"When Clean Angels Calls, I Run"
Working Conditions of a Gigified Care-Worker

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> I am standing in the middle of a store when I receive my first call from Clean Angels. I am rather unprepared at first. I've had some annoying calls from call centers in the last few days. That's why I am a little bit unfriendly to the employee of Clean Angels at first, because I assume that it is a call center call again. Also, I am not expecting a call from Clean Angels at all – and definitely not at this time of day. Even so, the woman is very friendly and asks for references from my previous cleaning jobs. She adds that it is important for me to send a reference, because Clean Angels sees itself as an intermediary and therefore has to guarantee a certain quality. She emphasizes that I will not be employed through the platform, but directly with their customers.
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> I tell her that I will try to organize a reference. She says that without one, unfortunately they will not be able to consider my application. I immediately start to think about how I can organize the reference. I do not have any contact with my former employers and I feel a little bit embarrassed to ask them for a reference. Then I remember that I am standing in a store and continue shopping (Fieldnotes 08.10.2020).

The incident described above was my first personal contact with Clean Angels, a digital platform that matches gigs in the domestic house cleaning sector. In the context of my research project, I conducted autoethnographic fieldwork on the platform. In this chapter, I hope to provide a differentiated view of the consequences of platform labor architecture for workers' everyday lives. While ride hailing platforms or courier service platforms have been the subject of intense attention (cf. Berg et al. 2018; Ivanova et al. 2018) less is known about the experiences in the care-sector.

In what follows, I shine a light on the kind of domestic house cleaning that is mediated via digital platforms. In line with feminist geographers, I identify platform workers not simply as laborers but as individuals living within complex social relations. In addition, the concept of platform urbanisms helps me to understand the subjective experiences of a worker within the urban space.

While a growing body of literature discusses the logics and realities of digital care platforms (e.g., Ivanova et al. 2018; Shapiro 2018; van Doorn 2021), lately calls for more knowledge about subjective perceptions, positions, and realities within the gig economy have gained momentum (Altenried/Dück/Wallis 2021; Bauriedl/Strüver 2020; Elwood/Leszczynski 2018). A subjective perspective puts forth important insights on the workers' socio-spatial experiences, especially in the gig economy, in which workers become the platform's good (Kluzik 2021: 220). Against this background I ask: how do care platform workers experience socio-spatial practices that are created by the platform?

I used this episode from my fieldwork to start this chapter because it specifically illustrates aspects of how the working relationships between the platforms and the workers are shaped and shows how this affects the workers' subjectivity. It raises key questions about dependencies, power relations, availabilities, and hierarchies. My autoethnographic research findings will facilitate understanding of the ways in which working as a gigified care-worker in the urban context affects workers' lived realities. Through this research, I will demonstrate how the anticipation of constant availability encroaches on workers' lives. The daily life as platform worker, shaped by the socio-technic relationship to the platform, is highly complex and pervaded by contradictions. At times, workers might relish the freedom to accept or decline the offered cleaning gigs and thus decide when, where, and how long they do paid work. At many other times, however, they will vividly feel their ultimate dependence on the platform. Furthermore, I will show that platform workers must repeatedly negotiate unclear role assignments that have been deliberately created by the platforms. These perpetual negotiations take place within a socio-spatial context comprising multiple players and interests and reinforce existing hierarchies.

Digital platforms in the city

One example of how digital transformations affect cities are intermediation platforms. Platforms emerged in line with the idea of a smart city. According to Leszczynski (2020: 193) platforms present a "diversification, and intensification" of smart cities' "constituent practices, processes, and technologies". In practice, intermediation platforms scale smart city processes from the city administration onto personal networks and devices of citizens. Therefore, platforms create opportunities to use codes and algorithms for exchange of information, goods, and services for urban citizens. In this way, digital technologies affect various spheres of public and private life in the city. The labor market is involved in this development as well. One manifestation of this development is a growing number of digital platforms for labor intermediation that offer their services in the urban space (Lee et al. 2020: 116). Digital labor platforms have thus been evolving into "critical infrastructures of urban societies" (Barns 2019: 1). This is also the case in the sector of domestic house cleaning. Booking a cleaning person through a platform has become standard for many households. This encourages the platforms to depict themselves as important players who combat the high prevalence of informal working arrangements.

