

**The relational production of workplace equality: the case of worker-recuperated businesses
in Argentina**

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Abstract:

Work organizations are commonly studied as sites that produce and reproduce inequality. But we know much less about how organizations promote equality. This article examines efforts to broaden access to power, opportunity, and resources in Hotel Bauen, a worker-recuperated business that was converted from a privately-owned company into a worker-run cooperative. Drawing on extensive ethnographic and archival research, I analyze efforts to redesign and redefine work through collective decision-making, job rotation, and pay equity. The article concludes by identifying three mechanisms of equality—inclusion, opportunity distribution, and symbolic leveling—to theorize the relational production of workplace equality and complement the near-exclusive focus on inequality and its effects.

Keywords: relational inequality; equality; work organizations; worker cooperatives; worker-recuperated businesses; Argentina

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Understanding the causes and consequences of inequality is central to much sociological inquiry. Work organizations, for example, have been theorized as fundamentally unequal (Lamont, Beljean, and Clair 2014; Ridgeway 2014; Risman 2004), creating differential access to respect, resources, and rewards that is remarkably hard to change (Acker 2006; Avent-Holt and Tomaskovic-Devey 2010; Ridgeway 1997; Roscigno 2011). To this end, scholars have identified a host of recurrent causal sequences that “lock categorical inequalities [based on race, class, and gender, as well as skill, education, and other status markers] into place” (Reskin 2003; Sørensen 2000; Tilly 1998:7; Tomaskovic-Devey 2014; Weeden 2002), often focusing on how these inequality-producing processes play out in the workplace (for a review, see Vallas and Cummins 2014).

Some studies assert that through a better understanding inequality, we can advance equality (Reskin 2003; Tilly 1998; Tomaskovic-Devey 2014). But explanations of inequality do not necessarily provide the tools to understand potential remedies (Kalev, Dobbin, and Kelly 2006:610). As DiPrete and Fox-Williams (2018:3) succinctly state, “sociological research makes a strong case for the desirability of inequality reduction, and it points to large scale social transformations that might accomplish this objective, without researching how this social transformation might occur.” When examining workplace inequality, for example, research analyzes how organizational actors legitimize and perpetuate wage disparities, job segregation, and hierarchies of power. But we know far less about organizational attempts to reduce differential rewards, allow greater mobility, and ultimately challenge inequalities at work (Rao, Morrill, and Zald 2000). This article addresses the seemingly simple (but politically and organizationally complicated) question: How do work organizations produce and sustain equality?

Work organizations that have radically redesigned and redefined work offer an important opportunity to examine efforts to produce equality. One case is that of worker-recuperated businesses, which are companies that have undergone a significant organizational change by converting from privately-owned enterprises into worker-controlled cooperatives (Palomino et al. 2010; Rebón 2007). In contrast to conventional firms, worker cooperatives are collectively owned by their members and combine economic objectives with social values (Atzeni 2012; Parker et al. 2014; Rothschild and Whitt 1986). Drawing on eighteen months of ethnographic fieldwork in a worker-recuperated hotel, this article analyzes organizational efforts to broaden access to power, resources, and rewards at work. Through an in-depth examination of collective decision-making, job rotation, and pay equity, I identify three processes that help explain the production of equality: *inclusion*, *opportunity distribution*, and *symbolic leveling*. While each of these have been previously identified (Leidner 1991; Martin and Ferree 1995; Rothschild-Whitt 1979; Salgado 2012; Vieta 2010b), this article offers a conceptual framework to explain the relational production of equality at work. It also contributes to research on worker cooperatives by demonstrating how cooperatives can limit the growth of inequality through the adoption of distributive workplace practices.

RELATIONAL IN/EQUALITY

Work organizations are key sites to examine how inequality is produce and reproduced in society (Baron and Bielby 1980; Reskin 1993; Tilly 1998; Tomaskovic-Devey 1993). Research on workplace inequality has taken a relational turn (Emirbayer 1997), conceptualizing inequality not as inherent to individuals or positions, but as the product of the social relations between them (Acker 2006; Tomaskovic-Devey and Avent-Holt 2019; Vallas and Cummins 2014; Wright 1994). From this perspective, managerial authority exists only in relation to less powerful

subordinates (Roscigno 2011); “skilled” work is defined in opposition other forms of “unskilled” labor (Steinberg 1990; Warhurst, Tilly, and Gatta 2017); and who and what is valued is produced through the recognition of others (Tomaskovic-Devey 2014). In this relational model, actors vie for scarce organizational resources by constructing categorical distinctions (Massey 2007; Ridgeway 2011) and attaching meaning to them through social interaction (Avent-Holt and Tomaskovic-Devey 2010; Schwalbe et al. 2000). When internal categories like “worker” and “owner” map onto external categories like “male” and “female,” inequalities persist and become “durable” in organizational life (Tilly 1998). These inequalities are not just material but also transform into interactional hierarchies through organizational processes (Otis 2011).

Research on inequality has well documented the processes that produce and reinforce differential access to respect, resources, and rewards based on categorical distinctions (Gorman 2005; Lamont, Beljean, and Clair 2014; Ridgeway 1997; Roscigno 2011; Sørensen 2000; Tilly 1998; Weeden 2002). Tilly (1998), for example, identifies exploitation and opportunity hoarding as two core inequality-generating mechanisms that explain how actors extract value from others and monopolize positions or resources for themselves. In addition to the material bases of inequality, scholars also highlight the cultural and symbolic processes at play (Vallas and Cummins 2014; see also Harris 2003, 2006; Ridgeway 2014). Extending Tilly’s relational theory of inequality to an organizational context, Tomaskovic-Devey (2014) identifies resource pooling and claims-making as additional processes that explain an organization’s inequality regime (Acker 2006). Other work has examined the legitimation of inequalities through processes like symbolic vilification, “wherein less powerful actors are discursively deemed less worthy” than others (Roscigno 2011:362-3). As this brief review suggests, scholars have developed a broad understanding of the relational mechanisms of inequality. Yet we know far less about processes

that promote equality by distributing access to organizational resources. Tilly (1998:245) makes this explicit, calling for scholars to study “how to either foil [organizations’] inequality-producing effects or to turn them toward the promotion of equality” (Tilly 1998:245). What are the processes that produce equality?

