voters were angry with the government?”

Studying the unionization of Smalltown's public workers is important for two reasons. First, the ongoing expansion of neoliberal ideology, in particular in response to the Great Recession, provides an opportunity to observe the coping strategies of public workers in real time, at the local level, to macro-level political economic forces. Second, the case of Smalltown enables an investigation of two important issues in the sociology of work: dignity at work (Hodson 2001) and workers' voice (Wilkinson et al. 2014). As defined by Hodson (2001:3), dignity is “the ability to establish a sense of self-worth and self-respect and to appreciate the respect of others.” Freeman and Medoff (1984:8) refer to workers' voice as “the use of communication to bring actual and desired conditions closer together.” In industrial economies, they note, unions are the prime vehicle for collective voice.

In the rest of this article, I explore the concepts of dignity at work and worker voice, then describe the challenges to dignity faced by the Smalltown workers while on the job; the triple threat of managerial turnover, gender discrimination, and neoliberal austerity. I also analyze the structural features of the workplace to determine what characteristics, if

² The first state to pass a statute allowing public workers to engage in collective bargaining was Wisconsin in 1959.

³ See: <https://www.bls.gov/opub/>. Retrieved June 14, 2018.

any, contributed to the use of collective voice by this group of workers. Finally, I demonstrate that while neoliberalization and its related political discourse of austerity poses tremendous challenges to public sector workers, it can also serve as a catalyst for workers to stand up and fight back. That is, “budget-cut fever” is a real threat to workers’ livelihoods, but the collective response of workers’ to this threat can open doors to challenge a broad array of attacks on their dignity at work.

Dignity and Voice in the Neoliberal Era

The current political-economic period is commonly referred to by sociologists as “the neoliberal era.” Stemming from the economic crises of the 1970s, the neoliberal era is generally acknowledged to have begun with the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980 who, in his inaugural address, proclaimed that “government is not the solution to our problem; government *is* the problem.” While neoliberalism is not a monolithic process, it has at its core a reinterpretation of classical economics which argues that unfettered free market capitalism is the best economic model for generating economic growth which will create the best outcomes for all members of society (Hayek 1948; Friedman and Friedman 1980; Harvey 2005; Fourcade and Healy 2007). At the macro-economic level, this is accomplished by a combination of austerity measures including reductions in taxes and government spending, deregulation, and privatization (Vachon, Wallace, and Hyde 2016). At the workplace level, it means increased ability of managers to hire and fire workers as needed and to reward them on an individual and competitive rather than collective bases (Romer 1986; Cappelli 1999).

Despite numerous theoretical and empirical writings, sociologists have surprisingly not delved deeply into the ramifications of neoliberalism as a political project for worker dignity in the public sector. Unlike the private sector where employment is determined by the ebb and flow of the labor market, public sector employment is largely regulated by public policy and thus is highly susceptible to the political agenda of elected officials (Johnston 1994). In what follows, I will briefly review the established predictors of dignity at work, explore the role neoliberalism may play in undermining dignity, and consider ways in which workers can respond when faced with threats to their dignity at work. These theoretical insights will help to inform our understanding of the experiences of the workers in Smalltown.

Dignity at Work

In his comprehensive treatment of dignity at work, Hodson (2001) identified several key factors that reinforce or undermine dignity at work. On the one hand, good management and well-run organizations are key predictors of a meaningful and satisfying work life. On the other hand, mismanagement and abuse, overwork, challenges to autonomy, contradictions of employee involvement, and gender disparities are key threats to dignity. On gender, Hodson found women to be more likely to be employed in disorganized, chaotic workplaces. With regard to mismanagement, he found managerial abuse to be more common in smaller workplaces where employees worked under direct supervision or in close proximity to the boss (see also Edwards 1979).

The injection of neoliberal values into the daily work practices of organizations has likely exacerbated old and created new challenges to dignity at work. The singular emphasis on market processes within the workplace, including the use of authority unrestricted by government regulations or union contracts, can create workplaces devoid of basic dignity for employees (Hodson and Roscigno 2004). A growing number of sociologists have pointed to the negative consequences of neoliberalization for employee well-being, including the work of Crowley and Hodson (2014) which found increases in employee turnover and reductions in informal peer training, effort, and job quality to be associated with neoliberal work environments. A more recent attack on dignity at work during the neoliberal era and one not treated in Hodson's original work is the decline of job security and the rise of precarious work. Kalleberg (2009) finds the increase of precarious work, characterized by irregular work schedules, short-term employment, or a constant fear of layoffs, represents a serious threat to workers' dignity. Within the public sector, neoliberal austerity has led to increased precarity and perceptions of insecurity for workers who continually ponder whether their jobs will be eliminated by budget cuts.