As critical infrastructures, digital platforms for labor intermediation shape urban life and, especially, urban work realities (Bauriedl/Strüver 2020: 270; Ecker/Rowek/Strüver 2021: 119). The emerging practices sound promising as framed by the platforms: an algorithm matches workers to customers within seconds. The result is that work is placed at shorter notice, for shorter periods of time, and more anonymously. In order to guarantee a match in any case, a huge workforce is available for the customer of the platforms. For workers, flexible working hours and the promised freedom to accept or decline gigs are pitched as positive aspects.

However, because of deliberate decisions in the design and architecture of the platforms, the new working arrangements define socio-spatial experiences in the urban space (Barns 2019: 1). Workers' daily life is characterized by fragmented working hours, a lot of (unpaid) travel time and major ambiguity about the quantity of assigned jobs. Platforms remain in the powerful position of transforming how, when, and where work is done, while workers have to adapt to the conditions. Therefore, several scholars emphasize the potential of platforms to shift and shape existing power relations in a daily urban life (Bauriedl/Strüver 2020: 270).

The controversy surrounding digital platforms has inspired thorough and continuous research on some sectors of the gig economy in recent years. Platforms for ride hailing, courier services, or food delivery especially have attracted increased attention (cf. Ivanova et al. 2018; Richardson 2020; Shapiro 2018; van Doorn 2017; Zwick 2018). Strikingly, these sectors are particularly dominated by male workers and mediate the type of work that is visible in the public urban life.

In contrast, the platformization of paid care work that is performed in the private space of the home (child and senior care, tutoring, cleaning, etc.) receives less public and academic attention. Care.com, Helpling, or Mamiexpress.ch are examples of such emerging platforms that have both embraced features of the on-demand economy and function within this logic (Ticona/Mateescu 2018: 4386). Digitalization allows new scales and facilitates network effects that would not previously have been possible in the care sector (Altenried 2021: 57). For example, in the cleaning sector, which is the focus of this contribution, the hiring process changes fundamentally. In the past, cleaners were either hired directly by the customer or they were employed by an intermediary company. Therefore, it remained clear who was the formal employer (with the associated responsibilities) and who would actually show up for the cleaning. This changed with the use of digital apps. The customer of the platform becomes unintentionally an employer of an unknown person. In some cases, the customer and the worker never even meet.

This new development in the sector needs increased attention in research, as it has a heavy impact on urban labor. Independently of digitalization, a care crisis, namely an externalization and commodification of care work can be observed. House cleaning for example is externalized because of a lack of capacity in the household, whether from more intensive burdens in gainful employment or because it has become something affordable (cf. Altenried/Dück/Wallis 2021; Huws 2019). Following the logic of commodification, social reproduction and care of households and people has become something that needs to be efficient (Altenried/Dück/Wallis 2021: 10). Digital platforms are an example of how efficiency and flexibility can be maximized: cleaners can be ordered exactly when they are necessary and with just one click on an app, the hiring is done in no time. Therefore, digital intermediation platforms present themselves, and are discussed, as part of the solution for the above-mentioned care crisis (Huws 2019).

In contrast to this affirmative rhetoric, I shift my perspective of analysis from the customer to the worker. In this paper, I aim to shed more light

on how platform workers themselves experience the everyday socio-spatial interactions with a care platform. In this, I strive to better understand how digital platforms (re)produce and reinforce socio-spatial differences and inequalities. To provide a focus on such subjective experiences I work with the method of autoethnography.

Doing autoethnographic research

The method of autoethnography allows me to link my own lived experiences as platform worker to broader socio-cultural experiences (cf. Ritchie 2019: 71) and vice versa. Or in Reed-Danahay's (1997) terms, I understand "autoethnography as a form of self-narrative that places the self in social contexts". The method therefore presents a suitable match for my research interest in experiencing the subjective socio-spatial practices of a platform worker.