Like inequality, equality has been understood in individual terms as the “variation in the possession of ‘human capital’ or other goods” (Emirbayer 1997:292). From a relational perspective, equality and inequality are not characterized by the absence of one or the other, but as emergent phenomena constructed through processes of meaning making (Harris 2006). Moreover, the meanings of equality and inequality are connected: what is understood as legitimate inequality shapes definitions and visions of what equality entails. As Acker (2006:452-3) notes, “the legitimacy of inequalities...varies between organizations. Some organizations such as cooperatives...with democratic goals, may find inequality illegitimate and try to minimize it. In other organizations, such as rigid bureaucracies, inequalities are highly legitimate.” In other words, some organizations identify inequality as a social problem and adopt strategies to remedy inequalities deemed illegitimate.

REDUCING INEQUALITY AT WORK

Although inequalities are inherent to capitalist systems (Harvey 2014), it is important to study efforts to create and realize change (Wright 2010). There are two strands of literature that address efforts to reduce inequality in work organizations. First, research on conventional firms shows that certain policy interventions can effectively promote diversity (Kalev, Dobbin and Kelly 2006) and reduce work-family conflict (Kelly et al. 2010). Comparing two such redesign efforts, Perlow and Kelly (2014) find that both initiated a collective reevaluation of work practices and expectations that challenged norms of an ideal worker who works long hours in

person and prioritizes paid work above all else (Williams 2000). Others have examined more extensive efforts to redesign work processes, finding, for example, that cross-functional teams can reduce job segregation and lead to better outcomes for women and minorities (Kalev 2009). Such studies emphasize the importance of both structural changes through *redesigning* work processes and cultural changes through *redefining* what it means to work successfully (Correll et al. 2014).

Research on alternative organizations like worker cooperatives also offer additional insights into the possibilities and dilemmas of efforts to reduce inequality. Worker cooperatives are organizations that equally distribute ownership among members, thereby removing the categorical distinction between worker and owner that characterizes capitalist firms (Cheney et al. 2014; Vieta 2010b). Empirical research suggests that inequalities in the distribution of power and resources are lower in cooperatives compared to conventional organizations (Bartlett et al. 1992; Burdín 2016; Dow 2003; Magne 2017; Pencavel 2001), but gender disparities persists (for a review, see Sobering, Thomas, and Williams 2015). Research on the plywood cooperatives in the U.S. Pacific Northwest, for example, finds that power is more equitably distributed because there are fewer managers (Pencevel 2001; Greenberg 1984). Studies of producer cooperatives in northern Italy and Uruguay find that they have lower wage inequality than conventional firms, although this may be due to the fact that individuals with higher earning potential exit the organizations (Bartlett et al. 1992; Burdín 2016). Despite their alternative organizational arrangements, worker cooperatives are not free from inequality. Research shows that cooperatives also construct categorical inequalities – for example, member/non-member, founder/new member – that are used to justify distributive inequalities in the workplace (Salgado 2012).

Scholars have long debated the ability of worker cooperatives to not only survive but realize their collectivist-democratic values (Rothschild-Whitt 1979). In their classic study of the Mondragon Cooperative in Spain, Whyte and Whyte (1988:272) clearly articulate this challenge: “a worker cooperative is likely to find itself in a catch-22 situation: It disappears if it goes bankrupt or if it is highly successful.” Under this premise, a cooperative that is successful in a capitalist market has inevitably compromised its values. This degeneration thesis has been refuted by economists theorizing labor-managed firms (Ellerman 1984; Vanek 1970) and complicated by social scientists advocating for a focus on workplace democracy in practice (Heras-Saizarbitoria 2014). Nevertheless, there are important and on-going debates about whether or not cooperative organizations can align their social values and economic goals in practice (Cheney 1999; Flecha and Ngai 2014; Kleinman 1996; Vieta and Lionais 2015).

One common assumption is that alternative organizations must live up to an ideal type. Yet as Martin (1990:189) observes, “inconsistencies of goal and practice; the decoupling of structure and activity; conflicting values, goals, practices, and outcomes – circumstances that characterize practically all ongoing organizations – are depicted as fatal or disqualifying flaws.” Instead of assessing organizational purity, Vieta and Lionais (2015:3) argue that “the possibility of cooperative degeneration *must be considered in context*” (*my emphasis*). Cooperatives provide not only an ownership model to restructure work but also a set of principles that guide the revaluation of work (Novkovic 2008), and these gain traction when they relate to a broader social vision. In Argentina, for example, the cooperative organizational form was adopted by the first wave of WRBs as part of the wider call for economic change and social solidarity on the part of social movements of the time (Ruggeri and Vieta 2015).

This article draws on a combination of ethnographic and archival research to examine how one cooperative organization implements and negotiates practices aimed at broadening access to power, opportunity, and resources. I first describe my case study of one of the most iconic worker-recuperated business operating in Argentina and the methods I used to study the organization. I then analyze collective decision-making, job rotation and pay equality in the cooperative, focusing on the practical reorganizations and cultural redefinitions that such efforts entail. I conclude by specifying three equality-producing processes—inclusion, opportunity distribution, and symbolic leveling—and explore the implications of these empirical findings for the study of equality at work.

WORKER-RECUPERATED BUSINESSES IN ARGENTINA

Worker-recuperated businesses (WRBs) are organizations that were closed by their private owners and reopened under worker control. Despite its long history (for a review, see Ness and Azzellini 2011), this type of alternative work organization gained visibility in Argentina following the country's economic crisis in 2001, although some WRBs predated this crisis (Ruggeri and Vieta 2015). As private companies closed their doors and jobs (and capital) moved offshore, increasing numbers of Argentine workers found themselves unemployed in a contracting labor market (Minujin and Kessler 1995). Following a series of failed macroeconomic policies, the country defaulted on its sovereign debt (Pozzi and Nigra 2015). During the final days of 2001, people took to the streets to protest the economic policies and political leaders who brought on the crisis. In response to the breakdown of the wage relation and newfound unemployment, groups of workers occupied their former workplaces in an effort to save their jobs (Magnani 2003; Vieta and Ruggeri 2009). In 2018, there were 384 WRBs of

varying sizes operating in different industries across Argentina and the tactic of workplace “recuperation” has been utilized in other national contexts (Programa Facultad Abierta 2018).¹

Hotel Bauen is one of the most iconic WRBs operating in contemporary Argentina. Located blocks away from the national legislature and other major landmarks, the 20-story hotel offers mid-range accommodations and event spaces in the heart of Argentina’s capital city of Buenos Aires. The four-star hotel was constructed by a private firm in preparation for the 1978 soccer World Cup, offering a centrally-located meeting place for the military elite and then, with the country’s return to democracy in 1983, politicians and businesspeople wielding political and economic power. On the eve of the country’s 2001 crisis, the hotel’s corporate owners declared bankruptcy. Workers would later uncover not only extensive mismanagement, but a series of fraudulent transactions that contributed to the hotel’s closure. Just over a year later, in March 2003, approximately thirty former employees broke into the abandoned hotel and occupied the property.

