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Living the Call Centre –Global, Local, Work, Life, Interfaces.

Jonathan Warren -2011

**This Thesis is submitted as a partial requirement for the Degree of Doctor of
Philosophy, School of Applied Social Sciences, Durham University 2011**

Declaration

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INTRODUCTION-LANDSCAPES, WORKPLACES AND LIFESCAPES, CHANGE AND CONTINUITY

This thesis is about work, its place in our society, its place in particular places, but above all its place within lives.

The central theme explores the contexts of place and space. It attempts to say something about the wider lives and lived experience of those living and working in regions undergoing structural shifts in ways which have or are in the process of changing their established economic patterns and rationales. It tells a story which is complex, intricate and subtle, a story which is all too often overlooked, discounted and suppressed, a suppression emanating from both simplistic Marxist approaches which envisage the scales falling miraculously from workers eyes as they rush to man the barricades and crude Neo-liberal accounts of capital and its mechanisms within which individuals become little more than production units. Neither of these theses is helpful; such ideological standpoints by their nature fail to appreciate the complexity of the real world, and prefer to simplify rather than to demystify.

What this research is attempting to do is explained by Taylor *et al.* (2009, 2). In an editorial piece for *Work, Employment and Society*, they argue that there is a need to revive:

the ethnographic tradition (1) within the sociology of work and employment. This tradition has involved the primary material of academic researchers, firsthand accounts marshalled by journalists, and autobiographical testimonies of workers themselves, which have had a huge influence on sociological thinking in the field

Taylor *et al.* (2009, 2:7).

The essential point is that work is important; it always was and is still, despite what some commentators would have us believe. It is also important as the above quotation shows to bring the voices of those involved “on the front line” Taylor *et al.* (2009, 2:7) back to the forefront. In other words people matter, as do their workplaces and their wider communities. But I would argue that the only way to gain meaningful insights into those spaces is by exploring the narratives of the individuals who live and work within them. It is their lives that bridge the gap and are a very great part of the substance that these spaces are constructed from. It is essential to realise that the “frontline” is formed by the interface of narratives of lives, of place, of capital and of culture. In order to know what workplaces and communities are, it is necessary to access and to come to know the lives of those who populate those workplaces and communities.

This thesis deals with the theme of change and attempts to highlight the importance of understanding and of following the trajectories of localities, industries and lives through these large scale changes. Social scientists throughout the discipline’s history have always sought to identify, map and assess the changes in social structure that appear to mark transitions from one kind of society to another. The transition from the industrial to the post-industrial has been no exception. However, what have received less attention are the changes in social action that such transitions prompt. This thesis is an attempt to contribute something from the “action” side of the “structure/action” divide. The need for action to come back to the fore within studies of the workplace after a prolonged absence is also highlighted by Taylor *et al.* (2009, 2), who argue that:

It was the richness of such narrative accounts that generated the formidable insights into the social processes at the workplace

Taylor *et al.* (2009, 2:8).

Taylor *et al.* (2009, 2) argue that such approaches declined as the economic and political landscape shifted during the 1980's with the consequence that:

academic interest in workers agency diminished as management was increasingly seen as the only actor that mattered (see Thompson and Ackroyd, 1995)

Taylor *et al.* (2009, 2:8).

I have not sought to privilege the agency of one group over another. Rather, it is important to understand the experiences of workers, supervisory staff, management and those on the fringes of the industry if one is to make any sense of work as an experience and gain as full an understanding as possible. It is equally important to stress that work whilst highly important is only part of the story, and it is equally important to consider and understand the lives of individuals beyond the work place. Without an understanding of non –work life it is not possible to understand the motivation for much of the *social action* which goes on within the work place, to understand the imperatives which led individuals to that work to begin with, or to comprehend their desire to move on to another employer.

It is important to note that these experiences do not just happen anywhere, they happen *somewhere*. So the biographies of the places and spaces within which work takes place are immensely important. The “front line” as Taylor *et al.* call it is not just the product of the labour process. Its nature and the way it operates are shaped by the wider contexts of

place and locality. Within their article, Taylor *et al.* refer to a number of well known pieces, amongst them Hugh Beynon's seminal "Working for Ford" (1973) and Garrahan and Stewart's "The Nissan Enigma" (1992) both of which give accounts of what it is like to work in car production. These pieces they do this successfully because they recognise the importance of the locations within which this work is taking place. In Beynon's study, the experience of working at Halewood is not just a story about the Ford Motor Company. It is about much more; it is about the experience of those who come from Merseyside, and how the context of work in that place, i.e. the traditions of strong trade unionism which arose from manufacturing, heavy industry and dock work, moved into Halewood along with the work force and made the workers, the work place and the work experience different to comparable Ford plants in other locations such as Dagenham. Within Garrahan and Stewart's work, location is again crucial to making sense of the work experience, i.e. how the site was chosen, promoted and was justified as being a "substitute" for the jobs lost through the rundown of Wearside's shipyards and how the working experience within a highly controlled, single union, "Just in time" car plant differed radically from the working practices of the region's traditional industries.