This paper draws on autoethnographic fieldwork I conducted on three different platforms in 2020-2021. I registered on all three platforms and created a profile with my interests, my documents, and my experiences. In this paper, I explicitly discuss material that I collected during fourteen weeks working in the cleaning sector between October 2020 and January 2021. And while the Covid-19 pandemic did affect public life during the aforementioned period, Switzerland was not under a strict lock-down at the time. This meant that there was a steady demand for cleaners for private households to conduct fieldwork. In effect, my access to domestic household cleaning gigs turned out to be easier than anticipated as I received several job offers in a short period of time. In Switzerland, platform labor in the care sector has been a growing market in recent years. International companies and Swiss specific platforms have been on the rise, spending noteworthy resources in marketing and advertising strategies. A variety of business models and employment conditions have been developing, configuring specific characteristics in each different platform. Whilst some platforms provide online market places without any support in the hiring processes, others assign jobs and provide working contracts. Recently, innovative forms of online platforms, Platform based cleaning cooperatives, emerged. Examples such as that of Plattformkooperative Autonomía in Zürich, ought to be monitored in the coming years. Especially considering the constant conversion of the market and its under researched socio-economic repercussions, online labor intermediation platforms in Switzerland deserve more academic attention.

The platform I worked on – dubbed Clean Angels here – is one of the major online domestic household cleaning platforms in Switzerland. Within the hiring and working process on this platform I experienced life as care platform worker, bearing many of the risks of the business model myself. Recording my own experiences as a platform worker constitutes the data material used for this paper. While I talked to workers in other contexts, I did not get to meet a single other Clean Angel during these fourteen weeks. In contrast to delivery riders, care workers are invisible in the city, therefore, I could not identify in public space and contact them. The platform also does not provide networking opportunities, there were no organized meetings nor public groups on social networks.

Clean Angels connects workers to customers in need of cleaning assistance, for short-term and flexible gigs or long-term regular arrangements. In line with care-work platform logic, everything is organized through an app and all the necessary documents and transactions are provided by the platform (Ticona/Mateescu 2018: 4387). With this, the platform conforms to what Altenried (2021: 57) describes as one of the main strategic goals of online labor intermediation platforms, namely becoming an indispensable infrastructure of our daily live. This also corresponds to the feedback I got from my customers. They highly value the uncomplicated hiring process and assure to me that booking a cleaning person via an app is a service they wouldn't want to miss.

My living circumstances and positionality are strongly intertwined with my research outcomes, especially when doing autoethnography. Although this approach offers detailed insights into a field (Butz/Besio 2009) it remains tied to the lived reality of one individual. On the one hand, my Swiss identity and my job as researcher are not the usual profile of a platform worker (cf. van Doorn 2021). On the other hand, identifying as a woman and my previous work experiences in household cleaning as a student gave me legitimacy with the platform and with my customers. I will reflect on further aspects of my positionality in the chapter below. In the following sections, I will first show how my autoethnographic research allowed me to experience and reflect on socio-spatial practices in domestic household cleaning intermediated via a digital platform.

Learning from subjectivities: Living a platform worker's life

My autoethnographic data gives me an in-depth insight into the omnipresent negotiations of platform workers. By following the typical day of a platform worker, I will show how spatiotemporal work patterns and hierarchies are constantly (re)negotiated. The quotes are all extracted from my fieldnotes. I have arranged them to portray the usual day of a platform worker.

Starting the day – dealing with time and space

Organizing starts in the morning. I get a call from Clean Angels:

> Clean Angels offers me a cleaning gig for this afternoon. As I do not want to reject the offer (I am afraid that I will get fewer offers), I accept, even though I know that it will be a stressful day (Fieldnotes 26.11.2020).

The spontaneous and flexible arrangement of the gigs hides a lot of background work. While the platform itself is reimbursed for the time they invest to assign their gigs (otherwise their business models would make no sense), as a platform worker I do not get any financial compensation for all the organization. Very soon into my new job as gig worker, I realize that the platform does not only interact with me via its app, but platform employees also call me at any time that is convenient to them. Often, this happens when I am not prepared to receive calls. In the example at the very beginning of this chapter, Clean Angels called me at a very inconvenient time. The platform does not really care about office working hours and expects their workers to be ready at any time. Both examples demonstrate the unpaid (administrative/organizing) work required to make the gig care economy work (Bor 2021: 158). Nevertheless, planning the gigs and scheduling the day is one of the main tasks as platform worker. Interestingly, digital tools on the platform are provided as a solution for this planning problem. Within the app I receive all the job offers and should theoretically be able to manage all the scheduling whenever I want to do it. However, the platform keeps on calling me to force me to immediately answer all the requests they have already sent me via their app. It is clear, therefore, that the platform overlooks, or does not care, that workers exist in a social and spatial context outside of paid work that influences working availabilities in every decision of whether to take a gig or not.