Responding to Attacks on Dignity

Hirschman's (1970) theory of individual and group responses to dissatisfaction in organizations outlines three possible responses of workers faced with attacks on their dignity. Dissatisfied group members may choose *exit*, which entails quitting the organization; they may choose to use their *voice* to affect change in the organization; or they may choose to

just remain *loyal* despite their displeasure. Employment situations represent a special case because of the power imbalance that exists between employer and employee (Hamilton and Feenstra 1997). That is, workers can in principal quit their jobs, but the limited prospects for reemployment make exit a somewhat false option for workers who need a stable source of income. Because of fear of reprisal, most employees grudgingly opt for loyalty which is why it is so extraordinary when workers choose voice—even more so during hard economic times when re-employment options are even more limited.

When considering responses to attacks on dignity at work, the use of voice corresponds with Hodson's (2001) concept of resistance, which he identifies as one of the key ways in which workers can safeguard dignity at work. Resistance can take various forms, ranging from the deliberate sabotage and destruction of equipment (Juravich 1985) to more subtle and subdued actions such as withdrawing cooperation or withholding enthusiasm. One key question that arises when looking more closely at voice as a form of resistance is whether it is individual or collective in nature. Individual voice can often be more subtle than collective voice, but it is inherently riskier as the cost for an employer of terminating one unruly employee is relatively small compared to the cost of trying to replace an entire workgroup that is acting in solidarity (Fantasia 1988).

Considering the neoliberal threats to dignity described above, there are theoretical reasons to expect workers to choose exit, but also some reasons to expect the use of collective voice. On the one hand, the market ideology characteristic of neoliberalism

creates a tendency for workers to individualize social problems and pursue the typical market solution—exit for a better alternative (Wright and Rogers 2011). On the other hand, the seemingly arbitrary assault of neoliberal austerity on a group of workers could create a collective sense of decline within the place of employment, potentially galvanizing resistance into the use of collective voice to protect dignity at work—especially when options for exit are limited.

The case of Smalltown provides a great deal of insight into the threats to dignity and responses to such threats by public sector workers in the era of neoliberalism. The municipal site of employment represents a very local manifestation of neoliberal austerity, often experienced by workers as personal attacks on their dignity. Smalltown offers a window into how neoliberalism, dignity at work, and workers' voice intersect in the lived experiences of workers at the local level. Some of the threats to dignity encountered by the town hall workers are typical and well-documented, and many may not necessarily be new, but have not been afforded much consideration in previous research. In what follows, the story of Smalltown will be placed into perspective by considering previous research and theory in an attempt to glean new insights into the micro-macro connections between neoliberal hegemony and the daily work-life experiences of workers, including their propensity to resist threats to dignity.

Research Design and Methods

This study takes place in Smalltown, a fictional name used for a real New England town. Smalltown

is a historic, mostly rural setting that is best known for its annual agricultural fair each summer. There are less than 3,000 households, and the population is over 90% white. The median family income for Smalltown is in line with the median for the state. I selected Smalltown as the research site for this study as a result of my grounded approach while conducting a study of union democracy. Travelling to union meetings throughout the state and observing the democratic process of local unions brought me into frequent contact with a union representative named Tom, who I befriended, and who invited me to the first contract bargaining meeting for the newly unionized Smalltown town hall workers. Since forming a new union is a rare phenomenon in recent years—especially in a small workplace comprised almost exclusively of women workers—the opportunity to observe the negotiation of a first contract seemed like an excellent opportunity to study democratic practices in a newly formed organization. What I found, however, was that the motivations of these workers for organizing a union were very interesting, thus the focus of the study shifted in response to the circumstances.

I utilize a qualitative research design that incorporates direct observation with in-depth interviews. Direct observation data were gathered at union meetings and contract negotiations between 2011 and 2013. The negotiations were held at public buildings and were attended by the workers, their union representative, management, and their attorney. Contract negotiations provide an excellent opportunity to gain insight into the underlying motivations for these workers in choosing to use their voice on the job. The proposals put forth by the workers

during negotiations outlined their perceptions of the sources of decline in their workplace.

I conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews with each of the eight town hall employees described earlier and two key informants: the union representative, Tom, and Rachel, a union organizer who helped the group form their union. Being a native of the state who grew up in a working class community of similar size to Smalltown enabled me to forge strong connections with participants over the course of the project. The town management, described earlier, was not interviewed for this study, since the focus was on the experiences and motivations of the workers. The interview guide consisted of open-ended questions on two broad topics: general workplace experiences and motivations for organizing the union. In response to a recurring theme in the observational data, I also focused on the relationship between macro-level political-economic processes and micro-level responses to the changing terrain of public sector employment during the period of neoliberal austerity. The interviews were between one and two hours in length and were conducted outside of work, often in a local coffee shop. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim for the analysis. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of participants.

