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The Ambivalence of Autonomy: Skills, Trust, Tactics, and Status on a Construction Site in Belize

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Abstract

This article focuses on the autonomy of construction workers informally employed in Belize City, Belize, as emerging from the labor processes and material conditions that characterize construction work in this ethnographic setting. I argue that the notion of ambivalence can be fruitfully applied in order to understand how autonomy acts in contradictory ways in reproducing the relationships amongst workers, and between them and their contractors. In a context characterized by personal relationships, minimized managerial control, and flexible employment, the article employs an ethnography of the workplace which focuses on the role of trust, status and tactics used by builders to their own advantage, in order to show the relevance of their autonomy for how they meaningfully engage with their work, with each other and their employers. The article asks how workers differentially positioned within the skills-based hierarchy of the workplace act ambivalently, simultaneously reinforcing and negating their unequal place within it while striving to make their conditions less precarious.

Keywords: construction industry, ambivalence, autonomy, skills, Belize

Introduction

Construction workers are often described as having a high degree of autonomy at work when compared to others working in manufacture, yet they are still employees who work for other people, and often their employment is insecure, temporary, and without any formal protection. While working with Belizean and Central American builders in Belize City, I encountered this paradox. The workers I met were proud of the fact that they knew how to perform their jobs well, and on this basis, they felt secure enough to argue with their employer in order to negotiate slower working rhythms while also taking every opportunity to slow down covertly or take a break. At the same time, all were informally employed and hired for short periods of time. The central question of this article aims to address these seemingly conflicting aspects of construction work in Belize: How is a sense of autonomy at work related to a dependency on others to work?

The scholarship on construction work has treated these two issues separately. On the one hand, it emphasizes autonomy at work as an outcome of specific conditions and as a value held among construction workers (Applebaum 1981; Thiel 2012). On the other, this literature shows the vulnerabilities experienced because of insecure employment and how they are navigated (Swider 2015; Hirslund 2021). I analyze how these two issues are linked by exploring the extent to which autonomy is implicated in the ways workers relate to each other and to their employers. Rather than considering "autonomy" as merely descriptive, I use it as an analytic term to understand how hierarchies are reproduced and made meaningful by workers, and how it impacts their employment conditions. In doing so, I follow anthropologists who have complicated the unequivocally positive attribute of autonomy and offered nuanced understandings of how people make a living (Ferguson 2013; Millar 2014). However, in this article, I am more interested in exploring directly the contradictory nature of autonomy. While it can be defined by a certain freedom from control, it is also at the core of self-disciplining practices. Workers differentially positioned within the construction site hierarchy also experience autonomy differently: those who are more autonomous at work are, perhaps paradoxically, the ones with stronger links to their bosses, and vice versa. This autonomy is ambivalent, as workers both manage these contradictions while also participating in their reproduction.

Autonomy and Ambivalence

Applebaum (1981) illustrates how the autonomy of the construction worker is enabled by the technological and organizational features of the industry. Due to the situational nature of construction work and its dependence on hand-tool technology adapted to the ever-changing nature and spaces of work, laboring is regimented by less strict spatial and temporal disciplinary boundaries than, for instance, factory work. Moreover, management must rely on skilled

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workers for the development of products. Therefore, builders—particularly when compared to industrial factory and service workers—are more autonomous in their task divisions and relatively free from managerial oversight. Silver (1986) suggests that the autonomy of construction workers is defined by supervision and self-direction. Accordingly, the degree of autonomy changes in relation to these variables: it is greater when work is less supervised and more self-directed. Thus, the autonomy of builders is an outcome of the peculiarities of the work they do and is determined by the level of control they experience. Using a rationale based on efficiency, sociologists of organizations point to the conditions under which specific forms of control are likely to arise. Ouchi (1980) argues that the difficulty in determining individual performance underlies the type of organization and form of control. Auditing interdependent labor is too costly when determining individual performance is difficult and tasks performed are ambiguous. The latter occurs especially when tasks are integrated or unique. This is why socialization is the main mechanism through which control is mediated under these circumstances. Etzioni (1961) proposes that organizations with economic goals tend to be more effective when they have a utilitarian compliance structure, in which remuneration is the key to control. This is true in the case of blue-collar workers in particular, who strive to reduce organizational control by developing their own control systems for expressive activities (social and normative) while the foremen control any instrumental activities (input and allocation). Using a rationale based on efficiency, these approaches help to explain why forms of self-control based on common values develop under conditions such as those present in the case given here: the actions of workers are dependent on one another, they adapt to changing environments, are to some degree autonomous from an employer's supervision, and due to the small workforce, there are no managers or foremen. The question of how control is experienced and understood by workers is also left open by this literature.