Like many other WRBs, workers in Hotel Bauen formed a worker cooperative,² adopting an organizational structure in which workers share equity and participate in democratic decision-making (Cheney et al. 2014; Vieta 2010b). In Argentina, cooperatives are regulated by formal standards set by the National Institute of Associativism and the Social Economy (INAES), which requires they establish a Workers’ Assembly, elect an administrative council, and submit annual reports to maintain their organizational status. In the BAUEN Cooperative, the Workers’ Assembly is made up of all members and operates according to a policy one-person, one-vote.

¹ WRBs exist in countries around the globe. On Brazil, see Henriquez et al. 2013; on France, see Azzellini 2015, on Greece, see Kokkinidis 2015; on Italy, see Vieta 2015; on Uruguay, see Rieiro 2016; on Venezuela, see Ríos and Picone 2010 and Azzellini 2012; on the single case in the U.S., see Curl 2010:23-24.

² When referencing the cooperative that operates the facility, I use the acronym (BAUEN) of its registered name: *Buenos Aires Una Empresa Nacional* (Buenos Aires. A National Company). I use the name Hotel Bauen to refer to the property itself.

The Assembly then elects members to serve on the Administrative Council, which oversees the day to day operations of the hotel.

WRBs can be understood as part of a “new cooperativism,” referring to organizations that embraced a cooperative model as a grassroots response to neoliberal crisis (Vieta 2010a; Curl 2010; Larrabure, Vieta, and Schugurensky 2011). As Larrabure, Vieta, and Schugurensky (2011:181) explain, such organizations generally adopt “stronger horizontalised labour processes, decision-making structures, and more egalitarian pay schemes when compared to older coop experiences in the region.” WRBs are no exception (Hirtz and Giacone 2013). According to a survey of WRBs in Argentina (Programa Facultad Abierta 2010), over half reported adopting policies of equal pay, which can be explained in part by size of the collective and extent of political conflict they encountered (Vieta 2010b:311). Most decentralized decision-making and removed extreme hierarchies and paternalist practices from the workplace (Fajn and Rebón 2005; Fernández Álvarez 2005; Sobering 2016). More than half engaged with a broader community by supporting schools, neighborhood centers, and health clinics, oftentimes locating these services within spaces previously limited to production. Finally, most WRBs reorganized work processes, combining past organizational arrangements with formal and informal policies of job sharing and rotation (Atzeni and Ghigliani 2007; Atzeni and Vieta 2014; Calloway, Colombari, and Iorio 2013; Fernández Álvarez 2016; Fernández Álvarez and Partenio 2010; Magnani 2003; Pizzi and Icart 2014; Ranis 2016; Rebón 2007; Vieta 2014).

Despite extensive organizational transformation, these efforts have been fraught with challenges familiar to scholars of workplace democracy. Research on worker cooperatives has well documented the challenges of collective decision-making, job rotation, and equal pay. For example, problems arise in maintaining participation among members and resisting tendencies to

centralize authority (Atzeni and Ghigliani 2007; Pateman 1970; Ng and Ng 2009). Moreover, some research has found that over time, members become “cooperative capitalists” by adopting conventional management styles that align with market logics (Calloway 2013; Fajn and Rebón 2005; Schoening 2005). Similarly, practices like job sharing and rotation involve serious trade-offs: while these practices can demystify knowledge and take steps towards equalizing influence, they can also detract from the quality and efficiency of production and generate conflict among members (Rothschild-Whitt 1979:524). Finally, even among worker cooperatives, egalitarian pay schemes are uncommon. Cooperatives usually legitimize some degree of pay inequality. For example, well-studied cases like the Mondragon Cooperative set pay ratios that bound wage differences among members (Cheney 1999:80).

Research on WRBs in Argentina has found that efforts to reorganize work are closely related to the experience converting an existing business into a self-managed, worker-run enterprise (Fajn and Rebón 2005). At the outset, some groups encountered minimal conflict and little disruption to production. Others engaged in contentious occupations and experienced prolonged legal battles to secure organizational legitimacy, political recognition, and access to financing (Fajn 2003; Rebón 2007). Even for those able to secure tenancy, WRBs continue to confront problems with understaffing, aging equipment, chronic underproduction, financial precariousness, and organizational uncertainty that limit or even stymie efforts to reorganize work (Palomino et al. 2010; Vieta and Ruggeri 2009).

Hotel Bauen is an extreme case in this regard. Despite its success reopening for business and expanding its service offerings and membership, the BAUEN Cooperative has never received the legal right to administer the property and the legal status of the hotel remains unresolved (Ruggeri, Alfonso, and Balaguer 2017). As a result, the struggle to secure the

expropriation of the hotel has become a central goal. Although the cooperative has navigated insecurity through repeated threats of eviction from different political actors, the ongoing campaign has also fomented solidarity among members of the BAUEN Cooperative and between the cooperative and other WRBs, leftist political parties, and social movement organizations both nationally and internationally.

METHODS

This article is based on eighteen months of ethnographic research conducted in the BAUEN Cooperative, a worker-recuperated hotel located in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Ethnography is well suited to study relational social processes (Desmond 2014) and participant observation is ideal to capture the role of informal relations, meaning-making, and changes as they occur over time (Morrill and Fine 1997). This research took place over four periods between 2010 and 2015. The first three periods of fieldwork lasted approximately two and a half months each (2010, 2011, and 2013) and consisted of participant observation in the hotel and in-depth interviews with key informants and elected officers. In addition to describing my project and receiving consent from individual respondents, I received formal organizational approval from the cooperative's administrative council to conduct this research.³ This series of ethnographic "revisits" (Burawoy 2003) allowed me to build trust and rapport with workers, observe different leadership councils, and ultimately trace changes in the organization over time. The final period of fieldwork took place over ten months in 2015. During this time, I shifted from a participant observer to an "observant participant" by working part-time in the cooperative (Moeran 2009).