All participant observation and interview data were coded into general themes, following Glaser and Strauss's (1967) grounded theory approach. The sociological theories of dignity and voice were used as "sensitizing concepts" (Schwartz and Jacobs 1979) to organize the data. The conclusions for this study were reached through the simultaneous process-

es of collecting and coding the data, and then going back to the field to further explore those codes; that is, the conclusions were achieved inductively through theoretical sampling.

The Triple Threat to Dignity in Smalltown

It doesn't matter who you are or where you work in this office—you're a nobody. You're just a warm body. Twenty-five years of public service, and they [the Selectmen] don't care or appreciate it. [Beverly, the Asessor of Smalltown]

As the quote by Beverly above suggests, the town hall workers in Smalltown felt they were not respected by management. The nature and form of disrespect varied across occasions and across individual workers, which lead me to probe more deeply and ultimately identify three major themes which I refer to collectively as the triple threat to workers' dignity in Smalltown. The themes that emerged were: 1) frequent managerial turnover, 2) persistent gender discrimination, and 3) neoliberal austerity. Each of these themes will be discussed in detail below.

The Chaos of Frequent Managerial Turnover

The employer-employee relationship in New England municipal government differs from the relationship found in most private sector workplaces and even public sector jobs in other parts of the country. Management, in the form of the Board of Selectmen, is replaced frequently—on a quasi-regular schedule depending upon election results—and employees almost always have greater tenure than

their bosses. Smalltown holds elections every two years, which means theoretically the entire management team could be replaced every two years. The town hall workers on average have 15 years of experience in their jobs, ranging from Melody, the Executive Secretary, who is the youngest and least senior with nine years of experience up to Karen, the Town Clerk, who has 25 years on the job. On the other hand, the Selectmen averaged less than six years on the job.⁴

The two-year election cycle in towns like Smalltown creates an unpredictable fluctuation in management that contrasts sharply with the relative stability of the staff who perform the day-to-day functions of municipal government. They carry their job skills and institutional knowledge forward through periods of disruption caused by management turnover. The following insight from Grace, the Tax Collector, illustrates the nature of this system and how it negatively impacts the town hall workers:

It's an archaic system. You can't have new Selectman come in every two years to run a town. You need continuity, someone who knows how to manage. I mean, God bless him [the First Selectman], but he's a farmer. I'm sorry, but my point is anybody can get voted in. It doesn't matter if you have any real knowledge, managerial skills, or the best interest of the town in mind. If you are willing to run because nobody else wants it, you get in. That, for the employee, is a horrible situ-

ation to work under. And I'm sure that's part of everyone's feeling...the boss changes every two years and we don't know who we're going to get. We may get someone who is fair and good and knowledgeable, or we may get Joe Shmoe off the row who doesn't know a thing about running a town government.

She went on to explain that the qualifications for the job of First Selectman are few, and the pool of people who are willing to run for the position is limited. Being a relatively low-paying and rather demanding job, candidates must have the financial means to leave their career for two years with no guarantee of being re-elected. This is perhaps why so many of the previous First Selectmen have been either farmers or retirees—many having no prior experience managing employees.

The structural features of this form of management give rise to many threats to workers' dignity in the town hall. Newly elected Selectmen often view the workers as part of a problem they were elected to fix—in this case, a problem that was animated by the new mood of austerity. "The management," as Karen, the Town Clerk, stated, "changes every election or two while we serve for much longer, and we get these eager new bosses over and over again who want to change everything and make it 'better' [using air quotes] because apparently we haven't been doing it right." This initial assault on the workers by new bosses is likely a direct result of campaign promises to make government "more efficient." These promises imply that the candidates have a better understanding of the jobs of town government than the workers who have been doing them for many years. With the rise of the Tea Party and

⁴ Arthur, the First Selectman, was at the beginning of his second term at the time of my observations. Prior to that, he was on the board under the previous First Selectman who held office for two terms, making a total of six years of service for Arthur. The preceding two First Selectmen were in office for one term and two terms, respectively.

increased calls for austerity, the potential threats posed by a newly elected government were exacerbated.

The town hall workers believe they have valuable experience and job-specific skills, but the new leaders do not always value, or perhaps even resent, their knowledge (Braverman 1998). Thus, the frustration with frequent managerial turnover is due in part to the devaluation of workers by new leaders who, as Dave, the Fire Marshal, suggested, “don’t really understand the job of running a small town.” The town hall workers considered themselves to be white-collar professionals and firmly believed their accumulated knowledge made them valuable, and thus they should be seen as useful to a new manager wishing to run the town efficiently. However, they knew from experience that almost always the new manager wanted to do things “his own way,” and in the current economic climate that likely meant cuts.