Sargent (2020) notes stark differences between the autonomy of skilled workers when compared with the constant surveillance experienced by laborers in Delhi's construction sites. These differences were justified by supervisors' view of laborers as inferior to trade workers, who in turn reinforced this hierarchical understanding by distancing themselves from laborers. This suggests that builders with different skills have various degrees of autonomy, and that these differences come into play in how they relate to each other and to their supervisors and employers (cf. Thiel 2012, 49). To discuss autonomy within the workplace, I present an ethnography of the relations between different workers and between workers and contractors; that is, I discuss autonomy within the hierarchy of the workplace. Autonomy exists within relationships that emerge from the labor process within the material conditions of the work site. Burawoy (1979, 15), with reference to industrial work, calls these "relations in production," which constitute the relational aspect of the labor process, for instance between workers and managers and between workers themselves. On the construction site, relations in production are chiefly structured by skill and exist within the space of autonomy, which depends upon the material and processual aspects that characterize construction work. Attending to these relationships ethnographically, I show how hierarchy is lived through a variety of modalities, how actors embody structural positions and reproduce exploitation, and how conflicts and solidarities are contingent upon labor organization and production (De Neve 2001).

Together with foregrounding autonomy as a central aspect of how these relations are lived, I extend the discussion of autonomy beyond the work site to the employment relations between workers and their employers. This requires a joint discussion of how workers experience autonomy while laboring and how autonomy is implicated within their intermittent and unstable working conditions. In his ethnography of construction work in London, Thiel (2012, 4–5) notes the concomitancy of a builder's autonomy with its hyper-flexibility and its low legal and union protection. Even when working within formal contractual terms, construction workers are exposed to what Paap (2006, 33) calls the "structural insecurity" ingrained in relationships in the industry. In this article, I extend an analysis of autonomy to the role it plays in how workers navigate insecure working conditions. This requires taking autonomy from being an outcome of certain factors to considering it as a pivotal element in how work relations are structured from the perspective of the work process on the construction site and by looking at workforce retention over time. Thus, this article advances an understanding of the autonomy of construction workers not only as an outcome of certain variable conditions and as a value that forms part of workplace cultures, but also as an element that structures how they understand, manage, and maintain their work and employment.

By giving autonomy analytical relevance, this article contributes to discussions in anthropology that complicate a positive view of autonomous individuals and which develop other understandings of autonomy, especially in relation to labor. While Ferguson (2013) has challenged celebratory accounts of autonomy by presenting the case of people striving for dependence in South Africa, Millar (2014) has discussed different meanings of autonomy in waged and unwaged labor. Millar (2014, 47) distinguishes between two

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understandings of autonomy: autonomy in the neoliberal sense, referring to the "individual empowerment, entrepreneurialism, and self-help" of a subject who precedes relationships, and autonomy as liberation through the creation of relations of reciprocal dependence, as emerging from anti-neoliberal struggles. She argues that by choosing wageless labor as garbage collectors instead of wage labor, her Brazilian informants claimed the latter kind of autonomy.

My aim in this paper is to contribute to an analysis of autonomy *within* wage labor, in work that is intermittent and highly casual yet also characterized by important internal differences in the degree of employment insecurity experienced by workers. By tracing the ways in which autonomy is pivotal to the reproduction of a skills-based hierarchy on the work site, I show how autonomy becomes meaningful for workers precisely because it emerges from the material and processual features of the production in which they are involved. Thus, I present a different case from the ones that have understood autonomy in the Caribbean as sought and found outside of wage labor (see Prentice 2015 for an exception) and concerning entrepreneurial ventures. This literature analyzes different economic practices (Freeman 2000; Safa 1986; Sampath 1997) usually associated with "cultural values" that are related to the history of colonial relations and to the use of slave labor (Browne 2002). Because these features are shared between workers who were born and bred in Belize and workers who moved there at varying times from Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala, the kind of autonomy discussed here is meaningful to builders because of their engagement with the same kind of work, rather than because of any wider cultural aspects ascribable to a shared colonial past.

