MAKING AND MAINTAINING THE SUBJECT IN CALL CENTRE WORK

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ABSTRACT

This article reports an ethnographic study of call centre work. Analytics are applied enabling study of relations between power and subjectivity. Findings indicate organisational ‘truth’ claims about workers are produced in a constellation of architectural, technological and managerial apparatuses. Workers orient to and reify the power of these claims, even when resisting.

INTRODUCTION

Studies of modern call centre and office labour have progressed through several different perspectives. Initially, a labour process orientation was applied to highlight exceedingly tight regulation of worker actions at the hands of architectural, computer and telecommunications technologies (Baldry et al., 1998; Fernie and Metcalf, 1998; Kinnie et al., 2000; Knights and Odih, 2000). Subsequent studies indicated that despite such disciplinary devices, workers retain the ability to exert resistance in traditional and creative ways (Jermier et al., 1994; Knights and Vurdubakis, 1994; Knights and McCabe, 1998; Bain and Taylor, 2000; Knights and McCabe, 2000; Taylor and Bain, 2003; Winiecki, 2004). Others have reported how the architectural and technological discipline of workers in call centres is part of a larger managerial apparatus that not only regulates minute by minute conduct, but also acts to implicate workers into a managerial rationality such that they come to govern their own actions using knowledge of process and their selves provided by management (McKinlay and Starkey, 1998; Kinnie et al., 2000; Wray-Bliss, 2001; Knights and McCabe, 2003; Winiecki, 2004).

This paper builds upon existing literature to provide examples and theoretical explication of *how* workers participate in the production of their selves in the face of organisational truth claims about quality and productivity, whether they are acting in compliance with the rules and tactics of the organisation or in resistance to them.

METHODS AND ANALYTIC PERSPECTIVES

This paper reports on an ethnographic study of inbound call centres.¹ During the project the first author completed about 2000 hours in participant and non-participant observation spanning two calendar years.² In accomplishing data collection, the author ‘went

to work' with agents in three call centres and spent full shifts, including meetings, normal work practices, lunches and breaks, with individual workers. Shifts spanned all days of the week and began as early as 5:00 AM and ended as late as midnight. Such continuous engagement with informants provides the researcher with access to both formal and informal knowledge and practices, opportunity to develop knowledge and understanding of context, constraints, personal commitments and values, and social and personal practices involved in 'being' a member of a particular venue (Schwartzman, 1993; Hopper, 2002; Smith, 2005; Tope et al., 2005).

Data analysis was performed concurrently with fieldwork. This orientation toward constant comparative analysis allows the researcher to continuously build empirical support for developing findings and also to fill gaps in the data to add to the development of theoretical argument and conclusions (Strauss and Corbin, 1998; Smith, 2005). Continuous analysis of data also allows the researcher to pursue information in multiple ways – observationally, through interviews and in official documents. This contributes to the essential ethnographic accomplishment of triangulation in data collection and data analysis (Strauss and Corbin, 1998; Smith, 2005).

Theoretically, this research was guided by the work of Michel Foucault. Foucault's analytics permit the researcher to identify how particular forms of knowledge are produced and applied to effect the construction of scientific 'truths'. These authoritative forms of knowledge are imbricated with, and help to constitute, various kinds of power relations. Foucault identified two forms of power relations: disciplinary and governmental (Foucault, 1980; Foucault, 1988b; Foucault, 1993; Foucault, 1995). Disciplinary power manifests a 'bio-political' force upon individuals that more or less makes them conform to particular rules. Discipline is common and insidious in subtle forms such as the partitioning of individuals in office cubicles with common equipment so they may all be exposed to the

same stimuli, including identical computer software or machinery so operators perform operations in prescribed ways. Governmental power – also referred to as ‘governmentality’, for a mix of governance and rationality (Townley, 1994) – is typically manifested as a psychological force to ‘conduct the conduct’ of individuals by convincing them to accept a particular rationalisation and use it to guide their actions.

Governmental power operates ‘at a distance’ (Rose and Miller, 1992). Rather than direct imposition of rules, governmental power seeks to *incite* appropriate behaviour as a ‘free choice’ made by self-regulating individuals, guided by various forms of expert knowledge. Governmental power is mediated by the subjective aspirations and choices of individuals, rather than existing as a relationship of domination. Subjectivity is thus constituted by, and acts as a channel for, a particular constellation of power relations characteristic of ‘free’ societies (free markets, political democracy, etc). This freedom may not be quite as free as it is often made out to be, but neither is it simply a sham—rather it is *through freedom*, and through the forms of individualisation associated with it, that power operates.

From the point of view of the individual, governmental power manifests as *technologies of the self*—ways of examining, analysing and acting upon one’s self in order to produce desirable outcomes, such as, in this context, a job, a promotion, stress reduction, useful qualifications, etc. These technologies channel particular kinds of power relations, but also allow individuals to adopt different stances towards these power relations—to fashion their selves in different ways. They act as an instrument for *both* compliance and resistance (Foucault, 1988a).

