



**Discourses of professionalism in front-line service work:  
Insights from a case study in an Italian bank**

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## **Discourses of professionalism in front-line service work:**

### **Insights from a case study in an Italian bank**

#### **Abstract**

The article draws on the literature on the triangular employment relationship in the service industry, as well as on the debate on contemporary forms of professionalism, to explore the varied uses of the discourse of professionalism in a banking company. Methodologically, it is a single-case study based on 61 semi-structured interviews, company documents and observational data. The research results show how, in the company studied, the notion of professionalism was used both by individual employees and, at the collective level, by union organizations to advance front-line employees' and customers' interests *vis-à-vis* the management. Moreover, rather than a single discourse, several discourses of professionalism coexisted within the company, and they were subject to constant debate and contestation. The article thus advances extant research on both contemporary forms of service work and professionalism, while providing a bridge between these two streams of literature which, to date, have barely talked to each other.

#### **Key words**

bank work, professionalism, service triangle, service work

## Introduction

Since the advent of the post-industrial society (Bell, 1973), a number of disciplines have devoted increasing attention to service work, which today represents an ever more constitutive part of the work experience of people around the world (Korczynski, 2009, 2013; Lopez, 2010). Among these disciplines, a strand of literature within sociology of work and organization proposes a revision of the traditional ‘dyadic’ model of the employment relationship in order to account for the role of ‘customers’, in addition to managers and employees, within a new ‘triadic’ model of employment relationship in the service sector (Korczynski, 2009, 2013; Lopez, 2010; Gabriel et al., 2015). Several empirical studies show how this model is able to account for the complexity of the employment relationship and for the diverse alliances and conflicts that arise in service organizations. However, a number of contextual factors influencing the relational dynamics among employees, managers and customers are still under-researched. A relatively neglected factor is the possibility that the power imbalance between customers and front-line service workers may be non-existent or even favourable to employees, for example when they are perceived to possess advanced technical skills and high occupational status (Korczynski, 2009; Lopez, 2010). Moreover, there remains considerable space in the literature to build a bridge among the debates on three similar and interconnected forms of work: service work, professional work and knowledge work (Ó Riain, 2010; Gabriel et al., 2015). Besides furthering researchers’ understanding of these contemporary forms of work, such a bridge could provide service workers with new ways to counterbalance the power asymmetry which normally affects their relation with managers and customers (Korczynski and Ott, 2004; Lopez, 2010), thus helping to improve their work experience and conditions.

Bank work is an occupation which has been traditionally associated with high prestige and advanced technical skills. However, in recent decades a profound transformation engendered by privatization, technological innovation and managerialization has significantly changed not only the way in which bank work is conducted but also traditional employment practices in the industry (Regini et al., 1999; Kipping and Westerhuis, 2014). Studies in several countries report evidence of

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3 work intensification, increased managerial control, as well as the spread of an aggressive sales  
4 culture sustained by strict budgetary controls and strong sales incentives (Regini et al., 1999;  
5 McCabe, 2009; Kipping and Westerhuis, 2014; Spicer et al., 2014).  
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10 Within this more general context, the present article investigates the varied uses of the discourse of  
11 professionalism in a bank company. In doing so, it draws on previous research on service work,  
12 professionalism and bank work. In particular, it builds on previous research which examines the  
13 complex dynamics of the triadic employment relationship in banking organizations (Forseth, 2005;  
14 Subramanian and Suquet, 2018); on the study of software developers conducted by Ó Riain (2010),  
15 who calls for closer attention to the connections and similarities between service and professional  
16 work; on McCabe (2009), who reports how bank cashiers deemed ‘unprofessional’ the pressure to  
17 sell applied on them by managers in the company that he studied. In addition, this article explicitly  
18 builds on the two streams of literature on service and professional work, the purpose being to  
19 explore and further advance the potential that derives from cross-fertilization between these  
20 debates.  
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35 On the basis of company documents, observations and interview data, the findings show that, in the  
36 organization studied, front-line employees resorted to notions of professionalism to indicate that  
37 their interests were aligned with those of the customers. On the one hand, company-level union  
38 representatives resorted to the same notions of professionalism. On the other, whereas some  
39 managerial actors used similar notions of professionalism, others reframed it or opposed it in a  
40 manner more consistent with the goals of the company. The research results also show that the  
41 discourse of professionalism can be used both by individual employees and, at the collective level,  
42 by union organizations to advance front-line employees’ and customers’ interests *vis-à-vis* the  
43 management. More broadly, the findings and their discussion advance researchers’ capacity to  
44 understand both contemporary forms of service work and professionalism, while building a bridge  
45 between these two streams of literature which, to date, have rarely talked to each other.  
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3 The article is structured as follows. The next section outlines the theoretical framework, discussing  
4 why and how the emergent stream of research on the discourse of professionalism is a useful  
5 complement to extant research and theory on service work. The description of the methodological  
6 approach introduces the research results, which report the main themes identified in the analysis of  
7 the empirical documentation. The two final sections discuss how the findings contribute to the  
8 literature, as well as the limitations of the study and the avenues for future research that it opens.  
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### 19 **Front-line service work and professionalism: bridging the debates**