Therefore, this paper tackles a contradiction that emerges from considering autonomy within, as opposed to outside of, employer-employee relationships. It looks at autonomy that paradoxically exists within hierarchical relationships. Shifting from a comparison between wage and wageless labor, to a comparison of workers' positionalities within wage labor, I argue that the autonomy of builders is ambivalent. Smelser (1998) contends that the dichotomy between autonomy and dependency is insoluble: neither is separate from the other as a state or condition, they are co-constitutive and therefore neither is univalent. This simultaneity is better captured using the notion of ambivalence to explain situations and behaviors. Dependent situations give rise to ambivalence, according to Smelser, both positively (solidarity) and negatively (entrapment). Within anthropology, Jovanović (2016) has focused on ambivalence to shift from analyzing the ways in which individuals resolve inconsistencies to exploring power relations by problematizing how people participate in the reproduction of their own conditions while coping with contradictions. By focusing on relations in production, I will show that the work site is both a place for the reproduction of these hierarchies and a space within which to carve out a kind of autonomy. In calling workers' autonomy ambivalent, I wish to add a third kind of autonomy to Millar's (2014) distinction between neoliberal and liberating, with the aim of accounting for the contradictions it gives rise to. As I illustrate in the following pages, the ambivalence of autonomy lies in the fact that it allows workers a certain space of action at work while also being the basis of their self-disciplining practices, and the more workers are autonomous within the workplace, the stronger their relationships with contractors potentially are, which allows them to stabilize their employment. Autonomy, while negating hierarchy, also reproduces it.

Construction, Labor, and Fieldwork in Belize

The construction industry in Belize City is of a small scale: it contributed to around 3 percent of Belize's GDP at the time of fieldwork (SIB 2021), when it had a workforce of around 4.5 thousand in the Belize District surrounding Belize City (SIB 2015). In urban areas, construction and manufacturing are among the sectors with the highest poverty rates, and urban and rural poverty is higher among agricultural workers and those in elementary (unskilled) occupations (GOB and CDB 2011), which includes "building construction laborers," as well as other similar tasks (SIB 2015). Research on urban violence in Belize has highlighted how unskilled laborers, masons, carpenters, and others employed part-time and seasonally (Gayle et al. 2016) form part of the base from which gangs recruit their members. Thus, construction workers are subject to harsh economic conditions while occupying a vulnerable position within the city.

The construction industry has attracted Central American migrants since the late 1970s (Iyo 1998), when Guatemalans, Salvadorians, and Hondurans began to move to Belize mainly because of civil wars in their home countries (Palacio and Stone 1991). At the time, attention was mainly directed toward refugees in rural areas and agricultural work, since 75 percent of them relocated to rural areas (Palacio 1990), and many fueled the need for labor in the sugar, banana, and citrus agro-industries. The migration flux continued in the following years, and recent research has suggested that a good number of Central American migrants seemed to be working in construction (Acuña González 2012). These studies outlined the mix of economic migrants and refugees coming from Central America, and how the rise in gang violence in Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala has produced a new wave of asylum seekers (UNHCR 2017).

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The anthropological literature on labor in Belize has mainly focused on the agricultural sector and on the banana and citrus industries, which employ both Belizeans and Central Americans. Moberg (1997) has shown the division of the workforce according to "myths of ethnicity and nation" (116) in the Belizean banana industry. Medina (2004) has discussed how workers and growers in the Belizean citrus industry positioned themselves situationally in terms of gender, class, and political, ethnic, racial, and national identity. Both these works deal with a large number of actors involved in sectors heavily influenced by the international market and with a form of production that strongly relates to place by being rooted in the exploitation and ownership of land. As I show below, in the locally oriented small-scale construction sector in which my interlocutors worked, such differences did not translate into a clear segmentation of the management and control of workers. Rather than emerging in the formation of unions and within collective action (Medina 2004), in the case of the construction sector, the solidarities and conflicts between workers surfaced from practices and values reproduced in and out of the workplace which are recognized across ethnic and national lines by builders who entered the sector and the city at different times and under changing circumstances.