To systematize my access during this final period, I rotated positions approximately each month to gain work experience in every sector. I typically arrived mid-way through an eight-

³ In addition to organizational consent, this research was approved by the Institutional Review Board at [UNIVERSITY].

hour shift to shadow members and assist them in their daily tasks. I also attended internal meetings and helped prepare for events hosted in the hotel. I took fieldnotes for 253 days of participant observation; of these, I spent 161 days working in different sectors. I also attended 77 meetings and events, which I documented in my daily fieldnotes. With some exceptions, I did not audio record meetings I attended because groups often discussed sensitive issues such as disciplinary actions, hiring, and firing. I also conducted 45 in-depth work history interviews with an availability sample of workers in the cooperative. I often stayed long after my designated shift to interview workers over meals (every member receives one meal per shift), during their breaks, and at the end of their workday. Finally, I gained access to over a thousand pages of meeting minutes, financial records, press releases, and other organizational documents starting at the cooperative's inception (March 2003 to December 2015). I used these archives to examine the evolution of formal workplace policies over time, place decisions in historical context, and triangulate my ethnographic observations.

I analyzed interview transcripts, organizational meeting minutes, and fieldnotes using open and focused coding (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995). I began by using general theoretical codes related to work reorganization, decision-making, job rotation, and pay, and then refined them as subthemes emerged. I coded meetings based on how they were summoned, who attended, what topics they dealt with, and what decisions were made. For meetings I attended, I used to my fieldnotes to supplement and triangulate organizational records. To analyze these diverse sources of data, I applied the evidentiary criteria normally used for ethnographic research (Becker 1970; Katz 2001), assigning higher value to patterns of conduct reported by many sources. In what follows, I use pseudonyms and change small details to maintain the anonymity

of my respondents. I use the real name of the organization to promote data transparency (Jerolmack and Murphy 2016; Reyes 2018).

REDESIGNING AND REDEFINING WORK IN HOTEL BAUEN

The BAUEN Cooperative transformed a hotel abandoned by its private owners into a functioning worker cooperative, amending how work was organized, how authority was structured, and how decisions were made. Initially, there was very little internal organizational structure aside from the Administrative Council and the Workers' Assembly. Carmen, a founder of the cooperative, explained that they originally organized work according to a handwritten chart that indicated members' availability. Unlike cooperatives with formalized ownership structures and specified capital shares, founders of the BAUEN Cooperative contributed what they could, may it be food, a portion of their earnings, or the administrative and manual labor required to open for business. As the cooperative grew in size and the workload increased, members started to formalize an internal structure. In preparation to reopen, in 2004 the cooperative transitioned from a horizontal organization with little formal differentiation, to dividing labor into sectors and establishing a pyramidal structure of authority similar to the arrangement under private management (Figure 1). Each sector has a manager who is appointed by the Administrative Council and informally approved by members of the sector. The manager holds the power to hire or remove members from the sector (but not from the cooperative as a whole), organize work schedules, oversee day-to-day operations, and report any problems and challenges to the Administrative Council.

[Insert Figure 1]

Since its inception, the BAUEN Cooperative has grown substantially, from 30 founding members to nearly 170 members in 2013 (Pierucci and Tonarelli 2014), all of whom work full-time for subsistence wages. In response to the increasing amount of work and coordination

across sectors, the cooperative increased the size of the Administrative Council. It started as the three-member council (made up of a president, secretary and treasurer as required by INAES) and was eventually expanded to include nine elected officers, including a president and vice president, secretary and vice secretary, treasurer and vice treasurer, and three substitutes (*suplentes*). Since it reopened, Hotel Bauen has been operating around the clock, hosting overnight guests, organizing diverse events, and offering a meeting place and café for passersby in the busy downtown area.

Former employees initially occupied closed businesses as a survival strategy to reclaim their source of work. But over time, they developed collective goals to not only save their jobs but create better jobs and a more equal organization. For example, an early version of the cooperative's bylaws explicitly states that it "will develop its social and economic activities under the form of a worker cooperative, promoting within this most just and reasonable order the provision of work for all its members and the best conditions possible and fair pay." These collective goals were repeated to new members the cooperative. During an orientation, an elected officer explained: "In a company where you work in a relation of dependence, you work for someone else. In a worker cooperative...you are a member-owner and everyone is equal to their *compañeros* beyond any position or situation." As this description suggests, workers adopted a cooperative model to facilitate their value of equality regardless of position or tenure. In what follows, I examine three organizational efforts to broaden access to power, opportunity, and rewards among its members by detailing how the BAUEN Cooperative implemented and negotiated practices of collective decision-making, job rotation, and pay equity.

Collective decision-making

When workers prepared to reopen the hotel, they divided jobs into different sectors and created a pyramidal structure of positions, two primary ways that power is stratified in organizations. Yet they combined certain bureaucratic practices with collectivist ones. This was most apparent in the Workers' Assembly, a collective decision-making body made up of all members of the organization that operated according to a democratic policy of one person, one vote. The cooperative's founding documents, which all new members received, enumerated the issues that required the approval of the Assembly, the procedures for calling and facilitating meetings, and the rights and responsibilities of voting. What is more, any member could submit proposals for consideration in the Assembly and all members were immediately eligible to vote.

A close reading of meeting minutes attest that the Workers' Assembly was more than just an administrative formality. Members not only used it as a forum to vote on certain predefined issues and meet legal requirements, but to actively oversee decisions made by their elected officers. This was primarily done through an appeals process. With the signatures of 10 percent of the cooperative (12 people in 2015), members could call an assembly to evaluate any decisions made by a co-worker, supervisor, or elected officer. On a Thursday in 2015, one such appeal took place. A month before the meeting, a long-time member named José had been fired following an altercation with a guest. Citing previous disciplinary problems, the Administrative Council deliberated on the incident in their weekly meeting and voted unanimously to fire him for the gravity of the infraction. Upon receiving the news, José decided to contest the decision, collecting signatures and submitting them to request an assembly.