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22 In recent decades, a debate has arisen on the role of the customer in influencing the employment  
23 relationship in service work contexts (Fuller and Smith, 1991; Du Gay and Salaman, 1992;  
24 Korczynski, 2009; Lopez, 2010). Accordingly, Korczynski (2013) proposes a revision of the classic  
25 dyadic relation between employers (or, more commonly, managers considered as agents of  
26 employers' will) and employees whereby customers are included as significant new actors in a  
27 triadic employment relationship model. Although not all authors agree with the conceptualization of  
28 the employment relationship in service work as a triad (for a critique see, for example, Brook, 2007;  
29 Bélanger and Edwards, 2013), there is substantial agreement in the literature that the introduction of  
30 a third figure opens up possibilities for multiple configurations of the relations among the actors  
31 involved in the provision and consumption of personal services. In particular, authors in this stream  
32 of inquiry talk of 'varied alliances' and 'shifting coalitions' among managers, front-line service  
33 workers and customers in service organizations (Lopez, 2010). As a result, an increasing number of  
34 empirical studies have investigated the so-called 'service triangle' (Lopez, 2010) in contexts such as  
35 retail stores (e.g. Gamble, 2007; Johnston and Sandberg, 2008), call centres (e.g. Korczynski et al.,  
36 2000; Bolton and Houlihan, 2005), hotels (Sherman 2011) and casinos (Sallaz, 2010).  
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57 However, Korczynski (2009: 964) affirms that future studies need to consider further factors that  
58 may influence the relation among managers, employees and customers in front-line service work  
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3 contexts, thus calling for a micro-focus on specific workplaces and occupations in empirical  
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5 research. For example, a relatively overlooked factor is the possibility that the power imbalance  
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7 between front-line service workers and customers may be non-existent or even favourable to  
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9 employees in certain situations. Front-line service workers, indeed, are generally considered as  
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11 subject to vexation by both managers and customers because of the pervasiveness of the  
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13 “enchanted myth of customer sovereignty” in service organizations (Korczynski and Ott, 2004).  
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15 Nevertheless, Lopez (2010) notes that workers may sometimes be more powerful than customers,  
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17 especially when their work is characterized by high technical skills, considerable autonomy in  
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19 decision making, and an elevated perceived occupational status (Korczynski, 2009). In their study  
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21 of an ‘exclusive’ department store, for example, Johnston and Sandberg (2008) find that shop  
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23 assistants use their expert knowledge of cosmetics products and extremely stylish clothing to gain  
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25 control over customers’ behaviours. Service work contexts where such conditions obtain thus  
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27 represent a promising avenue for future research.  
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33 Korczynski (2009: 952) defines service work as “work undertaken where the central job task  
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35 involves interaction with a service-recipient and where the job status is below that of professional”.  
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37 As noted by Ó Riain (2010: 322), this may have induced researchers to focus on service workers  
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39 who are relatively weak in the labour market and often disempowered in their relations with both  
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41 managers and customers. Recently, Gabriel et al. (2015) have called for cross-fertilization of the  
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43 debate and research around service work, professional work and knowledge work. In addition, the  
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45 definition of service work that Korczynski (2009) provides seems to assume a rather ‘essentialist’  
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47 view of ‘professions’ as a specific sub-type of occupations which meet special criteria and are  
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49 usually exercised outside organizational hierarchies (Watson, 2002; Evetts, 2011), in line with ‘old’  
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51 or ‘traditional’ models of professionalization (Muzio et al., 2011).  
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56 However, recent developments in the sociological literature on professions and occupations show  
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58 that the boundaries among professions, occupations and organizations have become blurred over  
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60 time. As a consequence, concepts such as ‘organizational professionalism’ (Faulconbridge and