A second and related threat to dignity was the inexperience of new leaders with managing employees. As Grace, the Tax Collector, put it, they were “used to managing cattle and tried to use the same methods with us.” The current First Selectman, Arthur, was a cattle farmer. Many of his predecessors also came from agricultural backgrounds with little or no experience supervising office professionals. Maureen, the Assistant Tax Collector, described her first encounter with the current First Selectman when he took office: “He asked what I did, and I told him. He then chuckled and said, ‘Then what does the actual Tax Collector do?’ I started to explain the difference, and he just cut me off and ‘never mind,’ he said, in a very sarcastic tone, ‘You *clearly* have

a lot of important things to do and better get back to work.” Others spoke of his inability to say “hello” in the morning, but later emerging from his office to bark out orders. Karen described having a sense that he did not see them as equal human beings, but just “tools or animals” to use as needed.

Several of the workers expressed a preference for having a professional town manager to supervise the workforce instead of an elected First Selectman. Some other towns across the state had created a town manager position, which provides consistent management across elections and ensures a professionally trained manager with experience managing and interacting with employees. While favoring the town manager model, the workers acknowledged this option was unlikely in Smalltown because of its size, commitment to tradition, and aversion to paying for a highly-skilled, full-time manager.

A third threat to dignity posed by the regular managerial turnover is the abrupt and unpredictable change of course that ensued whenever a new First Selectman took over. From managerial style, to policy, to the tasks performed by particular workers, to the most mundane workplace practices like the use of the water machine and break room—everything was open to complete transformation. As described by Melody, the Secretary to the First Selectman, “Every time a new First Selectman gets elected, even the simplest of daily routines is up for grabs. Employee handbook? Yup, we’re gonna have to rewrite that.” While this kind of change is generally true whenever a new manager takes over an office, the frequency and regularity of this occurrence in Smalltown created the experience of perpetual

disorder. Clingermayer and Feiock (1997) find that the frequent turnover of leadership in municipal governments causes chaos and inefficiencies. Chronic change in management often leads to radical shifts in priorities, leaving employees who had invested years in a project now being directed to abandon it and focus on something new—only to have it abandoned again after the next election and never experiencing the pride of completing a project.

The inconsistency in priorities, the mismanagement of employees, the lack of long-term goals, and the chronic abrupt changes in direction parallel the “chaos on the shop floor” detailed by Juravich (1985). While studying a small manufacturing company called National, Juravich found that short-term profit motivation coupled with incompetent management led to the normalization of chaos. That is, decisions that would seem irrational to most people began to make sense in the culture of the workplace. The price for this chaos was high both in terms of institutional success, as well as employee turnover and worker self-esteem. Although the workplaces, workers, and nature of the work performed at National and Smalltown are worlds apart, the experiences of the workers are strikingly similar. In Smalltown, the chaos caused by frequent managerial turnover was also normalized. Essentially, the town hall workers would grin and bear it, ride out the period of disruption, and perform their duties as efficiently and professionally as possible.

The waves of managerial transition that had taken place just prior to my observations caused considerably more stress than usual among the town hall

workers because of the Great Recession. The mood of austerity among voters nationally and locally, as represented by the success of the Tea Party, and the budget cut priorities of local candidates promised to make the period of chaos more contentious than usual. For Karen, the Town Clerk, a union contract was viewed as an opportunity to “create stability and consistency” across these periods of disruption and chaos. Further, a union would allow the workers to have a say in what those workplace procedures would look like. As Jessica, the Assistant Town Clerk, put it:

With a union we could have some continuity—protection—because, okay, we signed a contract for three years; you’re getting voted in for two years? This is what you’re working with for two years because we only signed [the contract] a year ago... At least for the next two years we know where we stand and we had some say in it.

Clearly, the stability provided by a union contract across periods of managerial transition would greatly improve the level of dignity at work for the town hall workers and yet until the Great Recession, the chaos of managerial transition was normalized in Smalltown and the workers chose to remain loyal rather than exit or use their voice.

Gender Discrimination

The second component of the triple threat to dignity in Smalltown was gender discrimination. The town hall workers would use phrases such as “playing favorites” to describe the First Selectman’s friendly social relations with the male maintenance workers,

which contrasted sharply with his more overbearing demeanor with the women. Overall, the women felt they were treated as incompetents who needed to be closely managed and continually instructed. A succinct account of this disparity was apparent in an interview with Grace, the Tax Collector:

It's always a matter of the Selectmen seeing the male workers as equals or peers, but seeing us, women, as subordinates—I mean, like really low down the totem pole and in need of directions constantly. And it's funny to me because we come to work dressed very nice and do the jobs that none of them could figure out in a million years, and they are like, all dirty, just back from digging holes or something and smelling like manure and cigarettes. No disrespect, of course, their work is important, but so is ours.