On the day of the meeting, workers filed into the theater and recorded their attendance by signing a large black book. With 62 members present (just over quorum), the meeting began. A

councilmember stood on the stage and dictated five reports that had been written by people who witnessed the incident. From different points of view, the reports described a busy Sunday afternoon when José had appeared in the hotel on his day off, allegedly drunk. Next, José was invited onto the stage to present his appeal. Standing just over five feet tall, José was a thin, dark-haired man who had previously worked in Maintenance. I was used to seeing him in work clothes—faded canvas pants and long sleeve button up top. But on the day of the assembly, he looked much different. Although slightly worn, his clothes had been ironed, his hair was greased back, and his white sneakers were noticeably clean. When he took the stage, he spoke in a low voice. Looking out to the audience, he said that for the past twelve years, he had been a part of the cooperative and he apologized for the incident. Modest and direct, he said that he wanted to keep working in the hotel and asked the group to consider his plea. After he took his seat, the group voted, filing into a back room one-by-one and putting small papers that said “yes” (to ratify his exclusion) or “no” (to reverse the decision) into a locked box. When those in attendance finished voting, volunteers counted the ballots. By an almost two to one majority, the group reversed the Administrative Council’s decision. As one member interpreted as we walked out of the meeting, José had been “saved” by the assembly. Days later, José was back at work.

While José’s situation could have been unique, meeting minutes confirm that using the Assembly to appeal decisions was not uncommon. Of the 57 formal assemblies held between 2003 and 2015, members appealed 34 decisions. In exactly half (17), members voted to uphold the decision made, while the other half overturned existing decisions, like in the case of José. The vast majority of these appeals (31 of 34) evaluated decisions to either suspend or fire a member for a disciplinary infraction such as excessive tardiness or problems working with money. Through this appeals process, members of the cooperative exercised their organizational

power to not only participate in decisions, but also to reverse them, which placed the ultimate approval of all decision in the hands of the members as a whole. It was not uncommon to hear members of the cooperative acknowledge the Workers' Assembly as the highest authority or even call it "the sovereign" (*la soberanía*).

While assemblies meaningfully distributed authority in the cooperative, members were cognizant of the challenges of collective decision-making. In particular, some worried that people abused the Assembly, using it to advance individual agendas or allow free riding rather than promote shared goals. Emiliano started working in the cooperative in 2004 soon after workers reopened the hotel. He began in custodial services, cleaning salons and lobbies after events, and had since held seven different positions. With over a decade of work experience in the cooperative, he reflected on the appeals process:

Emiliano: There are a lot of assemblies where people have been fired. They collect signatures to review their situation, the people...the person was fired simply because they don't follow the rules that they should, the internal rules. So, the Administrative Council fires them. When the person affected doesn't think it's fair, for whatever reason, they collect signatures and...they call an assembly to review the case.

Author: Does this happen a lot?

Emiliano: Yeah, it happens a lot. And sometimes, it's justified. But lots of times, it's not.

Emiliano signaled an important tension that would come up in many more conversations with workers in the hotel. Beyond concerns that appeals would take up too much time, similar to the "endless meetings" that Polletta (2002) documented in participatory democratic groups in the

United States, some members felt that people abused their right to an assembly. Martín agreed: “[Appeals] are a nuisance [...] Here, there are people who have two or three opportunities, [even though] they don’t work...there are people here who take advantage of their right to call an assembly.”

Despite these concerns, I found that the regular use of the Assembly as a forum for appeals provided a collective referendum on the authority vested in the relationships between positions in the cooperative. Members elected to the Administrative Council or appointed to certain positions (as managers and coordinators) exercise managerial authority on an everyday basis to enforce the cooperative’s rules, make decisions, and oversee daily operations. In this cooperative, this authority was not just constructed in relation to positions with less power, but also in relation to a collective authority that distributed power democratically among all members.

This redefinition of authority was made clear in the ways that elected officers approached top-down decision-making. I regularly observed officers acknowledge that power resided not in individual positions or even the formal rules of the cooperative, but in the Workers’ Assembly. Indeed, elected officers regularly called assemblies to certify their decisions. For example, in 2015, an older member of the cooperative named Gisela requested to change her work schedule to accommodate an easier commute. During their weekly meeting, members of the Administrative Council approved her request pending the agreement of the Assembly. At the next scheduled assembly, councilmembers opened a discussion not only on the particularities of the Gisela’s schedule change, but also about the precedent that would set by allowing part-time work (all members to date had been employed full-time). This was just one of many instances I

documented where the Administrative Council summoned the Assembly to certify their managerial authority.

Job rotation

In addition to collective decision-making, the BAUEN Cooperative also practiced a system of job rotation. When members joined the cooperative, they began in one position and then often had the opportunity to change jobs based on both individual and organizational needs. Inés, a founder of the cooperative, explained the origins of job rotation: “The idea was that we should all have to do everything—the housekeeper could be the waitress, just like the waitress could be the housekeeper.” The practice of job rotation was closely related to the job security that members of the cooperative enjoyed. Unlike most service workplaces where employees are hired at will, in the BAUEN Cooperative, after a probationary period of six months, members cannot be fired without just cause. Thus, when positions open or interpersonal problems arise, members rotate to different sectors. Nearly all the workers I interviewed (with the exception of new members) had held more than one position, supporting a robust internal labor market, similar to rotational arrangements documented in manufacturing work (Burawoy 1983).

Cecilia’s work history highlights the regular movement of people through positions. Cecilia, who was in her late 20s, first heard about Hotel Bauen when her then-boyfriend worked in the hotel under private management. When former employees occupied the hotel, Cecilia accompanied them, joining a group of housekeepers who taught her how to clean. She remembered how—without industrial cleaning supplies, a functioning elevator, or even running water—she traversed the twenty-story tower carrying buckets of hot water to scrub the matted carpets and clear away debris. As the cooperative grew in size, Cecilia transferred to work in the

staff kitchen, where she would wake up early to prepare breakfast and lunch for 30 or 40 members on a tight budget.

After an interpersonal conflict with a co-worker, she asked the Administrative Council to change sectors. She briefly worked in Security until an opportunity arose to create a new sector.