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3 Muzio, 2008), ‘corporate professionalism’ (Muzio et al., 2011) and ‘hybrid professionalism’  
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5 (Noordegraaf, 2015) have been introduced. Countering an essentialist view of professionalism,  
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7 moreover, some authors argue that it should be treated not as a scientific but as a as a ‘folk  
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9 concept’, a discourse and an ideology employed by different actors in the workplace for different  
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11 purposes (Watson, 2002; Schinkel and Noordegraaf, 2011; Evetts, 2013; Barley et al., 2016). These  
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13 authors assume a pragmatic realist understanding of the ‘discourse of professionalism’, which can  
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15 thus be considered equivalent to ‘professional talk’ (Watson, 2002), and urge investigation of  
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17 professionalism as a dynamic concept “continuously manufactured” in the workplace through  
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19 disputes over its meaning (Schinkel and Noordegraaf, 2011: 84). In particular, according to Evetts  
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21 (2013: 783, italics in the original) “it is the increased use of the *discourse of professionalism* in a  
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23 wide range of occupational workplaces which is important and in need of further analysis and  
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25 understanding”. Referring to a categorization previously advanced by McClelland, Evetts (2011,  
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27 2013) affirms that the discourse of professionalism can be constructed ‘from above’ or ‘from  
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29 within’ occupational groups. When imposed ‘from above’, as it is in the case of most contemporary  
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31 service occupations according to Evetts, it works as a control mechanism deployed by managers  
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33 and employers to foster occupational changes or to discipline the workforce into conduct more  
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35 aligned with organizational goals. Consistently with this claim, empirical studies show that  
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37 professionalism has often been leveraged in consultancy work in favour of consultancy companies  
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39 (Kipping, 2011) and at the expense of their employees (Hodgson, 2002, 2005). By contrast, when  
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41 exerted ‘from within’ an occupational group, appeals to professionalism can help the group both to  
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43 negotiate better work conditions and, in the case of service occupations, to promote and protect the  
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45 public interest (Evetts, 2013).  
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54 In light of these considerations, the present article investigates the varied uses made of the discourse  
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56 of professionalism in an upper-tier service organization: a banking company. In doing so, it  
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58 responds to the call by Korczynski (2009: 964) for more detailed case studies on specific  
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60 workplaces and occupations in empirical research. In particular, it responds to calls for investigation

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3 of service work contexts in which front-line workers can be considered more powerful than the  
4 customers (Korczynski, 2009; Lopez, 2010). Furthermore, as argued by Ó Riain (2010) and Gabriel  
5 et al. (2015), exploring the similarities between service work and professional work has the  
6 potential to advance researchers' understanding of both these contemporary forms of work. Finally,  
7 while responding to those authors who invite study of 'professional talk' in organizations (Watson,  
8 2002; Evetts, 2013; Barley et al., 2016), the article contributes to the debate on professionalism as a  
9 discourse and ideology.  
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## 21 **Method**

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24 This study is centred on laBanca (pseudonym), an Italian banking group which has several tens of  
25 thousands of employees and which is a European leader organization as regards the provision of  
26 financial services. The study stems from a broader research project which investigated the dynamics  
27 and conflicts of the employment relationship in the banking industry, adopting the triangular frame  
28 advanced by Korczynski (2009, 2013).  
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36 The main data-gathering technique of the research was the semi-structured interview. Between July  
37 2016 and May 2017, 61 interviews were carried out: most of them were conducted at the branch  
38 level (n=41) with personnel belonging to different types of branch (serving 'retail', 'affluent' or  
39 'enterprise' customers), characterized by different sizes (from 3 employee-branches to branches  
40 with more than 20 employees), and situated in different contexts (North-Centre-South of Italy and  
41 city-countryside branches). In addition, 7 interviews were conducted with managers belonging to  
42 the HRM Direction and 7 with staff of the Loans Department operating at the local and regional  
43 levels. Three additional interviews were conducted with personnel of the Operations and IT  
44 Services. Finally, the researchers carried out 3 interviews with the HRM Director, the Director of  
45 Customer Experience and Customer Relationships Management and one collective interview with  
46 the CEO, the COO and the CIO of the bank.  
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3 All the interviews lasted between 50 minutes and 2 hours, with an average duration of 1 hour and  
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5 10 minutes. They were recorded (with the exception of the last group interview listed above, in  
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7 which the researchers were only allowed to take notes) and transcribed soon after their realization,  
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9 resulting in an empirical documentation of 690 pages, written in Times New Roman, single-spaced  
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11 and with font size 12.  
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14 Moreover, this study builds on more than 250 documents provided by the organization studied or  
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16 collected during the fieldwork. They include periodic business plans, financial and sustainability  
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18 reports, training materials for front-line employees, performance evaluation guidelines, internal  
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20 service orders, organizational and functional charts, communications to trade unions, union leaflets  
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22 and other material publicly available via the company website. It is also informed by notes taken  
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24 during a number of branch visits in which the researchers engaged in short periods of observation,  
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26 and informal conversations with branch managers, employees and union representatives. The  
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28 multiple data collection techniques used provided triangulation for data validity and reliability  
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30 (Denzin, 1978).  
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35 Consistently with other studies which investigate professionalism as a discourse (e.g. Cohen, 2005;  
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37 Barley et al., 2016), the empirical documentation was analysed following a thematic approach,  
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39 which means that researchers inspected the data looking for arguments, comparisons and metaphors  
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41 repeatedly associated with professionalism in interviewees' talk and company documents.  
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43 Following standard procedures for thematic analysis, the two authors of the article initially  
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45 performed the coding independently, and then met to resolve problems and inconsistencies around  
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47 the interpretation of the quotes (Guest et al., 2012). The entire process was supported by the Atlas.ti  
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49 qualitative data analysis software, which helped the coordination between the researchers.  
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53 A final methodological consideration concerns the research design, which was a case study. More  
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55 specifically, it can be considered an 'intense case' (Patton, 2002: 234) i.e. a rich example of the  
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57 phenomenon of interest, but not an extreme or highly unusual one. In this sense, it was an ideal  
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59 context in which to investigate the phenomenon of interest (discourse of professionalism in service  
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work contexts) without precluding the possibility of extending the scope of its findings to similar research contexts. To be noted, however, is that the aim of a case study is not statistical generalization, but rather analytical generalization intended to expand or generalize theory (Yin, 1994, 2010). Accordingly, the last section of this article discusses how to extend the study's findings in light of extant research and theory, as well as its limitations, and then avenues for future research.