In the small-scale industry in which I conducted fieldwork, changing demands for labor were reflected in variable building schedules and could be observed in a contractor's informal employment of workers with varying expertise and in different numbers, somewhere between two and ten a day. The builders I met worked on projects for private customers or companies, which usually lasted between one day to a few weeks. Without the relative consistency of employment offered in projects involving big residential or commercial buildings, workers were subject to particularly intermittent employment conditions. As I will show below, the small size of the industry and work sites I engaged with during fieldwork also heightened the importance of reputational acquisition for the maintenance of work relationships and the increase of work opportunities.

This article is based on twelve months of participant observation in Belize City (2015–2016). Early on in my fieldwork I followed day laborers in their search for one or a few days of work around the city. I accompanied workers who accessed construction work intermittently and had to complement their income by hustling in the city. Halfway through my research, I was introduced by a friend to a contractor for whom I started to work. His working crew was made up mostly of men born in Central American countries, who befriended me once they'd evaluated that, even if not skilled, I worked sufficiently hard, and that I wasn't spying on them on behalf of the contractor. This allowed me the opportunity of more continual contact with a single employer and more skilled workers. The material presented here refers mainly to on-site interactions and the observations I made while working as a laborer, but is also informed by time spent with the workers during after-work gatherings and around the city when they were not at work. I came to know builders from Belize and from Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala, who had arrived in Belize during or in the aftermath of conflicts in Central America, fleeing the more recent surges in violent crime in the region and looking for a better livelihood. These workers were old-time city dwellers and newcomers, with different skill levels and time spent working in the industry. Most of the workers I met in Belize were living in the city, and all the work with which I was engaged was within the city or its immediate outskirts. In this setting, employment was intermittent and fragmented. The less skilled the workers were, the less they were paid per hour or day. Workers who were more skilled were employed for longer on any given project, while, in comparison, less-skilled workers had to search more frequently for new work opportunities.

Skills and the Emergence of Trust

Dylan, a laborer in his mid-thirties who was born and bred in Belize City, takes me to the site where he's been working. It's the house, under construction, of a businessperson on the outskirts of Belize City where residential areas are developing. Inside, electricians are busy working. Outside, Dylan is digging alongside a Belizean mason and his helper to make space for the foundations of a fence, which is to be erected around the property. Since the work needs to speed up, I'm hired for the day by the mason on behalf of the contractor responsible for the whole project, and I spend the day "tying" metal bars to each other for the foundation inside the ditch they've already dug. The mason instructs me on how to do this, showing me the tying technique, cutting metal wires and bars when I need them, and from time to time he comes to check how well I'm tying and how the work is progressing. In a similar way, he directs and assists the other two, who are shoveling dirt and breaking pieces of cement buried in the way of the new foundation. He also designates breaks for us to have a sip of water under the shade, while remaining attentive to the possible arrival of the boss as, I'm told, it's best for him to find us working. When the contractor comes around, I hear the mason negotiate the plan for the fence with him. The mason insists that the plan he holds in his hands is inadequate for the actual space around the house, and after a while, the contractor is convinced. Later the mason says that because of his experience, he's able to identify mistakes like these,

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and he wears a pleased smirk, which makes the other two Belizean workers and me smile.

This was a workday early on in my fieldwork when I followed Dylan and other day laborers in search of one or a few days of work around and on the edges of Belize City. Since the start of my fieldwork, it had become clear to me that there was both a divide between workers and bosses and a hierarchy between workers. By stressing his previous experience, the mason in the above vignette hints at a difference in skill set between contractors and workers, a difference that has also been clearly articulated by other builders I've worked with. The workers usually employed by Mr. Juan, the Belizean contractor in his early fifties for whom I mostly worked, talked about how Juan knew how to manage expenses (i.e., how to account for time, materials, workforce, and profit), but not how to work: "He knows how to calculate, he definitely knows that, but he doesn't know the work." They argued that they were the ones with the knowledge and skills that allowed construction work to go ahead. Because of the difference in skill set between workers and contractors, the contractor had to rely on the skills of a tradesman and trust him to use them efficiently for a specific task to be completed effectively in terms of both quality and cost efficiency.