Cecilia explained:

After the cooperative repaired the telephone lines, there was the possibility of opening a department of Reservations. [...] So I decided to do it, without knowing anything about reservations. I didn't know anything about hospitality, I knew absolutely nothing! But I said, 'well, I can do it.' [...] They gave me a computer, a telephone, and another person worked with me. [...] At first, I picked up the phone with fear, but over time, I learned and I [eventually] created the Department of Reservations...more or less as I imagined it based on what I taught myself...

While working in Reservations, Cecilia also started to study hospitality independently at a local college. With her additional training, she and a co-worker expanded the sector to oversee the scheduling of both overnight reservations and events. As she described:

We started to organize...small events and so on because we didn't know anything! But over time, we learned more and started to get it [...] With study and practice ... I learned almost all there is—public relations, commerce, reservations, reception, billing, events. I learned it all. I wasn't scared of anything anymore...

Although she had established two important income-generating sectors in the hotel, a newly elected administrative council rotated Cecilia to a different sector, which at the time was in need of leadership. She explained her move in this way: "...when the Council changes, and they

change the sectors. [...] It's just like that in the hotel, people are passed between sectors...you learn how everything works in the hotel as you are changing sectors." Like Cecilia, most workers learned new skills through practice. With the exception of founders of the cooperative who worked in Hotel Bauen under private management, most new members had little or no formal training in hospitality or hotel management, although some sought it out independently.

Romina started in Housekeeping and eventually rotated through a series of jobs that did not match her initial skill set. Reflecting on her career trajectory, she described job rotation as a learning opportunity:

Really, in [our] cooperative, many people come without experience, without a degree, they have just finished high school [...] but during the workday, they learn everything they need. [When I started] I didn't know how to use a computer or anything...I had finished high school and I did some additional classes. But at home, we didn't have a computer. I didn't have the practice. I had the theory [from the class], but I didn't have the practice. Then here, I got more practice, I taught myself how to use the computer system. This is something that before, I never would have been able to do.

For Romina, rotating jobs allowed her to put "theory" into "practice." She clearly remembered her fears of taking on new jobs with no previous experience or formal training and having to teach herself. In the months I worked with Romina, I witnessed this self-motivated learning. For example, when using the hotel's hospitality management software, Romina often explored the interface on her own, asking questions, and keeping a personal log of what she learned in a small notebook in her desk. The cooperative not only relied on members to train themselves, as Romina explained, but also to share their knowledge with each other. As Adrian pointed out,

“teaching the new people, it’s like a chain and it’s like, things have been passed to me, so I teach them and I end up teaching other people the method of work [and] the [computer] system.”

In addition to providing opportunities to learn new skills, members of the cooperative rejected the value of formal credentials *prima facie*. Skills, experience, and credentials are conventionally used to sort people into jobs (Tilly and Tilly 1997; Weeden 2002). But as Enzo, an elected officer, explained, “we aren’t technicians or professionals or degree-holders.” Rather, in the cooperative, “...we value the effort of each person.” By prioritizing individual effort over formal credentials, the cooperative redefined skills as sets of tasks that could be learned by anyone regardless of their previous education. Indeed, as we saw in the case of Cecilia, members were asked to rotate jobs despite their formal training.

Adrian was in his mid-20s and had worked in the hotel for six years. Like his co-workers, he had held many different jobs in the cooperative. He explicitly contrasted the opportunity to change jobs in the cooperative to a conventional firm:

In a company, you die in one position...but here, there are people who never finished elementary school but now are managing important areas of the hotel.

Take Francisco. He didn’t finish elementary school but he is in a really important sector [Administration]. Would a company give you the possibility to do that if you didn’t finish elementary school? Forget it!

As Adrian explained, Francisco had the opportunity to work in Administration despite his lack of formal education. A charismatic man in his late 30s, Francisco had been elected by the cooperative to serve as trustee, a job that involved mediating conflicts, encouraging the use of democratic procedures, and overseeing the cooperative’s administration and finances. As his

election suggests, the value of practical experience was so strong that even a member without formal qualifications could be elected by his peers to one of the highest positions of power.

While job rotation opened up opportunities to learn new skills and understand different parts of the organization, it was not without challenges. First, the informal criteria used to determine job rotation sometimes created confusion among members. The Administrative Council oversaw job placement and in the absence of a written policy or formal job qualifications, members sometimes questioned the rationale for rotation. Some, for example, reported that they had explicitly requested a job transfer that they did not receive. Alejandro joined the cooperative while studying business administration. After a couple months, he met with councilmembers to ask if he could rotate to a sector like Purchasing or Administration where he could utilize his degree. Nine months later, still working in the same position, Alejandro was frustrated. He explained that councilmembers had told him that he was too good at his current job to rotate him without a replacement. But Alejandro had a different interpretation: he felt like he had not been transferred because a councilmember did not like his relative, who previously worked in the hotel. As Alejandro's suspicion suggests, in the absence of a formal policy, personal biases may shape how job opportunities are distributed. Still other members reported that job rotation was used punitively. For example, one member was abruptly transferred to a different sector without considering his preference (he did not want to rotate sectors) or schedule (his hours and days off changed suddenly). Months after this move, he said that he felt like he was rotated as punishment, although he ended up enjoying work with his new co-workers. Both these issues—bias in decision-making and involuntary rotation—are rooted in the lack of formalization around who can rotate and when. While many members reported the

benefits of these distributed opportunities, others pointed out that occupational mobility was not equally accessible.

The cooperative also encountered problems associated with its explicit disregard for formal training. For members with no formal credentials, job rotation offered unprecedented occupational mobility, opening access to different positions and the opportunity to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the hotel. But as Romina explained: “We have created different positions, but there are a lot of problems if you are going to categorize people.”

Members with formal training and degrees reiterated this issue, expressing resentment around the prospect of job rotation. For example, Cecilia, who was transferred despite her advanced training, admitted that she thought her current role was “a job that anyone could do.” Santino, the only long-time member I interviewed who had not rotated jobs, attributed his permanence in one position to his specialized training: “you are going to see people passed through various sectors [...] but I’m a tourism expert.” Although some members like Santino were effectively taken out of rotation, others were asked to apply their know-how to different sectors, as in the case of Cecilia. Nevertheless, as Romina explained, it remained an “open debate” over what to do with people with formal qualifications.