In the following sections, the research results are presented according to the thematic categories identified in the analysis of the empirical documentation. To distinguish the different voices and perspectives coming from the field, a pseudonym has been univocally assigned to each research participant.

### **Front-line bank employees' discourse of professionalism**

During the interviews, we found that two main arguments populated front-line employees' discourse of professionalism. The first highlights the importance of mastering a broad technical knowledge in their everyday interactions with customers. In the words of Maria, an account manager:

*You have to be helpful to customers, professional because... hum, you need to know everything. Even things that are not strictly related to your work, I mean, there's a lot of information you need to have as personal knowledge. For example, the legal aspects of an inheritance procedure, or all the collateral aspects of investments. You cannot limit yourself to your everyday work.*

Familiarity with a broad range of financial services and their "collateral aspects" enables the front-line employees "to be helpful to the customers", who cannot master the same amount of information as them. As noted by Clara, an account manager who deals mainly with owners and managers of small-medium companies, expertise is necessary to give customers timely and accurate information:

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3 *You need to be professional, to give answers quickly and appropriately. You need to be able to*  
4 *answer all customers' questions and doubts... in any field... because our customers want rapid*  
5 *answers.*  
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11 Valuing technical knowledge and defending their expert image is thus a shared norm among front-  
12 line employees. It is essential for safeguarding their relationships with customers and protecting  
13 their reputation as a group. In this regard Antonio, a senior account manager, narrated about  
14 overhearing a junior colleague giving inaccurate information to a customer. The interviewee said  
15 that he let the junior colleague finish the meeting, because he did not want to compromise his  
16 reputation. But then he strongly reprimanded him because “he was just inventing stories”. Antonio  
17 added that bank work “doesn’t get on well with invention, improvisation”. This shared norm by the  
18 front-line personnel also explains their general reluctance to deal with insurance policies, which are  
19 considered part of another professional domain. As Laura, account manager of ‘retail’ customers,  
20 said: “insurance brokerage is a job and I was not trained to do this job”.

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33 Besides a discourse of professionalism as expertise, the second notion of professionalism  
34 widespread among front-line employees at laBanca was that of ‘professional ethics’. Interviewees  
35 also talked about ‘professional deontology’, which can be understood as the set of moral obligations  
36 that pertain to their work (De Vries et al., 2009). During the fieldwork, the idea that there is a  
37 distinguishing ethics of bank work was sometimes coupled with the notion of professionalism as  
38 expertise, as evidenced by Michela, an account manager of ‘affluent’ customers:  
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48 *You must be completely transparent with customers, explain to them what you’re offering, the*  
49 *positive aspects, the negative aspects, costs, timing, risks... this is really important. So you have*  
50 *to be honest and transparent as much as you can, and of course be competent. You must be clear*  
51 *and ethically correct. If you put together these two elements, the person you’re dealing with*  
52 *appreciates it, your honesty.*  
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3 Ethics, as well as expertise, is thus essential to establish satisfactory relationships with customers.  
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5 In the extract, ethics principally relates to transparency in the form of providing all the necessary  
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7 information to customers in order to evaluate correctly the pros and cons of every choice. In  
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9 addition, some front-line employees openly acknowledged the existence of a conflict of interests  
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11 between their company and the customers that could lead to unethical behaviours. As Giovanni, a  
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13 cashier, explained:  
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17 *Even though they come and tell me “this month you have to do ten cards”. Well, I don’t care, I*  
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19 *don’t want... and my branch manager knows this. I won’t sell ten cards just because I have to do*  
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21 *ten cards. If I see the chance, I can make a suggestion, but it’s not that I propose cards to every*  
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23 *customer. The interests of the customer must always come first... it’s the professional deontology*  
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25 *of bank work.*  
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30 Similarly Sara, an account manager, opposed her professional deontology to the demanding sales  
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32 targets imposed by the management:  
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36 *I sometimes had the impression that we were a kind of supermarket, as if we were selling*  
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38 *products at the counter. For example, there was a period in which we had to sell this SIM card,*  
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40 *for mobiles... then it was put on the back burner thankfully, because it didn’t work well. Another*  
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42 *thing I disagree with is when they say “Ok, now you suggest this product” but they don’t say it*  
43  
44 *like this. Rather, they say “all the branches have to sell three health insurances this week”. They*  
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46 *did the same with pension funds. There were a couple of weeks when everybody was talking*  
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48 *about pension funds, and afterwards... they forgot them. But you can’t act like that, I mean,*  
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50 *health policies, pension funds... are important for people, you can’t sell them like this. I’m not*  
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52 *going to do this, it’s contrary to my principles, to my professional deontology.*  
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57 Although she recalled that she had to sign a code of conduct when she was initially hired, Sara  
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59 found that everyday management practices and sales pressures at laBanca were at odds with her  
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3 idea of the “professional deontology” of bank work. These findings confirm the analysis by  
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5 Korczynski (2005) of ‘points of selling’ as sites riddled with tensions and contradictions.  
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8 In sum, the concept of professional ethics i.e. the idea that there are specific values and principles  
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10 that apply to bank work, complements the notion of professionalism as expertise in illustrating  
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12 front-line bank employees’ use of the discourse of professionalism to explain how they interact with  
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14 customers.  
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### 19 **Managerial conceptions of professionalism in laBanca**