Contractors, like the one above, depend upon tradesmen for the delivery of products. There are two aspects of this reliance on workers, the first of which concerns knowledge. Even when the contractor is, as above, also an architect, he still draws upon the expertise of tradesmen like the mason, who knows how to materialize what is on paper. The second concerns organization. The mason directed our actions, checked our work, and instructed us on when to rest. This was the case both when the contractor was on site and when he had to leave—and all of us complicitly paused our work. The autonomy of workers depends on these two factors: the differential knowledge between them and contractors and how labor is organized on site. The reliance of contractors on workers means that they need to trust that they will build to a certain standard when it comes to the quality of a product and the completion time. Trust emerges from the autonomy workers have, since they exercise a degree of control over the building process in terms of task organization, workforce control, and the knowledge of how to build in practice (cf. Thiel 2012). These elements make their actions uncertain from the point of view of the employer. According to Luhmann (1988), trust depends upon risk, which emerges from the possibility to act and decide. By adopting a basic understanding that "trust is to believe despite uncertainty concerning another's action" (Harriss 2003, 757), workers need to be trusted since their actions have uncertain outcomes. This uncertainty of outcome is a result of the degree of autonomy workers have. Thus, the worker's autonomy is the condition of trust between workers and contractors.

Contractors do not rely in the same way on all builders. Rather, their reliance is mainly upon experienced workers like the mason who directed and controlled us, the workers, while also liaising with the contractor. Experienced workers identified themselves with a specific trade, for example calling themselves "mason," "carpenter," or "welder." I refer to this group of workers as *tradesmen*, since they were recognized as skilled workers and all recognized themselves as such. They were assisted by "helpers" who, by working alongside them, learned a trade. The more menial and heavy-duty tasks were executed by workers like Dylan, who identified as "laborers" (which is the term I am using to refer to them) or simply "construction workers." The skilled workers organized helpers' and laborers' work. Employers had to trust them more than less-skilled workers: trust was hierarchically distributed on site.

Employment Relations

Trust is also essential in structuring employment relationships over time. According to Hart (1988, 191), trust is central to personal relations in which "constraints imposed by kinship identity and legal contract" are relatively absent. In this context of production not formalized by contractual arrangements, and in the absence of enforceable union and legal terms, trust is central in consolidating the bond between workers and contractors. Juan recounted to me his relationship with a Belizean welder who had been part of his habitual working crew: "He was a really good worker, he worked with me for about fifteen years. I taught him a lot, and he could do many different works. I could leave him on the work site and he will do the job." By working on subsequent projects together, contractors benefit from prior knowledge of tradesmen who can be trusted for their oversight and knowledge. However, the relevance of trust for these relationships was also dependent upon skill. Given the workforce availability, a tradesman is less replaceable than a laborer, not directly because the skills he possesses are scarce but rather by the relationship they establish through time based on skills. Dylan was acquainted with the contractor who hired him for the fencing job, but this did not translate into more constant employment since his work was supervised by a worker who was more skilled than him. Dylan's lower skill set and placement in a supervised position meant that his actions were less uncertain.

The autonomy experienced on site while working is thus a condition for relationships that, to some extent, reduce employment fragmentation. Relations in production that are built around autonomy

simultaneously shape how work is organized and how employment is maintained. Workers with different skills are employed by the same contractor, who establishes trust relationships based on the level of autonomy afforded by their skills. Exclusively male, these workers and contractors entered into contact in multiple ways. Tradesmen who knew each other after years of work around the city and who had become friends shared work opportunities while meeting during leisure time. Contractors also directly called workers they knew for upcoming jobs. Recently arrived migrants often found work in construction through Spanish-speaking neighbors who introduced them to known contractors. Laborers asked acquaintances working in construction about upcoming opportunities and were also scoping out the city in search of a construction site where they could inquire directly, thus making themselves easily available wherever "hard work" was needed. Occasionally relatives working in construction would signal working opportunities.

While ways of finding employment differed, I did not find structural elements that bound contractors and workers by ties that preceded their working relationships, such as kinship or residence or strong associations of specialist trades with a particular ethnicity, nationality, or areas of residence. This might primarily result from the scale of the city, the industry, and of the working groups among whom I carried out fieldwork. The contractors I worked with were involved in relatively short jobs that required a small workforce, hence the absence of the pre-migratory contractual relationships involving sourcing a migrant workforce from their place of origin or involving spatial segregation and other practices that made workers particularly vulnerable, such as withholding of payment, as described by Swider (2015) in China, or establishing debt relations, as reported by Sargent (2019) in India. Further, the number of construction workers was relatively low, and Belize City, despite being the biggest urban center of the country, had a population of only around seventy thousand at the time. While there are differences in terms of the affluence and ethnic composition of the city, I found that the workers I knew were from different neighborhoods and were acquainted with other workers located in various areas. This might explain the absence of a strong association between trade, place, and ethnic background that often contributes to workforce segmentation, as Thiel (2012) found in London.