Not only is the location of the "frontline" important, but so is the proximity of workers to that "frontline". If we examine many of the classic studies of industrial sociology they deal with easily identifiable occupational groups such as miners, dockers or ship-builders; what we tend to find is a community of workers that are concentrated into very specific geographical areas which are located in close proximity to the workplace. These workers and their communities were easy to identify and easy to find. These studies deal with

those communities which are beyond the workplace but are in fact constituted by it. The workplace provides the rationale for the community, without it the community would not have come into being. The extent to which the study of the community as an extension of the workplace is either incidental or conscious in a study such as Dennis *et al.*'s "Coal is or life"(1956) is debatable. However, what it meant was that these works were not just studies of the labour process. They are also, either by accident or design wider ethnographies of place. **(See note (1)).**Coal is our life" is a case in point; it can be viewed as a piece of industrial sociology, but it has little in common with contemporary labour process studies. Why? Because it can be argued that it is essentially a community study, dealing with home life, social institutions, leisure, and politics, to name but a few of the areas Dennis *et al.* (1956) commented on. This is not to discount the importance of work within "Ashton"; the pit is a constant and dominant presence, forming the context and backdrop upon which all other forms of social life are played out.

But the sustainability of such an approach has been under question for decades due to the changing organisation of life beyond the work place. This is of course a key theme within Goldthorpe *et al.*'s "Affluent Worker" (1969) studies. Whilst the idea that changes in lifestyle beyond the workplace reflect changes in class consciousness remains highly contentious. It is irrefutable that the easily identifiable occupational communities which were once commonplace have changed dramatically. This can be seen if we examine patterns of travel to work. As Byrne (2005, 1) shows, in 1970, 60,000 people worked in the South Shields area, with the number of working residents in the area falling by only 2,000 between 1970 and 2004, but by 2004 only 40,000 people worked within South Shields. For the North East and many other industrial regions the experience of post

industrialism has been one that has fractured the historic linkage between workplace and dwelling place. This is by no means absolute, but it does mean that the type of workplace studies which also featured, almost by accident rather than design, a wider ethnography of a well defined occupational community, are no longer possible in the way in which they once were.

This however, does not mean that such wider ethnographies that attempt to explain lives beyond the workplace are no longer possible or no longer important. Without them we are left with nothing except the labour process itself, and labour process theory by its very nature concentrates on how the workplace is structured rather than the wider narratives of individuals, localities and places. What then is needed is a different approach, one which attempts to capture the wider ethnographies of the workplace, and recognises that this is possible despite the dispersion of the work force due to their increased spatial mobility. In practical terms, this means that the researcher needs to access the wider ethnographies of the work place via encounters with individuals in the spaces they inhabit. Rather than visiting an occupational community in order to encounter individual workers and their lives, it is now a case of visiting individual workers and exploring their lives in order to encounter and establish what their wider occupational community might be and how it might look.

One study which has done this with great success is David Smith's "On the Margins of Inclusion" (2005). The study deals with the dispersion, diversification and absence of work in a particular part of Outer London. The community Smith studied was once much easier to define in terms of occupation and class. That place is now much more complex

and in order to construct a “biography of place” Smith explores the narratives of the individuals living on the estate in order to establish what the community has become. Smith is attempting to make sense of a place rather than a workplace. Yet, I would argue that the method used is similar to what I am proposing and appropriate, as it is one that allows places to be understood (be they the workplace or the spaces that surround it) via the experiences of those who live within them and allows us to construct the biographies of place which shape the context of the “frontline.”

Understanding Biographies

Biographies are important; C Wright Mills (1959) stressed the need to link biography and history in order to develop wider sociological understanding and imagination. To a great extent, the events and the emergence of the structures and forces which are examined within this research arise from and are prominently illustrated by the biography of a place. That place is the North East of England.

The North East region has a very good claim to being the world’s first true industrial society. The complex of carboniferous capitalism which developed in the region in the late 18th century made the region rich, increased its population and forged a distinctive lifestyle. But by the end of the 1980’s de-industrialisation in the region reached its peak prompting not just an economic crisis, but also a crisis of identity. Wearside’s experience illustrates this. Sunderland’s ship yards closed in 1988, but in 1989 the yards of North East Shipbuilders remained, maintained by a skeleton staff. The future was uncertain for the river that had produced a very substantial amount of the world’s merchant tonnage in 1900. Also prominent on the riverside skyline, and facing an uncertain future, was

Wearmouth colliery, one of the region's few remaining pits. This was the end of a long process, but what did it mean? The end of industry as it had been known or the end of industrial life in the region? For better or worse, change went beyond the "factory gates."