One outcome of this process is the production of particular forms of subjectivity and subjectification – ways of knowing and acting upon subjects that effectively massage the setting and subjects to reify the imputed ‘truth’ asserted *a priori*. Consequently, social forces

are brought into being within which workers participate in their own subjectification and – often – their own subjection.

VENUES

Fieldwork for this research was conducted in three inbound call centres providing: (a) technical support services to customers owning computer peripherals manufactured by an international corporation (*BigTech*); (b) customer service for an international package delivery company (*DeliveryWorldwide*); and (c) customer service for a regional insurance company (*MHealth*). The *BigTech* call centre employed over 900 agents at the beginning of fieldwork and about 300 at its close.³ *DeliveryWorldwide* employed 110 workers. *MHealth* employed between three and five agents through the project.⁴

Access to these workplaces was facilitated by the first author's instructor-to-student relationship with members in two of the call centres. Access to the third call centre was requested by a worker who attended a lecture presented by the first author in which he reported interim findings of research in the other two organisations. After securing organisational permissions for the research,⁵ the first author asked management personnel for a suggestion on who would be a good worker to sit with in order to learn about the work. He then went to that person and asked for informed consent through paperwork required by his university.⁶ After shadowing that person for between one and five full shifts, he asked that worker "who else would be a good person to talk with and watch?" This snowball-like approach enabled participation of nearly 100 workers, including management.

ARCHITECTURE, TECHNOLOGY, REGULATION, AND CREATING ‘OBJECTIVE’ MEASURES OF WORKER ACTIVITY

Consistent with early literature, the call centre is a site saturated with disciplinary power. Workers are assigned to work in cubicles, each equipped with a computer terminal, software, telephone and headset with which agents must conduct specific tasks (Taylor and Bain, 1999; Bain and Taylor, 2000; Winiecki, 2004; Winiecki, 2006; Winiecki, 2007). Workers’ computers and headsets are linked to a combined computer and telecommunication system through an ‘automated call distributor’ (ACD). The ACD ‘watches’ and continuously inscribes facets of each agent’s activity – if the agent is logged in to his or her computer, if the agent is currently working a call, how long the agent has been working any particular call, the average length of all calls worked today, how many calls have been worked today, etc. Call centres reduce these observations and inscriptions to spreadsheets where rows represent data for individual workers and columns represent each agent’s activity on that measure (Figure 1). These spreadsheets are regularly posted for agents to see so they know: (a) how they are being evaluated; (b) how their stats compare with company expectations; and (c) how their stats compare with those of other agents. The explicit purpose of this information is to allow workers to use this information when adjusting their actions so they meet or exceed company expectations (Winiecki, 2004).

<Insert Figure 1 about here>

While they are considered objective, these data are made possible by the way workers are disciplined through enclosure in cubicles during prescribed work hours, scripting that regulates their conduct in the course of customer interactions, computer software that requires them to perform tasks in a particular order and continuous surveillance by the ACD. Failing

to comply with discipline imposed by the clock, architecture and software will result in statistical representations of the worker that do not meet expectations. In terms of this article, the ‘truth’ value of these data, whether demonstrating ‘good’ or ‘substandard’ work, rests upon management’s assertion that they are true representations of the worker’s activity, and recursively by compliance or deviance of workers. The ‘truth’ value of these data are also linked to the already-accepted authority of statistics and scientific methods, commonsense assumptions about the profit orientation of the organisation and its right to assert standards upon work, the economic need for workers to make a living, among other things – all of which make the overall structure seem ‘natural’.

While statistical representations of productivity are continuously and automatically compiled by the ACD, measures of quality are accomplished manually by ‘barging’ or covertly tapping an agent’s phone, and scoring that individual’s work using a company-prepared form (Figure 2).

<Insert Figure 2 about here>

Figure 2 displays the quality evaluation form used at *DeliveryWorldwide*. Criteria for evaluating quality in each call centre vary somewhat but are generally consistent with the following. The scoring form requires evaluators to check if the agent has performed a set of tasks required by the organisation (‘A’ in Figure 2): (a) ‘friendly’ demeanour; (b) voicing prescribed opening script; (c) using customer’s name during the call; (d) providing accurate information; (e) offering additional assistance after initial issues are addressed; and (f) voicing prescribed closing script. The form also requires evaluators to check if agents have violated particular rules (‘B’ in Figure 2), for example: (a) using jargon; (b) failing to apologise upon customer complaint; (c) curt behaviour; (d) not offering additional assistance;

(e) transferring the call without introducing it to its recipient; or (f) repeating requests for information. The evaluator applies a set of rules (not shown) to determine if the call will be rated excellent, good, fair or poor, and computes a numeric score for the call based on this rating ('C' and 'D' in Figure 2). The 'truth' value of quality evaluations is similarly grounded on management's assertions that these criteria represent standards of quality work, the regularity of the process, and the fact that workers are expected to agree to the score by signing the report when presented to them by management. Productivity and quality marks are made possible by a constellation of architectural, regulatory and technological disciplinary practices and ongoing social processes in which workers themselves are implicated. This constellation produces 'real' evidence that the measures are what they are claimed to be – representations of workers' productivity and quality.