These factors contributed to the salience of trust relationships formed and maintained at work. Beyond assuring more constant employment, being acquainted with a specific contractor also meant that workers were more secure in receiving payment. In particular, younger and less experienced workers benefited from longer-lasting relations with contractors. When I asked about previous experiences working for new bosses, I was told stories of exaggerated delays in payment, resulting in smaller earnings or even loss of salary. Laborers were more exposed to exploitative conditions by being fragmentarily employed and in constant need of finding work. For them, getting to know a contractor was one way of protecting themselves against dishonesty as recently arrived migrants were also at risk of working for deceitful employers who would take advantage of the fact they were new to the city and its sector. Time spent in the industry constituted an advantage. However, while older workers remembered the industry as booming when they had first entered it, they reflected on the scant opportunities present during the time of my fieldwork, which made it particularly difficult for workers at the time to learn and become more stably employed. In the absence of strong social networks, the smallness of the sites and the direct relationship with contractors heightened the importance of trust-based personal relationships established at work. This also contrasts with Hirslund's (2021) account of the autonomy of laborers in Kathmandu, who privilege shorter employment and alternative jobs as a form of protection from exploitative conditions. The scarcity of work opportunities, the marginal position of laborers within the city's economy, and the smaller employment networks of new migrants made it more advantageous to seek relatively long-lasting relationships.

Status and Reputation

An experienced mason once told me that when a contractor tells him, "'I want this, that and the other,' like that, he just explains it to me once, OK? And then he goes [away]. When he comes [back] the job is finished. He's happy, the owner of the job is happy, and I also feel good." This quote points to the importance of trust—since the contractor assigns the job and goes away—while introducing yet another angle on the relationship between worker and employer. Similar remarks by other workers were followed by explanations that because of their work, their boss might secure more contracts and they would benefit by being employed on these projects. This is an expression of complementarity of interests between tradesmen and contractors. For contractors, the quality and timely completion of a project means acquiring a good reputation, which increases their possibilities of being given future contracts. Contractors explained that often neighbors of a client would contact them to have work done on their property, or that when moving in the city, people would stop them and ask about specific jobs because they had seen and heard about past jobs delivered by the contractors. For tradesmen, executing work that is considered proper also involves gaining a reputation: increased recognition of his work

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by the contractor results in greater possibilities of being employed on future projects. The reputation of a contractor depends upon the reputation of a worker; it is crucial for contractors to secure more contracts, and for workers to stabilize their employment. This is particularly important in a small environment where, rather than by advertisements and formal qualifications, word of mouth and personal connections are central.

Status is thus a further feature of relations in production that, like trust, follows a vertical distribution according to skills. In fact, a laborer's work does not lead to the acquisition of status as it does for tradesmen. In the work sequence, a laborer's work is the least refined and is often made invisible by successive layers added by more skilled builders (Lyon 2013). From the perspective of control, it is in their interest for tradesmen to exercise control over their laborers and helpers. Thus, the reputation gained by workers is relevant for their relationship with contractors and is also crucial for their relationships with each other. As for trust, status not only impacts employment relationships over time but is also central to the work process on site. The implementation of work discipline is exercised vertically, alongside being exercised upon peers and upon the self. The sociality of the work site and the relational aspect of status mean that reputation is acquired during the work process through being observed by fellow builders. Taking too much time to rest or visibly working less than others is not seen as a positive thing. Being a "hard worker" and demonstrating the ability to do a good job can be seen both by observing one's actions on the work site and by observing the resulting products and subsequent impact upon a worker's reputation, as tradesman Emilio, a Honduran and Salvadoran in his late forties, explained:

"Now, if people see that you've done a little work that looks like, 'Wow!' they look at it and they say 'Hey,' they say, 'for this one here we all got this week's salary,' or something like that. […] There you earn, depending on what you know. There you earn respect."