The First Selectman's disparate treatment of the two groups of workers appears to be rooted in a set of conservative cultural beliefs about gender, which are generally regarded as foundational to gender discrimination in the workplace (Ridgeway and England 2007). Whether consciously or not, individuals may translate their ideas about gender into discriminatory behaviors through sex categorization, gender stereotyping, the production of gender-based in-group/out-group processes, and the formation of discriminatory policies and practices in work organizations (Reskin 2000; Glick and Fiske 2007; Ridgeway and England 2007).

Conservative cultural beliefs about gender often lead individuals to value men's work over women's work. The genial relationship between the men on the Board of Selectmen and the male maintenance

workers was based on mutual respect for each other's work. Since the First Selectmen, as well as the town maintenance workers were part-time farmers—or at least regular users of heavy equipment such as tractors and backhoes—they had a lot in common. A couple of the maintenance workers who occasionally helped out Arthur, the First Selectman, on his farm on weekends received special treatment at work. The women, none of whom were farmers, had little opportunity for such *quid pro quo*. This genial relationship prompted many of the town hall workers to refer to the men as “the old boy's club.”

The same cultural beliefs that place men's work on a pedestal have also contributed to the devaluation or “feminization” of “women's” work (Reskin and Roos 2009). Previous research finds that when jobs are performed overwhelmingly by female workers, they tend to have lower salaries, more precarity, less benefits, and receive less respect from management (Reskin and Hartmann 1986). As the previous quote from Grace indicates, the First Selectman had less respect for the white-collar work performed by the women in the town hall than he did for the blue-collar work performed by the male town maintenance workers. Conversations with Tom, the union representative, and Rachel, the union organizer, reinforced this perception. Tom told me that it was “typical in these kinds of small towns” for the men on the Board of Selectmen to have “very different relationships” with the town maintenance workers compared to the white-collar town hall workers. Rachel overtly used the word “sexist” to characterize most First Selectmen she had dealt with, including Arthur in Smalltown.

Throughout the literature on work and occupations, the physical segregation of men's and women's work is considered to be a major factor that reinforces gender discrimination in the conditions and rewards of work (Roth 2004; Hirsh and Kornrich 2008). That is, the discriminatory effects of cultural beliefs and gender stereotyping are often compounded when they interact with structural features such as the sex composition of the workplace and the gendered distribution of labor within the workplace (Glick and Fiske 2007; Ridgeway and England 2007). In Smalltown, there was a great social and physical distance between the men and women. The work performed by the women in the town hall was performed under the watchful eye of management throughout the workday, whereas the town maintenance workers were dispatched throughout the town and generally outside direct managerial supervision.

The one male town hall worker, Dave, the Fire Marshall, occupied a unique position which offered great insight into the gender dynamics of the workplace. Like the "marginal man" as envisioned by Simmel (1971) and later elaborated by Park (1928), Dave straddled both worlds. His job embodied many of the characteristics of the women's white-collar jobs, but it also shared the autonomy and minimal supervision of the blue-collar jobs because he was often out of the building doing inspections. The First Selectman was uncertain as to how to deal with him, but ultimately let him go his own way and treated him more or less like one of the male maintenance workers. In other words, his gender gave him a pass. From his unique perspective, Dave recognized the difference in treatment by the First Selectman of the women and men workers:

They [the women workers] definitely have to put up with a lot of crap in the office. I hear it throughout the day. Arthur [the First Selectman] is constantly criticizing them or trying to teach them how to do their jobs. I don't think he really understands what it is that I do, though. He sees me in the office and then I leave to do inspections. I come back the next day and spend a few hours typing up reports and signing permits. I'm not in the [town hall] building from 8:00-4:00 every day and he doesn't know a lot about what I do, so I'm sort of left alone, which is fine by me.

This account from Dave provides three valuable insights. First, he sees the mistreatment the women town hall workers face on a daily basis and empathizes with them, but, on the other hand, is grateful to have the independence that his job (and gender) gives him. Second, as the one man in the town hall group, he has a more autonomous job than the women. Third, the First Selectman does not understand his work and as such likely does not classify it as either "man's" work or "women's work." As a result, while he does not include Dave in the "old boys club," he also does not over-manage him like he does with the women workers. Importantly, from his marginal position—with insights into both worlds—Dave affirms the perception by the women that they are being treated differently than the town maintenance workers.