These ways of seeing and measuring workers and creating them as subjects also demonstrate how organisations make use of scientific means of observing, inscribing and examining individuals such that those individuals are rendered as 'objective' numbers in a chart. The process and its discursive assertions are characterised as much by what they make invisible (what is not observed, what is not inscribed) as what they make visible. In so doing organisations forward claims of truth about the workers – claims made 'real' by workers' participation.

In addition to disciplinary practices, governmental power is evident in call centres through practices of management, supervisory personnel and agents themselves in interactions with other agents. This is typically manifested in actions that orient workers to the assumed truth status of the aforementioned statistics. The explicit goal of these practices is to turn agents away from any personal means they have of assessing their own productivity and quality, and toward the company's 'objective' representations of workers as subjects of particular ways of forming and using knowledge. These tactics assert a psychological force

upon agents so they become easily managed or actually manage themselves in terms of organisational measures. As described below, these practises are never total. Workers retain considerable freedom over their conduct and reasons they comply with company expectations, or not (for example, see Goffman, 1961; Taylor and Bain, 2003; Winiecki, 2004).

MAKING THE MANAGED SUBJECT

1. Disciplining and Governing in the Call Centre

To increase the effectiveness of managing the workforce, agents are organised into teams of five to 15 persons. Each team has an individual officially or unofficially assigned to a brokering role between agents in the team and administrative personnel.

Feedback most frequently provided to agents is in the ‘stats’ display (Figure 1). At *DeliveryWorldwide*, this display is updated daily by team leaders and posted on the outside of the team leader’s cubicle. Agents are expected to review their ‘stats’ every day. At *BigTech*, the stats are posted in an aisle nearby agents’ cubicles. At *MHealth*, agents are assigned to transfer their productivity statistics from the previous day’s stats printout to a large whiteboard in the call centre. These practices instantiate tactics by which each agent is made responsible for reviewing his or her own, and others’, productivity, thus coming face-to-face with the organisation’s image of one’s self and one’s own work. There are many governmental tactics aimed at convincing workers their worth as an employee is the same as their statistical productivity and quality ratings.

For example, it is normal for the team leader to add markings to the stats display to indicate which agents are meeting the organisation’s expectations, which are nearly in compliance and which are substandard. This is exemplified in colour coding and a ‘key’ at

the lower left of Figure 1. These additions demonstrate the activation of a power immanent in the tabular display that strategically orients the reader to: (a) ‘see one’s self’ in terms of the statistical targets of the organisation; (b) see each other agent on his or her team; and (c) relate one’s self to each of the others in terms of the data displayed on the table. The expectation, indeed responsibility, that agents will ‘see themselves in the data’ was made explicitly known by Kam, the supervisor at the *MHealth* call centre, who, in the course of one meeting between agents implored them:

You have to be able to *see yourself in the data*. This [stabbing the stats printout with her finger] is how we see you and this is how you should be seeing yourselves. Each of you know better than I do what’s going on minute by minute and if you know how we’re seeing you, you can adapt and make sure the stats come out right!

Kam makes it apparent that agents are responsible not only for ‘seeing their selves in the data’, but also for adapting their minute to minute practices in order to reify the organisation’s expectation of productivity. The organisational reality and ‘truth’ about subjects is made both possible and visible against the organisation’s claims that it is what the agents should believe and actively produce!

Discipline-produced productivity ratings are thus invoked in practices intended to draw workers into a new relation with themselves – a relation linking their ‘statistical selves’ with responsibility to conduct their conduct to produce satisfactory productivity statistics – linking disciplinary and governmental power. Agents are ‘coached’ in one facet of their conduct by being brought face to face with portions of the ‘political arithmetic’ of the organisation (Burchell, 1991; Gordon, 1991), and told of the expectation to use it as a means through which not only to know their selves but also as the basis for modifying their

behaviour (Kinnie et al., 2000; Knights and Odih, 2000; Winiecki, 2004). The individual's knowledge of the work and personal values are excluded from this discourse (but not from the overall social reality). Instead, workers are expected to use knowledge of the 'truth' about their selves provided in statistics and rules of the organisation when conducting themselves at work.

When workers have adopted the truth claims made by the organisation and the particular constellations of knowledge that make them possible, they can be expected to find ways to 'activate' those things when encountering situations that are not explicitly disciplined by the organisation and its tactics. Workers thus participate in the production of power that affects them, and through their actions reify and reinforce it and its perceived authority and rationality.