Thus, workers are generally not willing to sacrifice or compromise the quality of the product of their labor. Workers learn and enact these values on the work site within the labor process. As seen in the previous section, workers position themselves and understand themselves through skill. With skill, practitioners also learn values, as shown in the anthropological literature on the subject (Argenti 2002; Lewis 2016; Simpson 2006; Marchand 2008; Venkatesan 2010).

Status is acquired by applying one's skills according to the values (re)produced on the construction site. Rather than only being a matter of interrelated interest, status is central to how workers think of themselves and the satisfaction they gain from their work. To be respected is to be pleased to have one's work recognized, based on how one has executed that work and what one has produced. This is a case of "workers regulating workers" (Swider 2015, 74). In the case of the construction workers studied by Swider (2015), the supervision of workers by each other depends in part on the fact that they are paid by the job and are dependent upon each other for their pay and on overlapping social networks formed before migrating to the city and after, including those formed occupationally. In this case, workers regulate themselves based on status. This happens even though they are paid by the day. By the same token, this control over themselves means that they do not "burn out" under the pressure of a self-imposed pace, as observed by Swider (2015), even if the difficulty of the work of day laborers should not be underemphasized.

Crucially, while a skills-based hierarchy organizes labor on site, it does not translate into an authoritarian relationship between the workers variously positioned within it. Relationships between workers are of an authoritative (rather than authoritarian) nature, based on "achieved status" (Linton 1936, 115). This became clear to me while observing and participating in the interactions through which work was organized. On site, one follows the instructions of a skilled builder not because of an assigned position of power, but based on the respect they have earned as a result of their competence. In fact, tradesmen asked, rather than ordered, less-skilled workers to carry out particular tasks. Apart from observing the nonauthoritarian language used on site, this knowledge emerged during post-work discussions with builders, who recounted their frustration when commanded by more experienced workers. Javier, a Honduran helper in his mid-thirties, had a tense exchange with the Guatemalan tradesman who supervised him. One evening at Javier's yard, I heard him recounting a story that he had already told Emilio: "He tells me, 'You have to do it now,' and I tell him, 'Look, I'm going to do it but not now, if you want it now you can go to hell!' He says he wants it now, so I tell him to go….!" Carlos, the other interlocutor present and formerly working for the same boss, went on to add that he almost got into a physical confrontation with the same tradesman Javier had an argument with because of his attitude. Authority that depends upon achieved status is expressed by asking rather than commanding, and thereby accommodating autonomy. Thus, while workers earn respect and comprehend the skills-based hierarchy based on shared understandings, they also conform to an underlying egalitarian ethos that manifests itself in their sense of pride and autonomy. The same quality that allows one to stabilize and negotiate one's employment (or advance in a trade) is also based

on a non authoritarian control over labor. While the harsh treatment and explicit denigration experienced by laborers described by Sargent (2020) was based on an understanding of persons employed via different channels to those of skilled workers, the laborers I worked with equally partook of this ethos and did not accept inferior treatment.

Conflicts between workers are likely to arise when hierarchy is made explicit in utterances rather than kept implicit by compliance. Thus, status acquisition allows workers to stabilize their employment with respect to contractors by making themselves valuable or, if they are helpers, by advancing in a trade. Simultaneously, they discipline themselves according to shared values and enforce their authority upon each other without making their hierarchical positions explicit. In other words, workers act against the casual conditions of their work and at the same time enforce control over labor on behalf of contractors in an environment where managerial oversight is limited and cooperation rather than command is preferred.

Tactics

Workers' autonomy plays a central role in understanding both overt and covert negotiations of working conditions. Much of the tension between workers and contractors is about time: the working rhythm and consequent working days or length of project completion. At times, tradesmen pointed out to the contractor that the pace of work was too fast for the specific job to be completed correctly. William, a tradesman in his early forties and born in El Salvador, who was a good friend of Emilio, complained about the pressures from Juan to speed up at the end of a working day on a renovation job that had to be completed swiftly. The contractor did not seem to take into consideration that, as William explained to me and the other workers present, "Things need their time, they have a precise order." William's words not only reflect the negotiations between contractor and workers on the time needed (even under pressure) to successfully build, but also show that negotiations over time are crucial because the quality of a finished product is intrinsically entangled with the amount of time spent completing it. In other words, to build, it is necessary to have enough time to allow for an orderly development of work. To use the distinction that E.P. Thompson (1967) made in historical terms with regard to time and work-discipline, William stressed the primacy of task-orientation, of which he could claim intimate knowledge because of his skills, over the clock-time by which he was paid. This kind of negotiation depends directly on the skills of workers vis-à-vis contractors. Builders can argue that the speed of work needs to be slowed down because they better know the appropriate processes for delivering a quality product. By appealing to their skills, they can prolong the length of a working day or of the overall project. Being paid by the day, workers can consequently claim overtime or more working days, which increases their final wage.