Bobbitt-Zeher (2011) argues that a comprehensive understanding of gender discrimination at work requires exploration not just of the cultural component of gender ideology, but the structural features of sex segregation and formal policies, and the behaviors of institutional actors who design and enforce such

policies in everyday work settings. Throughout the interviews, I found numerous examples of gender stereotyping interacting with workplace structure to create forms of discrimination, including discretionary policy usage. For example, the First Selectman, Arthur, decided one day that he did not trust the town hall workers to fill in their own time cards, which they had been doing for decades, so he installed a time clock. Karen, the Town Clerk, recalled the introduction of the time clock during an interview:

So, we had this staff meeting where they decided we were going to use punch cards and a time clock. Grace is salary—our Tax Collector—and she has to use one, so she said—at this meeting—as it’s being introduced, “Do I use it?” and he [First Selectman] said “Yes.” So she looked at Chuck [parks department director] and she said, “Well, are Chuck and Jimmy [highway department supervisor] using one? Cause they’re salary.” And he [First Selectman] said, “No, they’re not; they’re doing something different.” She’s just like “Okay, what are the rules, like...who’s using it, who’s not, and why?” And, of course, he had no answers.

The decision of the First Selectman to put in a time clock—followed by his ambiguous requirements for its use—was taken as an act of discrimination by the women who worked in the town hall. The minute to minute management represented by the new time clock policy sparked deep resentment among the women and also symbolized their reduced status in the workplace. They felt insulted by the intimation that they were less trustworthy than their male counterparts who did not have to punch in and out of work.

In Smalltown, the physical and social separation of women’s work from men’s work intersected with the First Selectman’s cultural beliefs about women needing to be closely managed to create discriminatory treatment. The women who worked in the town hall had mostly put up with the gendered attacks on their dignity for years because they had good-paying jobs and there were few alternatives for exit in the area. But, in the new climate of neoliberal austerity, these gendered attacks were more threatening than in the past because they threatened their jobs and thus triggered a desire to use their collective voice to sustain their well-being.

Neoliberal Austerity

The third component of the triple threat to dignity was neoliberal austerity, which produced great uncertainty for the Smalltown workers. Following the Great Recession, a wave of budget-cut fever ran through the public sector from the national to the state and local level. The Smalltown workers were fearful that their jobs could be eliminated by way of downsizing, privatization, or combining of services with neighboring towns through “regionalization.” This threat emanated not only from the newly elected Selectmen but also from the angry taxpaying voters who had been whipped into an aggressive anti-government frenzy by the Tea Party rhetoric that was rampant at the time. Melody, the Secretary to the First Selectman, explains the shift in voter sentiments that occurred after the start of the Great Recession:

As the economy has dipped these last few years, we are at the mercy of the taxpayer who goes to a meeting

and says, “Why should she get benefits? I don’t get them at work anymore?” And they have the power of simply voting down a budget, and we don’t have insurance anymore. In our position, we have management who gets to make decisions and the board of finance gets to make decisions about our jobs, and so do the taxpayers who can stand up in a meeting and say, “I don’t think the tax office needs an assistant and, maybe not this year, but next year Maureen is getting her hours cut.” Where else [could this happen] other than the public sector?

Melody’s comment was reinforced by similar stories told by nearly all of the town hall workers when asked how their jobs had changed in recent years and all portrayed the shift as negative for their work-life.

It should be noted that this attack on the public sector was not unique to Smalltown at the time. On the nightly news the workers would hear stories of Midwestern states taking extreme measures to cut their budgets. In Wisconsin, Governor Walker effectively eliminated collective bargaining rights for tens of thousands of public sector workers. In Michigan, Governor Snyder dissolved several locally elected governments and appointed emergency managers to implement major cuts in municipal expenditures. This broad national sentiment was beginning to be expressed at the state level in Smalltown’s home state which faced budget issues which were trickling down to the municipal level. In this mood of anti-government fervor, Arthur, the First Selectman of Smalltown, ran and won on a campaign of making government smaller and more efficient. Reducing budgets, cutting taxes, and privatizing services

have long been at the center of conservative politics, but until recently these policies did not—at least not in their extreme forms—have a lot of traction with most voters in places like Smalltown. However, the combination of an extreme economic downturn and the rise of neoliberal ideology joined forces to make the jobs of Smalltown workers a primary target for conservative politicians and voters.

The Smalltown voters who suffered in the Recession were angry and saw one group who they had power over—the public employees they paid with their taxes. Rachel, the union organizer who helped the Smalltown workers organize, described a “complete lack of working class solidarity” on the part of private sector workers towards the public sector. Describing the attitudes of taxpayers, she noted that “rather than saying, ‘Hey, how come my benefits are being cut?’ they instead look at the public sector and say, ‘Hey, how come their benefits *aren’t* being cut?’” The following excerpt from an interview with Jessica, the Assistant Town Clerk, describes the animosity they felt from private sector workers during this time:

Only in the public sector does the general public get to come forward and say, “I think that person should go. I think that job should go. I think that job should be less hours.” Believe me, go to the town meetings and listen to them say, “I got cut on my benefits at work, so they should take a cut on theirs.” So, basically, at town meetings you get the people who say, “I had it rough this year, so I want to make it rough for others, and the one group we can do that to is the people that we pay with our taxes.” They can’t walk into a business and say, “Make your employees suffer

because I am," but they can walk into a town meeting and say, "Hey, I'm not paying taxes, so these people can have more than I can have." We've been hearing that for the last few years at town meetings.