However, it is not always the case that management or supervisory class workers are the principals in this process. Sometimes fellow agents – occasionally with limited supervisory responsibilities – become involved in the process. At *DeliveryWorldwide*, when an agent's productivity or quality is below standards established by the company, team leaders are expected to coach that agent until performance improves. That was the case when Sheila, a team leader with six years of experience at this call centre and five years at another *DeliveryWorldwide* call centre, 'adopted' Kalie, an agent on her team whose quality evaluations and productivity scores had been below standard for several months, and who had been the recipient of several customer complaints in the past year for being rude.

Sheila told she had gone out of her way to record Kalie's calls and rate them, independent of official quality ratings. Her intention was to identify 'problem spots':

I'd listen to her calls and score 'em and then sit with Kalie after work and review the recordings and my scores [to] show her where I marked her down. At first she'd get

really defensive and tell me her computer was acting up or the caller was being nasty or that her car needed to be fixed and she didn't have the money – all sorts of things to make excuses.

I'd tell her the same things were happening to me and that I just have to put it out of my mind when I come to work. I told her I learned how to recognise when I'm getting anxious or frustrated [with a caller] and just stop and count to five when I start to feel that way – counting to ten would take too long [and hurt my stats]! I was trying to tell her we all get frustrated and we've all got to find ways to deal with it.

It took awhile but she's started to turn around. She's not getting angry as much anymore and her stats are getting better.

Kalie was coached not only on tactics for accepting responsibility for her demeanour on the phone, but also on what kinds of knowledge are irrelevant to the organisational definition of 'good worker'. In doing so, Sheila was acting to try and help Kalie learn to help herself by developing 'technologies of the self' that connect her reasons for working with the official, statistically-represented, knowledge and desires of the organisation. Agents like Kalie are not forced to adopt or develop such technologies, rather they are expected to freely *accept and develop them as a responsibility*, and Sheila indicates Kalie was beginning to do so. Note also that Sheila held these meetings with Kalie *after work hours*. She told me this was so that she did not impinge upon the conduct of work and, implicitly, the production of productivity and quality statistics for them. In both cases, Sheila is demonstrating an orientation to the organisation's expectations – being governed and acting to move Kalie in that direction.

Call centres and agents bring disciplinary and governmental power into combination in other ways too. At *DeliveryWorldwide* statistical charts are posted publicly so workers can

see not only themselves in terms of their team mates, but also see the productivity spreadsheets of each of the other teams. The simple addition of colours on the chart and a companion set of rules (Figure 1) demonstrates how an apparently simple set of tactics concluding in a ‘truth’ claim are condensed into one visual form and used to represent the subject as either ‘satisfactory’ or in need of improvement.

This was demonstrated by Gray, a veteran agent at *DeliveryWorldwide* and highly respected for his quality ratings. He is also criticised by team leaders and management for relatively low productivity ratings. During a scheduled break, we were standing near the display of charts similar to that shown in Figure 1. He changed the subject of our talk by gesturing to the sheet depicting his team’s statistics. He remarked that his quality score is always very high while his productivity score is relatively low:

Y’know I always try to do as much as I can for the customer, ‘cause I think that’s what I’m here for and that’s what I like doing. But I feel kinda bad about not taking as many calls as everyone else. I’ve decided I’m gonna work on that [and] bring my calls per hour [his official productivity rating] up.

In this, Gray demonstrates an orientation to the organisation’s means for seeing and representing workers. In the face of the statistical display of his productivity compared with that of everyone else, he commits to alter his own practice. Gray is effecting changes in his own practices based on an adopted responsibility and perspective of himself that is in part produced by coming face to face with a statistical subjectification of himself (Foucault, 1988a; Power, 1994; Kinnie et al., 2000) and modifying his own personal preference towards quality as opposed to quantity – his personal views are trumped by the stats and associated managerial rationality.

Similar unprompted actions by agents were common and spawned unique technologies to manufacture good statistical subjectifications of one's self. At *MHealth*, the team leader reviewed call centre stats during a daily team meeting and then left agents to perform a daily ritual of posting their own statistics on a large whiteboard visible to anyone. This, coupled with harangues by management to 'see yourself in the data', led agents to develop unique practices to make their productivity stats 'better'.

For example, during periods with a high volume of incoming calls, agents would attempt to perform only minimal data entry into the database where calls were logged and then quickly scribble other notes specific to the call onto paper. This allowed them to answer more calls but had the side effect of pushing data entry work for calls until later. When call volume decreased agents would re-open these incomplete database records and attempt to complete remaining data entry and processing from handwritten notes. Sometimes this data entry is performed during breaks or after scheduled work hours. Rabbie, one of the agents at *MHealth*, described it this way:

[Management] keeps telling us we're supposed to be able to do things faster and faster. But [even if we could type fast enough] the computer system isn't fast enough to allow us to do everything during the call and before the next call comes in!

[Management] says they're not going to hire more agents so we're left on our own to figure out how to do things faster. It's easier to just take handwritten notes and finish [data entry] later.