Fortunately, not every decision has to be made on the spot. Some customers are on a fixed or regular arrangement and facilitate the planning:

> Today I have my 'routine cleaning'. The apartment of the couple who are never home needs to be cleaned. I know I will have a very tight lunch break as I have another cleaning job immediately afterwards in the afternoon. In general, the day is stressful because I then have to go to a meeting right after cleaning. I know that my schedule will only work out if everything goes well and I can save some time in the morning. Since the people are not at home anyway, I decide to go to the apartment a little earlier so that I can then also go into my mini lunch break a little earlier. However, I don't dare to go more than ten minutes early because I'm afraid the couple might still be home. Of course, that's not the case and I regret not coming even earlier (Fieldnotes 26.11.2020).

There is a lot to think about every day. The success of planning depends not only on organizing but also on other circumstances (e.g., if customers are at home or not). The quote above illustrates a typical working day of a platform worker. Thinking about time, places, (social) conditions at the different homes, commuting time and other obligations becomes normal and constant. Nevertheless, it is exhausting and neither the platform operators nor the customers take this into consideration. Platform workers are left alone with the scheduling and arranging. That went so far that I had to ride my bike through piles of snow on another day, because it would not have been possible to get from one house to the next on time with public transport.

As in many other instances, the time pressure on this day is produced by my feeling of having to accept every job the platform offers me. I work with the constant feeling of being under surveillance: I know that the platform keeps track of how often I decline. I have no idea where I stand in comparison to other workers, and I fear that they will no longer offer me gigs if I turn them down too many times. This latent fear is central in many of my decisions of accepting jobs even though they do not fit well into my schedule. The platform clearly profits from my dependency on their job offers.

Working through the day – negotiating (assigned) positions

Back to the day in question, the level of stress did not abate even though I got there in plenty of time. It goes so far, that I have to skip my lunch. This was not the only situation in which I put my own social reproduction on hold. Not having enough time to eat or having too short breaks in between two

customers for taking a shower to appear fresh again to the next customer was no exception on fully packed days.

> In the end, however, I finish after exactly two hours, which means that I have nearly lost the time I had gained. I quickly drive home so I can eat something small. Just knowing that everything is a bit tight today stresses me out. However, I can eat something and drink a coffee. Then I'm already off again, to a new customer. When I get there, it takes a long time for the customer to open the door for me. She's still in her pajamas, even though it's already 1:30 p.m. and she booked me. She tells me she completely forgot that she had ordered me (Fieldnotes 26.11.2020).

Apart from the time stress, this quote shows how I was forced to negotiate positions in social encounters that seemed to be regulated by the platform but in the end had to be negotiated repeatedly between me as worker and the corresponding customer. The encounter with the person in her pajamas is a first glimpse into the power relations that are shown to workers again and again. The customer not remembering having ordered a Clean Angel generated a feeling of being unimportant as a cleaning person. This forgetting might be a result of the easy ordering process via a mere click on a digital platform.

While the hierarchies were negotiated in subtle way in this setting, my next customer made it quite clear. After I had waited for her for more than fifteen minutes, she opened the door and without offering any greeting or apology, she asked me: "You know what you have to do, or do you have any questions?" When I responded that it was my first time in this flat and that she would need to show me around she was very surprised. She told me she supposed that Clean Angels would have informed me about the tasks and the circumstances in the flat. She was convinced that booking a cleaning person via a platform would also liberate her from her duties of providing the tools and detailing how the work has to be done. This understanding is at odds with the platform's emphasis that not Clean Angels, but the customer is in the role of employer.

My last customer on this stressful day was not the only one that had a completely different understanding of the roles of the platform, the worker, and the customer/employer (who often believes that the platforms would take care of everything for them). Bor (2021), who also conducts research on domestic housework platforms, also refers to this problem. She states that it is the platforms' intention to blur the responsibilities. The platform deliber-

ately creates vague roles of customer, employer, and worker and profits from withdrawing from responsibility.