Jessica's comments reveal a core sentiment among the town employees, the feeling that many private sector workers wanted to ease their misfortunes by creating misfortunes for others. This passage and others highlight the unique features of public sector employment and their fundamental relationship to the overall political and economic climate of the community, state, and nation.

My conversations with the town hall workers also revealed how personal the effects of neoliberalism felt to them. It was their neighbors at town meetings demanding cuts and their immediate supervisor publicly promising cuts. This very personal experience differs from typical encounters with neoliberalism in large-scale, state or federal workplaces which have more layers of management and thus neoliberalism is experienced as an impersonal structural shift emanating from a complex and faceless bureaucracy. But, unfortunately for the workers in Smalltown, they are also threatened by cuts from the state level as Karen, the Town Clerk, described:

If anyone wants to pick on us as a group, it can come from many different directions—from pretty much anybody. Not just the taxpayers. You know, the state can cut funding and that affects the town. Right now they are talking about regionalization. Are they going to regionalize some of these jobs and suddenly our jobs are cut as they have been combined to cover three towns?

The Smalltown workers face the threat of budget cuts not only from the local taxpayers and the town government but also the state, representing a marked increase in the precarity of their work in the wake of the Great Recession.

In addition to the fear of job loss, the Smalltown workers were also being asked to do more with less. For example, Karen, the Town Clerk, spoke about the copying machine which had broken down. It was apparently a rather old machine, long overdue for replacement, but the First Selectman continually insisted on temporarily repairing the machine or asking the workers to remove the jammed papers. This took time away from the normal duties of the Town Clerk and others, but they were still expected to complete the same amount of work within a given day. "So now," Karen told me, "I'm an office machine repairman, as well as a Town Clerk. But, I don't get paid to fix the copier and so I guess I'm using my lunch break time to wrestle with that thing." Being asked to do more with less is a classic threat to dignity at work. It is difficult for workers to experience a sense of pride and achievement in their work when the proper materials or time are not available to complete tasks successfully (Juravich 1985; Hodson 2001).

The Smalltown workers came to see unionizing as perhaps the only way to stabilize their work arrangements. They hoped to preserve the best of their current conditions and benefits by working them into a legally binding contract. The drumbeat of austerity in addition to the open hostility towards them made the use of voice more appealing, since they felt like they did not have anything to lose. As Grace, the Tax

Collector, put it: “If they are going to lay us off regardless, even if we do everything they want, it’s never enough, then we really have nothing to be afraid of when we stand up and push back. That’s why we called the union, because if they are going to fire us anyway, what have we really got to lose?”

Demanding Dignity in Smalltown

The experience of the Smalltown workers demonstrates the clear and present threat to dignity at work in the public sector posed by neoliberal austerity. At both the personal and collective level, the workers’ ability to experience a sense of self-worth and self-respect was undermined by increased fear of job loss, reduced resources with which to complete their work tasks successfully, and increased pressure to compete with each other over the right to stay employed. The already present threats of frequent managerial turnover and gender discrimination combined with the rise of neoliberal austerity to create a triple threat to dignity.

The election of a conservative Board of Selectmen on a platform of austerity amplified the threat of managerial turnover, leading to increased perceptions of insecurity. The Smalltown workers noted a distinct switch in public and managerial attitudes following the Great Recession, including a constant drumbeat about the need for cuts and making town government more efficient. These kinds of remarks coming from the town Selectmen, as well as the local voters created a sense of insecurity which had not existed during previous rounds of managerial turnover in Smalltown. The conservative gender ideology of the Selectmen also intersected with the neoliberal push

to cut jobs. For example, there was never any mention of job cuts or reductions in hours for the male, maintenance workers. However, the usefulness of the work performed by the town hall workers was constantly called into question. Again, the valuation of the maintenance work performed by the men appeared to insulate their jobs from discussions about the need for austerity.

In the face of these rising threats to their dignity at work, the town hall workers did not choose to exit and quit their jobs, but rather they decided to use their collective voice in an attempt to improve their situation. Gunderson (2005) suggests that the decision to use voice may be more common in the public sector due to a variety of structural features of public employment. When considering Smalltown, we can identify several characteristics that may have increased the use of collective voice as opposed to exit. First, being in a relatively isolated part of the state, re-employment options are generally limited. Second, due to the highly specific skill set required for these jobs, there were few private sector equivalents and even fewer that paid well or offered decent benefits. Third, the age composition of these workers—mostly over 50—makes career change very difficult. Further, the ongoing economic slump and resulting slack labor market make re-employment very difficult—no matter how much a particular employee may want to leave their current job. When exiting is not a good option, then the demand for a workplace that fosters dignity and respect is increased.