While Rabbie is speaking for himself, other agents indicated the same. When another agent was 'caught' doing this by the team leader, and told that she wasn't expected to work on break times, the agent replied, in what sounded an irritated and harried tone, "[i]f I want to

do it, I'll do it. Break times are for me to use however I want!" Like Rabbie, this agent demonstrates her orientation to the 'truth' and one's responsibility for maintaining one's stats, and the adoption of a technology of the self that allowed her to complete data entry and maintain 'good stats'. At the same time, by informing this agent that she is not expected to work during breaks, the team leader makes it possible for the organisation to absolve itself of responsibility for 'making' the agent do this. The agents are thus shown to *freely choose* to overwork to fulfil a force immanent in the strategies of the organisation and inculcated into the workers themselves – a force that frames the work and workers in a particular relation with knowledge encoded in the stats that makes workers responsible for fulfilling expectations (Power, 1994; Greenbaum, 1998; Kinnie et al., 2000). While Rabbie's and his co-workers' actions are 'secondary adjustments' (Goffman, 1961), given that they deviate from the official rules, it is also the case that they serve to extend the power of the organisation further into workers themselves.

Similarly, at *DeliveryWorldwide*, novice agents are sometimes tense about meeting statistical productivity and quality expectations of the organisation. For example, Beverly, a 10 year veteran with the company and a team leader, described a new agent, indicating that she was progressing toward becoming a reliable and independent agent, but adding:

[She is] really worried about her stats right now. She's afraid she's not gonna make it through her probationary period. I tell her she's doing fine but she won't believe me. She only looks at the [the stats displays]. She wants me to compile a paper copy of new policies and scripting and stuff [normally sent to agents via a proprietary E-mail system] – so she can take 'em home and read 'em. She doesn't want to spend any time *not* on the phone while she's here!

True to Beverley's assessment, this agent passed the probationary period and was given full status. She maintained her worry, however, and continued to request that Beverley print out materials for her to take home, rather than to take time off the phone to read them at work. She had adopted a responsibility for meeting the organisation's statistical targets for productivity, and had implicated her team leader into practices that enabled her to fulfil this responsibility by taking work home.

When fieldwork focused on observing and interviewing this agent – nearly a year after passing her probationary period – she had retained this worry, but applied it in a slightly different way. During one of her twice-daily 10 minute breaks, she said:

I've gotta work on controlling my calls. I let the customers ask too many questions and my call time is more than [the company] want[s]. Every time I walk past the [stats] board I can see that I'm sometimes [on the edge of acceptable productivity or quality]. I keep asking to be moved next to Pat [an agent known for very good productivity stats] so I can learn how she does it.

When asked how she came to want to 'do it' like Pat, she gestured toward the display of statistics on the bulletin board, saying, "I just see how everyone else is doing better than me and I want to be safe all the time. I don't like the way I look on the board."

This agent orients to the organisational 'truth' encoded in the stats in order to describe how she has come to see herself. She adopts techniques of working on herself to reify that 'truth'. In so doing, she reflects an adoption of the organisation's statistical means for knowing herself, and uses it as justification for fashioning practices to be used in reifying this knowledge.

Other agents were found to orient to the stats also, though in less aggressive and self-diminishing ways. Pat, an experienced agent, told how she uses the stats as a resource when modifying her day to day practise:

[The company] pays attention to our stats per month, but we see the stats reports every day, so we can adjust for a bad day by working harder on another day. [That way] your monthly average will be okay even if you have a few bad days.

This demonstrates how workers use the statistics as a baseline against which to measure themselves as workers, and how they activate different techniques for modifying themselves such that they continue to reify the organisation's 'truth' about them.

The above examples demonstrate how the organisation's disciplinary tactics tend to produce workers whose actions are consistent with its demands for productivity. However, it is not just that the organisation disciplines the worker into compliance. Workers can use instruments and techniques supplied by management in a variety of ways, ranging from compliance through proper means, to compliance through unofficial or proscribed means, to subversion or outright resistance. Even in resistance, though, workers demonstrate an orientation to the official 'truth' about them and their work as rendered in statistics.

An example can be seen with Cassie, an agent at *Delivery Worldwide* with about five years experience, and well known for her ability to produce very high 'productivity' ratings. Cassie was observed never to utilise the 'AUX' mode of the ACD to give her time to complete data processing following calls. Instead, she would hang up from a call and allow the ACD to send her another while she was completing data processing from the previous one. However, instead of voicing the opening script as soon as a call connected to her phone,

she would stay quiet and complete data processing. Only after completing data processing would she begin talking to the already-connected customer.

She described how this allowed her to produce a very high ‘% Available’ ratio and other, more desirable, effects:

I always get [a higher ‘% Available’ ratio] than we’re supposed to. It doesn’t get me any more money but it keeps [the supervisor] off my back. In fact, she thinks I’m the best one here! I don’t know if she knows how I do it – and she might be upset if she did – but I don’t care. It keeps her off my back and that’s all I care about.