I have also observed covert manipulations of working rhythms, such as slowing down the pace or taking breaks in the contractor's absence. Much like we did when the contractor was away to supervise the building of the fence, we would often take longer and more frequent breaks whenever employers were away, always ready to jump to our feet and resume work at the sight of an approaching boss. Contractors were not unaware of this—as Juan once blatantly put it: "It seems that they are working but they are not"—but they are unable to enforce discipline while absent. Importantly, I came to realize that taking breaks is as much a collective activity as laboring is. Because work is characterized by "sequentialism" (Thiel 2012, 10), in which the beginning of some tasks is dependent upon the completion of others, non-work also needs to follow the same rationale. It is usually tradesmen who dictate the pace of work, and with it the time of non-work. The skills-based hierarchy also operates in controlling non-work within an environment where the input of singular workers is often a collective endeavor in which individual actions are executed in concert. Consequently, laborers enjoy resting not by virtue of their own autonomy at work, but rather because of the decisions of more skilled workers.

The fact that contractors trust tradesmen does not necessarily make workers overzealous. On the contrary, the more workers are trusted, the more they are able to negotiate their conditions. This is because the stabilization of their employment and the possibility of negotiation depend upon the degree of uncertainty of their actions. As illustrated above, the more skills they have the more uncertain their actions. Workers' autonomy, carved from the organization of labor on site and the exclusion of contractors from forms of knowledge specific to them, allows tradesmen to exercise more control over the building process and their working conditions. However, the resulting overt and covert negotiations over time should not be confused with an enduring change in working conditions; rather, it is situational. In fact, workers do not directly challenge or resist, and they cannot keep what they win (Certeau 1984, 37) from the powerful (Scheper-Hughes 1993, 471–472). When overtly discussing time, they appeal to their skills rather than directly to unfit working rhythms. When covertly slowing down, they do not make their demands explicit. The resulting benefits constantly need to be renegotiated and,

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importantly, they do not lead to improved conditions over time.

Conclusion

In this article, I have presented an ethnographic account of how workers manage their labor and employment in the small construction sector of Belize City, which has peculiar characteristics such as a workforce that is informally employed, highly precarious, and with low skill differentiation, the workers mostly working in small groups without supervisors. These characteristics allowed me to make the case for the importance of autonomy, both on the construction site and in the ways builders navigate their working conditions, striving to obtain more permanent employment. The literature on the construction industry stresses autonomy as an outcome of variable conditions that characterize this kind of work, which is eventually upheld by workers as a value and characterizes their attitudes at work. I have developed these insights further by looking at the relationships they create between themselves and their employers. In looking at hierarchy in the workplace, I have reframed questions of skill, trust, status, and tactics in the workplace, centering them on autonomy and extending the discussion of autonomy from its place in the workplace to the relevance it has in the maintenance and frequency of employment over time.

By attending to the hierarchical nature of relationships in the industry, I have shown the contradictions that emerge from considering autonomy on the construction site and the relationships that extend from it. The concept of ambivalence is well suited to encompassing these contradictions, without negating the power relationships that give rise to them. Autonomy is ambivalent in two ways, the first with regards to workplace discipline and the second with regards to employment relationships. First, autonomy is characterized by a degree of freedom from a contractor's control over working rhythms to the benefit of builders, while also being the foundation of the control exercised between workers, which benefits the contractor. Workers' tactics show that they can manipulate to a certain extent the pace, length of time, and when exactly they work. However, as their status depends on the outcomes of their labor within this given autonomy, they also exercise a degree of control among themselves. Second, the more workers are skilled, the more they can be autonomous from direction and management while laboring, and yet, the more skilled the worker, the stronger his ties become to the contractor. By making autonomy meaningful through their actions and relationships at work, builders also participate in its contradictions, at once negating and reproducing the hierarchy shaping their working and employment conditions.

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