Other theoretical considerations for increased worker voice in the public sector include higher average

levels of education and increased devotion to their work (Gunderson 2005). Many public servants go into public service because of a passion for helping others (Lopez 2004) or a sense of public duty and civic responsibility to “do good” for society (Reder 1975:28). The educational level of the employees in Smalltown is varied, with most having some college, but few holding four-year degrees. Their devotion to serving the public, however, came through as a common theme when asked to describe how they came into public service and why they remain in it. Another factor could be the level of benefits relative to other comparable jobs. Although the Smalltown town hall workers never had a union contract, their pay and fringe benefits were comparable to those in larger towns that had unions, likely due to spillover effects of their collective bargaining agreements (Farber 2005).

While these structural features of public employment have been in place for decades, the actual decision of the Smalltown workers to use their voice was triggered by the rise of neoliberal austerity and the threat it posed to job security. In an exercise of what Hall and Lamont (2013:2) call “social resilience in the neoliberal era,” the Smalltown workers banded together to sustain their well-being in the face of challenges to it. The theory of loss-aversion in economics and psychology also suggests that humans will generally put a disproportionate amount of energy and effort into protecting against losses (Kahneman and Tversky 1984). Wallace (1989) finds support for this argument in an analysis of union workers’ strikes for “defensive control” from 1947-1981. The elimination of job security, proposed reductions in staff, and the taking

away of resources—in short, the deterioration of dignity—represent real losses that the Smalltown workers felt a need to prevent. As Dave, the Fire Marshal, put it, “Since they might lay us off anyway, we might as well fight like hell. There ain’t nothing more to lose.”

Discussion and Conclusions

The proliferation of government austerity that is associated with neoliberal hegemony and the resultant increase in precarity of public sector work poses a real threat to dignity at work in the era of neoliberalism. In the face of ongoing budget crises in state and local government—real or manufactured—public sector work has become much less secure and in many cases is characterized by a constant fear of layoffs. Budget cuts can also leave the workers who deliver public services lacking adequate resources to complete their work tasks competently or thoroughly—a situation which also undermines dignity at work. As we have seen in Smalltown, neoliberal austerity can also interact with and exacerbate existing threats to dignity at work such as the chaos of frequent managerial turnover and persistent gender discrimination. However, the case of Smalltown also reveals that in certain circumstances, the overt threats to dignity posed by neoliberalism can serve as a catalyst for workers to use their collective voice to address workplace problems. When faced with the threat of job loss, speaking up and fighting back becomes less risky. As Karen, the Town Clerk, said: “If I’m going to lose my job, I at least want to know I did everything I could to try and save it and if nothing else speak my mind on the way out the door.”

According to Larson and Nissen (1987), no workplace is ever completely unorganized. Whenever human beings live or work together, informal groups develop and standards of conduct and acceptable norms of behavior arise. It is no secret that the history of labor organization has often been the history of informal work groups becoming formalized through union organization in response to attacks upon established norms. The structural features of public employment in Smalltown made exit less desirable for these workers and helped to facilitate their use of collective voice to address threats to dignity at work. The Smalltown workers voted to form a union, negotiated a first contract, and voted to ratify that contract.

Through the use of their voice, the Smalltown workers were able not only to address some of the concerns associated with austerity but to challenge the triple threat to dignity they faced by also addressing the chaos associated with managerial turnover and the unequal treatment of women in the workplace. Their union contract ensures stability for the workers across changes in management and ensures fair and equal deployment of workplace rules for all workers, regardless of gender. While the contract cannot protect them entirely from layoffs, it does establish criteria to protect

them from unfair firings, as well as a set of job descriptions which make the elimination of positions more difficult. In addition to these specific gains, unionization has brought these workers into the larger anti-austerity movement of public sector unionism that has been fighting to protect public services and prevent privatization since the rise of neoliberalism.

Perhaps most importantly, the experience of having used their voice appears to have emboldened these workers to use it further. As Karen, the Town Clerk, stated:

It has taken a long time to negotiate, but this contract has really made improvements. I just can't believe we never did it before. I mean, all the things we put up with over the years. It hasn't been easy, but it was totally worth it and in three years we will work on it more and try to address some of the other concerns we didn't focus on this time.

The anger and dark humor I encountered on first meeting these workers who were fearful of losing their jobs transformed over time into a sense of power and pride in what they had accomplished together through their negotiations—a renewed sense of dignity at work.

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