Thus, even when resisting the power immanent in the ACD that applies a pressure to work faster, Cassie’s practice exhibits an orientation to produce statistical evidence that she is complying with that pressure – even when she is not – thereby allowing herself and others to be continuously measured according to it.

It is also the case that the call centres participating in this project proscribed eating, drinking and social conversations when agents were working customer calls. Agents were adept at using a common feature of the phone system to permit them to breach this rule – the mute button. The mute button is a feature of the phone system that permits agents to temporarily disable the microphone on their headset so that customers, or anyone listening to the call, could not hear what agents are saying or doing (the mute button is officially to be used to obscure coughing, sneezing and the like). Agents adept at fingering the mute button *could thus violate the rules*, usually without being caught, as described below. However, regardless of the official rules, all of these tactics were commonly performed by agents in all of the call centres participating in this project.

It was also not uncommon for agents to mute their headset microphone in order to conceal epithets or sarcastic remarks aimed at the caller. For example, it was not uncommon to hear agents insert remarks into their talk, and by tactical use of the mute button, allow the customer to hear only what the agent wanted them to hear. This technique was used when the current caller had said or done something that irritated an already frustrated agent, or when the current caller was appealing to conditions the agent thought to be somehow worth a sarcastic remark. Sometimes they were performed ‘for the benefit of’ the agent’s neighbours in order to interject the absurdity of the customer’s situation or request into the sometimes crushingly boring context of the work, thus providing a momentary relief from that boredom. The following represent several such uses of the mute button <text between chevron brackets was voiced while the mute button was on>.

1. Agent: You’d like to schedule a pickup for a package? <I remember you, you fucking asshole>
2. Agent: Yes, Mr. Howard, I’ll be glad to help you with that <If you’d just get a damned cellphone that works>
3. Agent: No sir. Delivery to that location can’t be guaranteed overnight.
Customer: But Brown express can guarantee it.
Agent: <Then send it on Brown express!>
4. Agent: You’re getting ‘out of memory’ errors when you try to print to your BigTech printer? <Then put more memory in your fuckin’ computer!>
5. Agent: I need your insurance ID number, so I can complete the processing to authorise your visits to a counsellor.
Caller: I don’t give personal ID to *nobody*. I don’t trust you stinkin’ deep pockets insurance companies!

Agent: <And you probably wear a tin foil hat too>

In using the mute button to hide their critical, sarcastic or satirical commentary on customers, agents are always able to display their selves as disciplined workers to the surveillance apparatuses of the organisation. Use of the mute button in this way thus implicates the worker in maintaining the ongoing production of an official organisational ‘truth’ about how the work is to be performed and workers are to be measured and subjectified. However, use of the mute button in this way also allows workers to gain illicit satisfactions while still being officially inscribed as good workers.

The above examples demonstrate how workers are able to effectively fool the surveillance apparatuses into ‘seeing’ them as docile to the organisational ‘truth’ about productivity. It is also the case that workers responsible for performing covert surveillance in order to conduct quality evaluations of workers, resist the rules but in so doing actually reify the organisation’s way of seeing, measuring and knowing workers.

One day fieldwork focused on Hal, a team leader, and his conduct of quality evaluations. After tapping into the phone of Denita, an agent with six years of experience, he waited until a new call started and began quickly scribbling notes on the evaluation form. After the call was completed, he remarked:

That wasn’t a very good [call]. She provided incorrect information when she answered the customer’s question about shipment of live animals. It’s not a very common question and the company keeps changing their policy so that’s not too big a deal – but it’ll hurt her.

As the next call began, Hal started scribbling notes again. From the team leader's desk we could hear Denita striking the keys on her keyboard very hard and telling the customer in a tired sounding voice, "I'm sorry but my computer's acting up again... This should only be a minute." After a few seconds we heard her say in a loud and anguished voice, "I HATE MY COMPUTER!" Hal nodded. "[It] sounds like she's having a really bad day." (Hal said he heard a change in the hiss in the phone line, indicating that Denita had pressed her mute button. Thus, her exclamation was not heard by the customer.)

Just then, Denita's team leader walked up behind us and, noticing her name on the form Hal was writing on, said, "[o]h! How's she doin'?" Hal remarked "not too good." Then, crumpling the rating form he said, "I think we're done for the night."

When asked about this, Hal told that it was late in the day and at the end of Denita's workweek – a time, he assured, when any agent really starts to show fatigue. "Plus, her computer is acting up and it's probably not fair to do a rating of her today. She's a good agent but things just aren't good right now."

It is also the case that agents at this call centre commonly answer up to 200 calls *each day* (± 4000 per month), but quality evaluations are performed on only 10 calls per month (.0025% of calls worked by an agent). Therefore, an otherwise 'good agent's' monthly quality rating could be severely harmed by rating calls performed in a period when technical problems and *understandable* fatigue are present.