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22 As part of their everyday language when talking about work, also managers cited the notion of  
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24 professionalism. In some cases, managers’ uses of the concept were consistent with front-line  
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26 employees’ views; in others they conflicted with them. An example of a manager’s view of  
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28 professionalism as expertise is provided by Matteo, a branch manager:  
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32 *I usually refer to my colleagues at the branch with the term “professionals” [emphasis].*  
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34 *However, one thing is clear to me, that the situation here is continuously changing but there’s no*  
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36 *real time for training, at least not the way we were trained before. So there’s like this*  
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38 *sentiment... I want to, but I can’t... because now they ask people to do it on the iPad, on the*  
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40 *laptop... this is what’s happening right now, but there’s a problem. The problem is that we have*  
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42 *to be more and more professional, to know exactly what we’re proposing to the customer...*  
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44 *because it’s us dealing with the customer when a loan or an investment is discussed... when we*  
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46 *do this, we have to know the topic in-depth and be aware. Therefore knowing things in-depth...*  
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48 *but if these are the means... here’s the difference between the employee and the professional,*  
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50 *here’s where the shoe pinches [emphasis]. Because professionals can actually do this, to train, to*  
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52 *keep themselves updated.*  
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58 In the excerpt, the discourse of professionalism is used to criticize the training procedures of  
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60 laBanca, while drawing a comparison between the past, when training occurred mostly with a

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3 classroom approach, and today, when training occurs during work time and by remote means using  
4 the company's online platform. What the branch manager lamented, in particular, was the loss of  
5 technical knowledge and skills, which are fundamental for keeping his colleagues updated on the  
6 continuous evolution of financial services and products and for protecting their professional image  
7 in front of the customers. It is important to consider that, following a recent redesign of job  
8 descriptions, branch managers within laBanca also relate to customers on several occasions, thus  
9 actually performing front-line work. This confirms the 'in-between' position of many front-line  
10 service sector managers highlighted by Bolton and Houlihan (2010), which can make them feel torn  
11 between their managerial duties and the closeness to their front-line colleagues.  
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24 Notions of professionalism as expertise are also reproduced in official documents of laBanca. For  
25 example, annual sustainability reports contain expressions like "...continuing update of the  
26 knowledge base and continuing reinforcement of the company's professional competencies" or  
27 "international mobility is considered strategic for the development of the competencies and  
28 professionalism of human resources".  
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35 During interviews and informal conversations with managers at laBanca, however, discordant or  
36 even disparaging conceptions of professionalism emerged.  
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41 *When I say that my account managers have to be professional I mean that they have to be*  
42 *attentive, they have to be ready... because they must be able to respond to all the customers'*  
43 *needs and requests... even to anticipate them because we know we can satisfy them all. Here in*  
44 *[laBanca] we have a product for any kind of need. Therefore they have to be able to match the*  
45 *right product with the right person and... with the right timing.*  
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53 Sofia's words are in stark contrast with those of the front-line employees reported in the previous  
54 section, who equated professionalism with information-giving activities which do not necessarily  
55 entail sales. Her heavy reliance on a marketing jargon indicates that Sofia framed professionalism  
56 as sales ability, as the capacity to seize the opportunity, quickly finding the products that satisfy "all  
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3 customers' needs". This branch manager thus equated professionalism and service work with sales  
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5 work, as previously found by Korczynski et al. (2000) in a study on call centre workers.  
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8 Other managers gave instead a negative meaning to professionalism. For example Carlotta, an HR  
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10 manager, repeatedly dismissed the concept of professionalism as expertise during the interview by  
11  
12 using expressions like "the super-expert", "the pundit" or "the punctilious" to describe those  
13  
14 colleagues who excessively valued professional knowledge and expertise. When asked about the  
15  
16 reasons why, according to him, senior employees are reluctant to perform sales work, Marco, the  
17  
18 manager of an enterprise branch, answered "in the end, I think it's because of a misplaced sense of  
19  
20 professional pride". Similarly, while informally chatting at the end of an interview with Luigi, an  
21  
22 HR manager of the Operations and IT services division, he affirmed:  
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26  
27 *I've been in this industry for quite a long time and I don't think there's anything like a*  
28  
29 *professional identity of bank work. On the contrary, I think this is a quite unionish concept, a*  
30  
31 *union-derived concept.*  
32