Equal pay

In addition to efforts to distribute organizational power and encourage occupational mobility, all members of the BAUEN Cooperative earned the same base pay rate, which was transparent and approved by a majority vote of the Workers’ Assembly. At the outset, the BAUEN Cooperative paid its members by distributing profits evenly each month. Over time, it formalized the compensation structure by establishing a base salary, and then adding additional “pluses” that accrued on top of this base rate. Members explained these pluses as organizational

attempts to incentivize punctuality, discourage free riding, and recognize tenure. For example, there were small monthly bonuses that could be earned for attendance and punctuality, as well as pay increases for people who held positions of extra responsibility (as managers, coordinators, or councilmembers), handled money (as cashiers or administrators), or were founding members of the cooperative. Members also received variable stipends based on their tenure (measured in years) and family status (based on the number of children), as well as one-time bonuses on their birthdays, on Mother's Day and Father's Day (if they are parents), before the end of year holidays, and at the beginning of the school year. While these stipends introduced some variation into the actual take home pay and could be interpreted as new forms of differentiation (Salgado 2012), these pay differences were small, bounded, and transparent. Finally, the cooperative shared profits twice a year. In a schema approved by the Assembly, every member received an equal share, which was adjusted according to the days worked during the period.

This practice of pay equity stands in stark contrast to most organizations, where wages are vertically dispersed (sometimes to extreme levels) and employees are not allowed to openly discuss wages (on transparency in the cooperative, see Sobering 2017). In the BAUEN Cooperative, pay is not only transparent, but members continually use equal pay to reinforce the notion that all jobs in the hotel are interdependent and important to their collective survival. Like conventional hotels (Sherman 2007), jobs in Hotel Bauen vary tremendously. Some jobs are interactive, requiring workers to interface with customers and engage in emotional and aesthetic labor (Leidner 1991). While others are intensely physical as workers cook, clean, and repair the hotel's facilities around the clock. Still others are administrative, where workers are charged with overseeing the organization's finances, operations, and record keeping. But as Pilar, a founding member and elected officer, explained, "[Jobs] cannot be compared. One may be mental and the

other is physical. If you start to analyze the work, both are important! You can't measure them.” This ecological view of work in the cooperative is further supported by the sentiment that, because members are also owners, the organization's assets belong to everyone. As one member explained, “I may not be making a lot of money, but I am administering the money of all the *compañeros*. This money belongs to everyone.”

Two issues—tips and overtime work—posed challenges to pay equity in the BAUEN Cooperative. As a service workplace, certain sectors had access to financial perks, while others did not. For example, waiters received tips from diners (in Argentina, it's customary to tip ten percent of the bill or less); receptionists and valets could earn tips from individual clients as well as commissions for booking services; office workers received product samples from suppliers; and housekeepers could earn tips from overnight guests. Perhaps due to this variation, there was no formal policy on how to distribute this extra money. In some sectors, I found that tips were shared among all members working a given a shift, whereas in others, tips were kept individually.

While small tips can produce variation, overtime work more significantly altered take-home pay. As a conference hotel equipped with seven salons and an auditorium, workers regularly planned events and catered dinners, conferences, and social gatherings, all of which required waiters, cooks, security personnel, janitors, and coordinators. These extra shifts provided opportunities for workers to earn overtime pay to supplement their full-time salaries. Yet these extra shifts were not equally available to all who wanted to participate. Rather, a relatively closed group of workers covered these shifts and thus consistently earned extra cash.

To understand the distribution of overtime, I talked to one of the members who oversaw events in the hotel. His initial explanation for the distribution of overtime was practical,

matching peoples' existing skills to the needs of overtime work. For example, current and former wait staff from the hotel's café filled in as waiters during events and cooks in the kitchen work overtime to coordinate catering. For other positions, the event coordinator kept a list of about 25 people who he could count on to show up and stay late. In addition to staffing issues, members also reported challenges determining the value of overtime work: "The value of an *extra* (overtime shift) always creates problems. [...] Our policy was always to try to pay [the market rate] in catering... For the *compañeros* who haven't worked *extras*, sometimes it seems like a lot. But we really can't pay less because we may need external help, and if we pay less, they won't show up..." Since the cooperative sometimes supplemented their own members with extra help during large events, a coordinator explained that they needed to pay a rate comparable to private companies. This practice dated back to the hotel's early years of operation, when the cooperative would compensate for being understaffed by contracting family and friends of members to help put on events. Nevertheless, the event coordinator did not see overtime pay as incompatible with the cooperative's policy of pay equity. He reasoned, "when you schedule an event, you calculate the value of all the extra shifts and include this in your price." In other words, the hotel's customers, not the cooperative itself, paid the labor costs. While event shifts were compensated according to what was described as the "going rate," I found that overtime work that is not related to events was valued differently. For example, when members covered shifts internally (i.e. when a co-worker called in sick), the cooperative applied a different price per hour. In contrast to event shifts that were paid upwards of \$600 pesos for six or eight hours in 2015 (approximately \$7.70 USD per hour), sector overtime was paid just \$33 pesos per hour (\$2.50 USD).

Who worked extras and how much they were paid was an ongoing topic of debate in the cooperative. These debates became particularly heated when the event coordinator went on vacation, leaving a different group of people in charge. One member observed that a small group seemed to dominate the event shifts. When I asked how this was different, she explained that the event coordinator liked to share the shifts among as many people as possible—if you asked to work overtime, you would eventually get a shift. Yet it seemed that in the coordinator’s short absence, overtime work was hoarded among certain people. As with job rotation, there was no formal policy to outline how to share overtime work when individuals committed to inclusion were no longer in charge. Even in this context of pay equity and financial transparency, overtime work offered an opportunity for a small group to earn far more than others due to the pressure to pay a market rate for event work.

EQUALITY PROCESSES

Since its inception, the BAUEN Cooperative has adopted organizational practices that distribute power, opportunity, and resources in the workplace. Taken together, collective decision-making, job rotation, and pay equity do not constitute a perfect organizational blueprint to eradicate inequality. Rather, they provide insights into an on-going project to redesign and redefine paid work to promote equality among members. In the BAUEN Cooperative, workers negotiated the meanings of authority, skill, and value through practice and in doing so, altered the material and symbolic ways that inequalities were produced and legitimized. Through collective decision-making, members vote democratically on issues affecting the organization, redefining the hierarchical arrangement of managerial authority. By facilitating job rotation, the cooperative opens opportunities for occupational mobility, redefining skill from a formal credential to tasks that can be learned by anyone. Finally, the practice of pay equity brings up

important questions around the value of paid labor, and was justified through an ecological view of each position in the cooperative.