When asked if these might have been factors in his decision not to complete evaluations of Denita's work on the day noted above, Hal acknowledged he could use this knowledge of how much a 'bad day' can affect an agent's evaluation in his decision to stop evaluating Denita. Thus, the worker's official statistical representation is protected and maintained, even in resistance to the rules.

From the above, whether in compliance with disciplinary or governmental forces from the organisation, or in resistance to those forces, workers are shown to actively participate in the making and maintenance of institutional power relations and, arising from them, their official workplace subjectivity.

2. Reflecting on the Production of Power and the Manageable Subject

From the above, it is apparent call centres have created disciplinary technologies, rules and tactics through which they claim authority over the relation between knowledge, the work and worker. Additionally, they create apparatuses through which workers are involved in their own subjectification and (often) subjection. By accepting the organisation's claim of authority, knowledge and power, workers become governable (Sewell and Wilkinson, 1992; Townley, 1994; Knights and Odih, 2000; Winiecki, 2004; Winiecki, 2006; Winiecki, accepted for publication). They agree to see and measure themselves according to the technologies, metrics and assumptions of management. This provides resources for management to deploy a set of tactics and techniques to inculcate workers, such that the conduct of workers is conducted to continually reinforce and translate management discourses and strategies.

The 'agreement' of workers is never total and without qualification though. Both disciplinary and governmental forms of power can be inflected in particular ways by workers as well as by management. All discourses are polyvalent—what Foucault refers to as 'the tactical polyvalence of discourse' (Foucault, 1990: 92-102). The 'polarity' of management discourses, and of the other relations of power which flow through the call centre, can be changed or even reversed by workers in the actual practice of their work roles. Workers are obliged to orient to and hence to mobilise management techniques and discourses, but they do so in different ways: from the enthusiastic acceptance of Beverly's new agent, to a more

grudging acceptance by Gray of the necessity to shorten his call times, to Cassie's manipulation of her '% available' time, to Hal's consideration for a fellow agent, to the widespread 'abuse' of the mute button. The same technologies and discourses can thus be used for different purposes, and can be associated with a range of different practices. Workers mobilise and reify management discourses, assumptions and forms of subjectivity, but do so in specific ways over which they have some control. Workers fashion their selves in ways which allow them to be viewed and measured as satisfactory by the organization, while still maintaining some distance from it, and a variety of stances towards it.

Thus, power is never 'outside' of workers. It is *in* the very tools, rules and thought processes through and by which work is performed. Workers are a conduit and a manifold in this process, both carrying this power and distributing it creatively through thoughts and actions.

Agents are put in positions where they develop and/or adopt particular technologies of the self to produce themselves as 'proper subjects' consistent with the truth manufactured through architectural, technological and management practices common to call centre work (Bain and Taylor, 1999; Taylor and Bain, 1999; Bain and Taylor, 2000; Kinnie et al., 2000; Callaghan and Thompson, 2002; Holman et al., 2002; Taylor et al., 2002; Dormann and Zijlstra, 2003; Knights and McCabe, 2003; Barnes, 2004; Beirne et al., 2004; van den Broek et al., 2004; Winiecki, 2004) and the 'reality' made possible by their participation in the system (Winiecki, 2006; Winiecki, submitted for publication).

CONCLUSION

All of these workers demonstrate a *free* acceptance of: (a) imputed truths presented in the form of statistical data; and (b) implied or explicit *responsibility* to develop or modify themselves in terms of those norms and forms. The organisation makes the measurement of

workers' productivity and quality a fundamental part of what they see, how they know themselves and what they are subjected to through managerial practices aimed at conducting the conduct of workers. As a consequence, workers are not only disciplined by the labour process instituted by computer and phone systems, they are also brought into the rational mentality of management's orientation to 'the stats' such that they become governed by it. This is a system that bootstraps its own values, goals, methods of examination and evaluation, and implicates others into the process, thereby producing a reality that permeates the environment and penetrates its members such that through their participation they carry and creatively translate its power (Burchell, 1991; Winiecki, 2006; Winiecki, submitted for publication).

The power immanent in these practices effects has the strategic goal of rendering workers as responsible but docile subjects who actively modify their subjectivity and actions following the organisation's representation of workers in statistical forms. Workers are made and maintained through an ongoing creation and reification of an organisationally imputed 'truth' rendered in practices of observing, inscribing and managing the work and workers, even when they resist it. This does not mean that resistance is futile, but rather that resistance operates through the same instruments, channels and networks as managerial power – the mute button can be a way of fulfilling official dictates, but it can also be a source of illicit pleasures; statistical measures of worker performance seem to be totally objective – an iron cage imposed by management – yet workers can influence these statistics in both legitimate and illegitimate ways. Resistance is not external to power, and neither is the subject. The subject is not a primeval reality which confronts power as an outside force. Rather power is involved in the very constitution of the subject, and this power can be used for a range of purposes, not only managerial ones. Dominant power relations can be modified, if only

temporarily, through the creative activities of those who are normally at the subordinate end of these relations.