Call it a platform day – keep on reflecting

I finish all my gigs for the day and I make it to my meeting on time. On the way, I reflect on the day. Looking back, all the time stress seemed unnecessary. Nevertheless, it was an omnipresent feeling today. I realize that the platform plays a central role in producing my temporal and therefore also spatial patterns. In this moment, I take out my phone again and see:

> Clean Angels has called me again, but I didn't see the call, because I was riding my bike to my meeting. I do not have time to call back. When I arrive at the meeting, I check my profile on the app. Three new cleaning requests have come in. I can't deal with them right now though, as I would have to check my agenda. I also intentionally don't look at my mails, which, among other things, would tell me to confirm the requests (Fieldnotes 27.11.2020).

As this example illustrates, the repeated calls of the platform force me to deal with their requests whenever it is convenient to them. The longer I work for them, the more I resent the feeling of the platform dominating my life this way. More often, I take the liberty to ignore calls or requests. I am aware that this is an advantage that surely not every platform worker has. As I am not dependent on the financial income of the platform, I do have the privilege of saying I "don't feel like" dealing with demands at a specific moment. Making my living is not conditional on the number of gigs I get. This surely affects my behavior towards the platform and the customers. Even though I am responsible and polite, I am not willing to answer calls 24/7 and I am less tolerant towards rude behavior of my customers.

This example points to the specialties of the autoethnographic method: I am able to dive deep into a platform worker's daily life and the experiences workers make in the gig economy. At the same time, my findings are closely related to my positionality which is clearly visible in the analysis. For example, I cannot imagine what it would mean to be financially dependent on the number of gigs I can get. Furthermore, I realize how much I am used to great time flexibility in my job as a researcher. This might exacerbate my feelings of stress when I am forced to work tightly scheduled cleaning gigs in other peoples' places at specific prescheduled times. As a researcher, I am used to manage my own work schedule with considerable freedom of when to work

on what. Even though that is exactly one of the promises of platform labor, I experience much more time constraints in my work as platform worker. Platforms seems to measure with another scale in this regard. The platform's idea of flexibility did not fit at all with mine.

Conclusion

What are the consequences when platforms start shaping domestic cleaning labor in the cities? By presenting a typical day in the life of myself as a platform worker I shone a light on two central aspects of domestic platform workers' daily routines.

First, working on a platform demands constant availability from the workers. This means that workers need to react immediately whenever a gig offer arrives. Furthermore, workers feel the pressure to be available for any possible gig. The platform performs constant but subtle control through repeated phone calls, app requests, and surveillance mechanisms that monitor not only performance at work but also the speed of responses to gig offers and the numbers of accepted and declined gigs. Connecting these findings to the idea of platform urbanism it becomes clear that platforms wield enormous power to shape the daily lives of an increasing number of workers in today's cities.

Second, short-term domestic housework being mediated via platforms creates situations in which customers/employers as well as workers have to (re)negotiate power relations. These negotiations are shaped by and at the same time (re)shape inequalities based on categories such as gender, residency status, or race. As a Swiss passport holder, I was privileged in comparison to an overwhelming multitude of migrants who work in this sector. As we know from research on offline cleaning, workers without residency or a work permit will find themselves in much weaker negotiating positions (cf. Knoll/Schilliger/Schwager 2012). As these situations take place in the invisible space of the private home, it is of essential importance to unveil the dynamics platform workers face in these interactions. As platform workers they face the additional hurdle that platforms seem to deliberately create vague role assignments and profit from not serving as formal employers. Even though they shape gigs in key aspects, they then leave it up to the workers to negotiate the specifics of their deals.

In conclusion, the digital 'solution' for the care crisis for customers produces new crises for workers (Altenried/Dück/Wallis 2021). The presented

findings make it clear how the responsibilities are allocated: workers are forced to navigate our urban spaces in rhythms demanded by the platforms. Understanding *navigate* in a spatial and temporal sense, workers are obliged to follow the specifications of the platform. Even though a certain flexibility is promoted, the discussed empirical case shows how the platform remains in a dictating position by pushing workers to accept offered gigs. Understanding *navigating* the urban space in a social sense, workers need to shift between the blurry roles assigned by the platforms whenever they negotiate with customers that need to be processed (unpaid) by the workers. In these encounters the customers remain in the more powerful positions.

While workers do the care work for others their own social reproduction is put on hold. I had the privilege of not being dependent on this work, many care platform workers do rely on this income. They often do their work silently and remain invisible in public space. Therefore, I consider it of major importance to continue research on how working arrangements are shaped by labor intermediation platforms.

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