33  
34 [extract from the research notes]  
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37 In the last two quotes reported, professionalism has nothing to do with dealing with customers.  
38  
39 Rather, it is something that obstructs bank employees' front-line work.  
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42 Thus, managers' conceptions of professionalism sometimes overlapped with front-line employees'  
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44 uses of the discourse of professionalism, and some others contrasted with them. In the latter case,  
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46 notions of professionalism as sales ability, or disparaging notions of professionalism such as  
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48 "punctiliousness", "professional pride" or a "unionish concept" were reported during both  
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50 interviews and informal conversations with managers operating at various levels of laBanca.  
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### Unions' uses of the discourse of professionalism

During the fieldwork, evidence on unions' use of the discourse of professionalism was also collected. For example, Alessandro, a workplace-level union representative of the Operations and IT services division stated:

*Everything can be said except that the colleagues aren't professional. They're highly professional, they're highly responsible. Several times I've seen IT colleagues staying at work for the entire weekend, even if they didn't have to... to solve a problem so that the colleagues could open the branch on Monday and everything worked so that they could serve the customers.*

In the words of the interviewee, professionalism corresponds to a sense of duty ('responsibility') and customer service – which applies also to back-office employees when they work during the weekend to solve technical issues in order to support their front-line colleagues in their everyday work and, ultimately, serve the customers. Thus professionalism, understood as customer service, entails the possibility of bringing together both front-line and back-office employees, because they all contribute to the provision of services, according to this union representative.

Unions also resorted to the discourse of professionalism in their workplace-level mobilization strategies. For example, in a union leaflet protesting about aggressive e-mails sent by managers in regard to the accomplishment of sales targets, it was claimed as follows:

*We ask the Company to intervene as soon as possible, while reminding everybody that the everyday work in contact with customers must always be compliant with the rules, the ethics and the deontology that characterize the banking profession.*

Similarly to the account managers interviewed who considered sales pressures as contrary to their 'deontology', the union leaflet recalled the same concept of professionalism to criticize sales-related internal communications and managerial practices. Ethics, it is argued, is particularly important in



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3 bank employees' "everyday work in contact with customers", confirming that customers are  
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5 considered allies in unions' battle against sales pressures and intimidations from management.  
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8 In the same leaflet, it was also objected that  
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11 *[laBanca] affirms that it wants 360-degrees professionally trained employees, whereas in the*  
12  
13 *branches the colleagues are not given opportunities to update themselves because the*  
14  
15 *commercial demands "of the moment" prevail over everything else.*  
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19 This excerpt shows the capacity of unions to appropriate the company's discourse of  
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21 professionalism as expertise, which is often reproduced in official communications, and turn it  
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23 against the management in order to oppose the deterioration of employees' working conditions,  
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25 especially of those involved in sales work.  
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27  
28 It thus seems that company-level unions used the discourse of professionalism in a manner largely  
29  
30 consistent with front-line employees' views of professionalism. This impression is reinforced by an  
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32 industry-level collective agreement recently signed by both company-level union representatives  
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34 and representatives of laBanca. In the text of the agreement, the word 'profession-' recurs 9 times in  
35  
36 a total of 10 pages. For example, among the general principles stated by the agreement there is  
37  
38 "respect for the dignity of the employees and valorisation of their professionalism". In addition, the  
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40 agreement declares that it is aimed at  
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44 *...developing, through adequate training, according to the various levels of responsibility, the*  
45  
46 *necessary managerial, commercial, relational and technical-legal competences that favour the*  
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48 *adoption of professional behaviours respectful of the rules and of the object of the present*  
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50 *Agreement and of the company-level agreements.*  
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54 As regards the ethical aspects of bank work, the agreement states that the social partners are called  
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56 upon to  
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3 *...identify the principles and values that can favour the constant improvement of the relations*  
4 *between banking companies, their personnel and customers, and of the working climate in*  
5 *general.*  
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10 In light of these findings, it is possible to affirm that company-level union representatives at  
11 laBanca resorted to a discourse of professionalism, understood as professional ethics, responsibility  
12 towards the customer and technical expertise, in order to defend both front-line employees and  
13 customers' interests. These conceptions of professionalism were used in their workplace-level  
14 mobilization strategies to oppose management's pressures and the deterioration of employees'  
15 working conditions. Furthermore, it seems that these arguments have found their way into the  
16 collective bargaining process, while being recently 'crystallized' in a collective agreement signed at  
17 the industry level.  
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### 31 **Discussion and conclusions**