The subject at work in contemporary organisational contexts exists in the spaces between the organisational definition of reality and the subject's personal self-conception (Goffman, 1961). That personal self-conception is heavily influenced by the organisation, but not in the sense of the worker simply submitting to the organisation's power; rather the worker's self is defined by the *stance* he or she takes towards these rules and orientations – it exists as a continuously produced tension between organisational and personal definitions of reality (Foucault, 1983; Foucault, 1988b; Gordon, 1991).

Agent Name	ACD Calls	Avg Talk Time	InBd Ext Calls	Out Bound Calls	OutBd w/in Cntr	Total OutBd Time	OutBd Per-cent	Total AUX Time	Total Train Time	Total ACW Time	Avail Time	Staffed Time % Avail	% Avail	Calls Per Hour	NCPH
Totals	929	2:16	9	108	27	3:06	10.4	4:06	:00	3:35	6:18	52:33	93.17	17.7	20.1
151		1:40	2	19	3	:33	11.2	:36	:00	:36	1:03	7:03	91.50	21.4	25.2
144		2:17	1	13	5	:11	8.3	:21	:00	:37	1:00	7:46	91.96	18.5	21.3
58		2:25	0	17	3	:21	22.7	:25	:00	:15	:25	3:47	93.36	15.3	17.2
64		2:08	3	8	0	:08	11.1	:09	:00	:22	:14	3:23	68.74	18.8	20.3
115		3:06	1	3	2	:06	2.5	:14	:00	:19	:47	7:36	95.73	15.1	14.9
148		2:05	2	17	7	:35	10.4	:49	:00	:27	:54	7:33	93.90	19.3	21.9
100		2:30	0	14	6	:22	12.3	:34	:00	:42	:52	7:40	90.78	13.0	14.7
151		2:07	0	17	1	:47	19.1	:52	:00	:14	:50	7:40	95.54	19.7	22.6

Team Goals
 Talk Time ≤ 2:00
 OB% ≤ 15%
 % Avail ≥ 95%
 NCPH ≥ 25cph

Wow! Great Job!
 Almost! Keep Working!
 Please work on this

Figure 1. Call Centre Productivity Data

Quality Assessment Form

CSR Name:		QA Administered By:		Date:	Time:	Session Type:	
CSR Signature:							

Call #	Friendly	Opening	Name	Info	Assistance	Close	Comments/Notes							Excellent	Good	Fair	Poor
1																	
	Date:	Jargon	No Apology	Rude/Curt Abrupt	Dead Air Mute Key	No Proactive	Blind Transfer	Poor Listening	Call Type:								
	Time:																

5	Date:	Jargon	No Apology	Rude/Curt Abrupt	Dead Air Mute Key	No Proactive	Blind Transfer	Poor Listening	Call Type:
	Time:								

Areas Needing Improvement			

# of Excellent Calls	0	X 20	0
# of Good Calls	0	X 14	0
# of Fair Calls	0	X 7	0
# of Poor Calls	0	X 0	0
Quality Score			Total
			0

Figure 2. Form for Scoring Quality of Agents at *DeliveryWorldwide*

ENDNOTES

1. Inbound call centres receive calls from customers, whereas ‘outbound’ call centres (also known as telemarketers) make calls to prospective customers.
2. Data collected included over 5000 pages of fieldnotes, 138 interviews, over 700 photographs and nearly 2000 pieces of official documentation.
3. The drop in employment resulted from subcontracting to low cost providers offshore.
4. Names of corporations and individuals are pseudonyms.
5. All participants in this research were required to signify their informed consent by signing a form developed in collaboration with the institutional research board of the university with which the author is affiliated. Some workers consented only to observation and informal interviews, while others consented only to interviews separate from the conduct of work. Persons who did not wish to participate were excluded from the study in all ways.
6. Organisational consent was formalised by signature of paperwork prepared by the author or provided by the organisation. One organisation required the participation of a corporate lawyer in this process and signing a separate non-disclosure agreement (NDA) to protect the organisation’s research and development assets.

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¹ Inbound call centres receive calls from customers. This differs from an ‘outbound’ call centre (also known as a telemarketer) which makes calls to prospective customers.

² Data collected included over 5000 pages of fieldnotes, 138 interviews, over 700 photographs and nearly 2000 pieces of official documentation.

³ The severe drop in employment was a result of a corporate plan to outsource call centre work to low cost providers in India.

⁴ Names of corporations and individuals are pseudonyms.

⁵ Organisational consent was formalised by signature of paperwork prepared by the author, or provided by the organisation. One organisation required the participation of a corporate lawyer in this process and agreeing to a separate non-disclosure agreement (NDA) to protect the organisation’s research and development assets.

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