Three relational processes explain how equality is constructed and sustained organizationally. As a collectively-owned enterprise with formally distributed power, the BAUEN Cooperative modifies the common organizational arrangement of exploitation whereby workers give up, in Marxian terms, the surplus value added by their labor. Even adopting a more expansive definition of exploitation as “a relationship in which one party uses power to gain at the expense of another” (Tomaskovic-Devey and Avent-Holt 2019:108), collective decision-making in the Workers’ Assembly provides an opportunity for workers to not only reorganize authority but also rework such power imbalances. This suggests an important relational mechanism of equality: *inclusion*, or the process by which participants are integrated into the value added by their efforts. While this analysis focused on the formal policies that established collective authority in the cooperative, it did not account for the ways that differences in race, class, gender, or other social categories impacted actual participation in decision-making. Who is empowered to make claims, who is supported to use democratic procedures, and whose voice is taken seriously are critical considerations to understanding the extent and limitations of equality processes (Pateman 1989), but go beyond the scope of this analysis.

The workplace practices examined in the BAUEN Cooperative also highlight efforts to broadly distribute opportunities and resources. Opportunity hoarding—the process through which certain groups limit others from the privileges or resources they enjoy (Tilly 1998)—is a fundamental way that inequalities are created. Members of the BAUEN Cooperative sometimes hoard resources despite the practice of equal pay, as evidenced in the analysis of overtime work. In his study of WRBs in Buenos Aires, Salgado (2012) comes to a similar conclusion, arguing

that founding members construct new credentials to justify unequal pay and monopolize positions of authority that are not related to ability or work experience, but to the prestige of their participation in the process of recuperation. In many ways, the reorganization of power described above could also be seen as a form of “non-exploitative oppression,” which describes a situation in which the oppressor relies simply on the exclusion of certain groups instead of their productive labor (Wright 1997). Nevertheless, what is clear is that as the cooperative reorganized work, well-studied inequality-producing processes shaped how material and symbolic resources were distributed. Yet this study also uncovers parallel mechanisms that disrupt such closure processes. Through job rotation, for example, opportunities for occupational mobility were distributed widely among members. Central to this effort was the way that the organization redefined skill, rejecting categories like formal educational attainment and credentials that often proxy for social class. This signals a second relational mechanism central to producing equality: *opportunity distribution*, or the sharing of resources between members of bounded groups with those outside their network.

Finally, by tracing the cooperative’s compensation policy over time, this article examined how members negotiated the meanings of paid work. Whereas scholars have identified discursive processes that reinforce inequality (Roscigno 2011), such efforts to redefine work suggest that the BAUEN Cooperative engages in a different process of legitimation: *symbolic leveling*, or the discursive emphasis on individuals’ equivalent ability to participate in decision-making, learn new skills, and contribute value to an organization. All three organizational initiatives examined relied on the symbolic leveling of human capital. In the BAUEN Cooperative, all members, even new hires, were seen as integral to decision-making and as having the ability to learn new job requirements and tasks, which was used to justify the “skill

mismatching” that took place as members rotated jobs. And finally, members of the cooperative adopted an ecological view of the organization, which legitimized the policy of equal pay.

CONCLUSIONS

Drawing on a long-term organizational ethnography of the BAUEN Cooperative, this article examined how workers negotiate the meanings of authority, skill, and value through the implementation of workplace practices aimed at broadly distributing power, opportunity, and rewards in the workplace. By shifting the analytic object from inequality to equality, I do not intend to suggest that workplace inequality has been (or can be) completely resolved in Hotel Bauen. Although WRBs have developed innovative strategies to address market pressures and engage in emerging solidarity economies, they are not free from the structuring inequalities of capitalist systems (Vieta 2010b) or internal challenges of reorganizing the workplace. Rather, I sought to show how meaningful efforts to reorganize work and redefine the categories used to justify inequalities can coexist with and contest inequality-producing processes.

While case studies are rich in particularities that are not generalizable to all organizations, they are useful for theory building (Ragin and Becker 1992). This paper contributes to theories of relational inequality by examining how organizations attempt to reduce workplace inequality among their members. Although research on inequality is often part of a broader project to promote equality (Cancian 1995), it does not provide a theoretical framework to understand potential remedies. Addressing this important gap in the literature, this article highlighted three equality-producing processes—*inclusion*, *opportunity distribution*, and *symbolic leveling*—that provide conceptual tools to study how organizations may broadly distribute material and symbolic resources at work.

This article also contributed to research on worker cooperatives by detailing the complexities and challenges of distributive practices aimed at addressing inequality. Given their emphasis on advancing members' needs through democratic participation, worker cooperatives are more likely to create inclusive, participatory, and equitable workplaces that support local communities (Rothschild-Whitt 1979; Vieta and Lyonnais 2015). However, this case highlighted the importance of not only structural redesign but also the cultural redefinition of work. In the case of WRBs in particular, equality processes were facilitated not only through the conversion to worker control but also by the legacy of cultural critique and connection to a broader vision of social and economic justice (Ranis 2016).

As this article demonstrated, inequality- and equality-producing processes can cooccur in the workplace. More research is needed to examine the interplay between distributive and exclusionary processes to better understand the relational dynamics of in/equality. Future research should also investigate the role of organizational environments on equality processes. Although this article focused on internal dynamics of one worker cooperative, a host of external pressures impact and potentially constrain these efforts. First, collective decision-making is not free from structural inequalities of capitalist societies or the impacts of social inequalities by race, class and gender that impact participation at work. Second, decoupling skill from formal credentials—as the cooperative does through job rotation—is potentially easier when individuals have lower formal educations. Yet research in very different workplaces—for example, the high wage service firms studied by Rivera (2012)—find that they also disregard credentials in favor of cultural matching in job placement. Similarly, when negotiating value in the context of low wages, members of the BAUEN Cooperative contend with higher market rates for service work, something that was clearly evidenced by the gap between internal wages and overtime wages.

Future research should situate organizations in institutional fields to better understand how individual differences, labor market characteristics, and market pressure impact equality processes in the workplace.

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