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34 This study has drawn on the literature concerning the triadic model of the employment relationship  
35 in service work (Korczynski, 2009, 2013; Lopez, 2010) as well as on the literature on contemporary  
36 forms of professionalism (Evetts, 2011, 2013), to explore the varied uses of the discourse of  
37 professionalism in an upper-tier service work context. The findings show that, in the organization  
38 studied, front-line employees resorted to the discourse of professionalism to indicate that their  
39 interests were aligned with those of the customers. On one side, company-level union  
40 representatives made a similar use of the discourse of professionalism in order to advance front-line  
41 employees' and customers' interests *vis-à-vis* the management. On the other, managerial actors  
42 reframed it or contrasted it in a way that was more consistent with the goals of the company.  
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54 These research findings provide four main contributions to the literature. Firstly, they show that the  
55 discourse of professionalism can be used by individual front-line service workers to ally with the  
56 customers and claim the maintenance or improvement of their work conditions. For example,  
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3 Matteo, a branch manager, affirmed the importance of technical skills for dealing with customers,  
4 while criticizing the company's current training tools and procedures that did not allow his  
5 colleagues at the branch to be trained as actual professionals. Account managers also often  
6 complained about the demanding targets and pressures associated with sales work within laBanca,  
7 which were perceived as unethical because not respectful of customers' exigencies. These findings  
8 demonstrate that the discourse of professionalism provides fertile ground for front-line service  
9 workers to ally with the customers and to criticize managerial initiatives, in line with previous  
10 empirical studies on the triangular model of employment relationship in service work (see, for  
11 example, the special issue edited by Lopez, 2010).  
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24 It may be argued that bank work is a relatively privileged service occupation, where front-line  
25 employees are considered to possess high technical skills and status. Consequently, these findings  
26 may not be generalized to other service work contexts. Previous research can help in extending the  
27 scope of the findings of this study (Yin, 2010). In his study of front-line service work in a casino  
28 located in South Africa, Sallaz (2010) finds that the workers claimed the status of 'service  
29 professionals', whereas this idea was opposed by the management of the casino, in order to keep the  
30 workers subjugated to poor work conditions. Similarly, the cleaners studied by Tweedie and Holley  
31 (2016) in Australia claimed the importance of specialized skills acquired through constant  
32 prolonged training in their work. These insights, coupled with the results of the current study,  
33 suggest that a discourse of professionalism can be used by individual workers in different service  
34 work contexts in order to ally with the customers and maintain or improve their work conditions.  
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49 Secondly, far from representing a purely individual level strategy of front-line employees, the  
50 discourse of professionalism can be (and actually *is*) used by service workers' union organizations  
51 to further defend their interests and to build a coalition with the customers. In the context of this  
52 study, evidence of union representatives' use of the discourse of professionalism is based on both  
53 interview and documentary data. Importantly, there is evidence of trade unions' use of the discourse  
54 of professionalism in workplace-level mobilization strategies as well as in the collective bargaining  
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3 process, as demonstrated by the agreement recently signed at the industry level. Similarly to the  
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5 finding of this case study, trade unions in other industries may resort to the discourse of  
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7 professionalism to oppose sales pressures, time pressures, increasing workloads, deterioration of  
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9 service quality and other negative issues that today affect the experience of many front-line service  
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11 workers. At the same time, trade unions at laBanca repeatedly resorted to the discourse of  
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13 professionalism to defend customers' interests (for example, when opposing aggressive sales targets  
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15 because they are inconsistent with the professional ethics of bank work). The existence of this  
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17 alliance is especially important in the banking industry, where trust between front-line employees  
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19 and customers is essential and where the consequences of unethical behaviour can be particularly  
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21 damaging to society at large (Regini et al., 1999; Spicer et al., 2014). This contribution adds to  
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23 those of previous studies which describe diverse tactics adopted by trade unions to ally with the  
24  
25 customers (see Lopez, 2010). Moreover, it is in line with one of the general aims of research on  
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27 service work which is, as Korczynski (2007: 382) notes in response to Brook (2007), not to  
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29 'supplant' but, rather, to 'supplement' unions' action.  
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35 On their part, also managers cited the notion of professionalism when talking about bank work.  
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37 Positive managerial conceptions of professionalism regarded "expertise" and "sales ability".  
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39 However, references to customers were less evident in managers' discourse of professionalism,  
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41 which also included disparaging notions such as "punctiliousness" or a "unionish concept". It seems  
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43 indeed that managers at laBanca considered professionalism a possible obstacle in the relations with  
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45 customers and the achievement of organizational goals, contrarily to employees, who considered it  
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47 necessary to maintain positive and respectful relations with customers. Within the studied company  
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49 therefore, the discourse of professionalism represented more a resource for employees and their  
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51 representatives to ally with customers, than for managers. In addition, "ethics" was largely absent in  
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53 managers' discourse of professionalism, suggesting that this may represent a more exclusive  
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55 discursive resource for service workers to ally with customers, whereas the notion of  
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3 professionalism as “expertise” was shared between managers and front-line employees and their  
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5 representatives, and therefore more easily appropriable by these two sides of the service triangle.  
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8 Thirdly, the article provides an account of the varied uses of the discourse of professionalism in a  
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10 service work context, thus contributing to the debate among those scholars who adopt a mainly  
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12 ‘linguistic view’ of this phenomenon (e.g. Watson, 2002; Kipping, 2011; Evetts, 2013). In  
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14 particular, Evetts (2011, 2013) argues that, although the discourse of professionalism can be  
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16 constructed either ‘from above’ or ‘from within’ occupational groups, in the case of most  
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18 contemporary service occupations it is imposed ‘from above’ by managers. Notwithstanding  
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20 managerial attempts to reframe and oppose the discourse of professionalism within laBanca, this  
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22 case study provides an extensive account of how the discourse of professionalism was used by  
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24 front-line service workers and their representatives to side with the customers against managerial  
25  
26 initiatives and to negotiate better work conditions. Moreover, the findings show how different and  
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28 sometimes conflicting conceptions of professionalism coexisted within laBanca, thus supporting the  
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30 argument that “we have probably several different discourses of professionalism that we can draw  
31  
32 upon” (Watson, 2002: 100), even within the same organization.  
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38 Fourth, this article provides a bridge between two streams of literature which to date have barely  
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40 talked to each other, thus advancing the understanding of both contemporary forms of service work  
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42 and professionalism. The article has extensively discussed how a focus on professionalism can  
43  
44 illuminate specific aspects of front-line service workers’ experience, and support them in building a  
45  
46 coalition with customers. On the other hand, exploring manifestations of professionalism in service  
47  
48 organizations can help to understand the ongoing transformations in professionals’ work  
49  
50 experience. For example, classic sociological accounts have tended to stress the ‘collegial’ and  
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52 ‘institutional’ character of professional ethics (Evetts 2013). However, this study has highlighted  
53  
54 the importance of the organizational and individual dimensions of professional ethics (e.g. the  
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56 account manager who affirmed that sales pressures were “...contrary to *my* principles, to *my*  
57  
58 professional deontology”). Extending this line of reasoning could yield interesting insights into the  
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3 reasons and circumstances behind professionals' ethical (and unethical) behaviours. More generally,  
4  
5 some authors have recently talked about 'deprofessionalization', highlighting a worsening of  
6  
7 professionals' work conditions, for example in the healthcare sector (Siebert et al., 2018). This may  
8  
9 indicate that, in the future, the similarities between professional work and service work will  
10  
11 increase. Studying service workers strategies to ally with service-recipients and oppose managerial  
12  
13 power will thus be of benefit also for professionals and for scholar interested in investigating their  
14  
15 struggles to maintain or improve their status.  
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19 Like any other study, this one has limitations that can also be considered an agenda for future  
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21 research. As the results of a case study, the findings reported here require further empirical research  
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23 and corroboration in other service work contexts. Moreover, the findings are mainly based on  
24  
25 interview data. In line with Barley et al.'s (2016) recent suggestion, future research could examine  
26  
27 the role of discourses of professionalism in naturally occurring situations within organizations, such  
28  
29 as interactions of front-line employees with customers, supervisors or with their back-office  
30  
31 colleagues. The absence of the "voices of customers" in research on service work is a limitation that  
32  
33 has long been acknowledged (Korczynski and Ott, 2004: 594). Despite common limitations of  
34  
35 access, as in the case of this study, future studies could do more to include the voices of all the three  
36  
37 actors of the service triangle.  
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41 Beyond the research strategies that could overcome its limitations, this study suggests several  
42  
43 avenues for future research. A first one would be to explore further the connections and similarities  
44  
45 among front-line service work, professional work and knowledge work, as suggested by Ó Riain  
46  
47 (2010) and Gabriel et al. (2015). The authors of this article acknowledge that their account of the  
48  
49 possible uses of the discourse of professionalism in front-line service work may be not exhaustive.  
50  
51 During the fieldwork, for example, one interviewee stated that, in order to be professional, female  
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53 employees should maintain a certain 'emotional detachment' from customers, thus confirming the  
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55 'gendered nature' of front-line service work (Forseth, 2005). Accordingly, future studies could  
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57 explore the 'gendered nature' of discourses of professionalism in service work contexts. In the  
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3 findings, it is argued that professionalism, understood as customer service, entails the possibility of  
4 bringing together both front-line and back-office employees. Another avenue for future research  
5 could thus be analysis of back-office employees' uses of the discourse of professionalism, which  
6 could help in starting to explore a neglected area in research on service work: that of the role of  
7 back-office employees in service organizations (Brook, 2007). Finally, front-line employees' uses  
8 of the discourse of professionalism resonate with social-scientific notions of what a profession is  
9 (Watson, 2002). Researchers in the sociology of knowledge and ideas could thus explore how the  
10 concept of 'profession' has circulated between scientific literature and everyday language, tracking  
11 the reciprocal influences between the two knowledge domains.  
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24 In conclusion, this study has brought together the streams of research on the discourse of  
25 professionalism and that on the triangular employment relationship in service work, opening up  
26 several avenues for future research and highlighting the possible benefits of this merger for both  
27 service workers and professionals. For all these reasons, this article represents an advance in  
28 research on contemporary forms of service work, professionalism, as well as in research at the  
29 crossroads between them.  
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