If we look back to the world of 1989, the theme of change/uncertainty at the local level was also mirrored by changes on the global stage. By January 1990 Eastern Europe was a very different place, and by the end of 1991 the Soviet Union had itself collapsed. Social scientists and commentators rushed to explain what was going on. Prominent amongst these were Francis Fukuyama, whose "The End of History and the Last Man" (1992) attempted to explain the victory of liberal democracy and the free market over Marxist-Leninism in the terms of G. F. Hegel whose own philosophical model Marx had famously "turned on its head." On a more general sociological level, Anthony Giddens "Consequences of Modernity" (1990) argued that the social institutions of societies such as Britain had now become "disembedded" and the former certainties of work and class had been replaced by a less certain society of "late capitalism" which offered more personal freedom, but at the cost of increased risk and insecurity.

When considered in this manner it would appear that the world has changed almost beyond recognition in the past two decades. But it can be argued that this is largely dependent upon both the perspective of the observer and the question asked. Throughout the 1990's the regions' landscape was in a state of transition. On Wearside, the river which had been Sunderland's rationale remained idle. In exchange for European redevelopment funding, the government had agreed to a ten year ban on shipbuilding on the Wear, dashing any hope of any revival of the industry.

By the early years of the twenty-first century when this study began, the physical landscape of the region had changed almost beyond recognition.

As well as the physical changes to the landscape around the river, other changes were also apparent, new industries were also becoming more prominent in the area. The Nissan car plant (built on what had once been Sunderland Airport) had become a major employer and many component suppliers had also sprung up to supply the plant. Significantly, call centres had begun to appear at the Doxford International business park, a green field site on the A19 corridor.

The counterpoint to the theme of change that runs throughout this thesis is that of continuity. Although highly visible structural changes have taken place in the region, does this mean that life and the way in which people understand it, and develop plans for life have changed too? Arguably physical landscapes are much easier to reconstruct than ways of living and modes of association. My initial approach to call centre work did not centre on questions around lives and life plans. I became interested in the industry from a largely technological point of view. In the later 1990's, the development of the internet, in particular, spawned a literature which is now known as "informationalism". This literature largely concerned itself with speculating about the human and social consequences of this new generation of information technology.

Call centre work might provide an appropriate area within which to study the relationship between technological information systems and humans, i.e. the way in which the labour process was largely governed by the technical parameters of telephony and computer systems, effectively integrating the worker into the system as another component of the

software. This theme of how systems “colonised” individuals via the labour process was also going to be developed by studying how call centres appeared to demand commitments from workers to team structures, not only at work but also through the experience of team-based leisure activities i.e. how the practices and relationships of the workplace increasingly colonised areas of life beyond the work place.

Whilst recognising that workplaces had certainly changed, I remained sceptical about theories and theorists that proclaimed that work was no longer a key site of social identity and that people now created their own identities via processes of consumption. This trend is perhaps best exemplified by the work of Bauman (1998, 1&2), who further argues that consumption and consumer practices can be seen as indicative of wider social change. For Bauman this is part and parcel of the shift from what he terms solid to liquid modernity. He is charting what he claims to be:

the gradual yet relentless passage from the early stage of modern society from a ‘society of producers’ to a ‘society of consumers’ and accordingly from a society guided by the work ethic to one ruled by the aesthetic of consumption.

Bauman (1998, 2:2)

Here it seemed was a model of work which appeared to exemplify many of these ideas. It sought to control individuals at work and directly shape parts of their “consumptive activity” during leisure time for the needs of the labour process. Yes, I was interested in such changes, but would be taking a sceptical rather than an optimistic view of the process.

The task then became one of how to test these ideas and find out what was really going on. It seemed to me that in order to know about what it was like to work in a call centre

there were two approaches I could take. The first option was by going to work in one myself, and becoming a traditional “participant observer” an insider within a specific organisation, in the way in which Roy (1960) conducted his celebrated “Banana time” study. Or secondly by taking a different approach, contacting and talking to those working within the industry and acknowledging that they would raise concerns that I lacked the practical experience to even consider. These points and concerns could then be integrated into the ongoing dialogue between me and my informants. The first strategy was not practical due to personal circumstances and would have only produced an ethnography of one particular workplace. In other words, it would be too focussed, too much of a “micro” approach, restricting my field to a specific workplace and a limited set of workers within that workplace. This was not what I was looking for.

The second strategy, offered the opportunity to explore these workplaces, and their workers. It also consciously acknowledged that I did not know a great deal and offered enough flexibility for emergent concerns to be integrated into the research along the way. Many important studies of the work place have used such an approach, for instance those of Beynon (1979) and Garrahan and Stewart (1992) and Dennis *et al.* (1956). These researchers did not experience the workplace first hand by placing themselves metaphorically and in the case of Dennis *et al.* literally “at the coal face”. However, it would be foolish to argue that such studies are diminished because of this or that they fail to give an adequate account of the “frontline”.

Methodologically then this work can be situated within the broad ethnographic tradition, exemplified by Dennis *et al.* (1956) in “Coal is our life.” Dennis and his team did not engage in direct participation in the mining industry in the Yorkshire coalfield during

their study, but they sought to understand the relationship between the industry and the wider community by spending time in that community and asking questions about its nature and how it shaped and was shaped by the industry. Such an approach allows a different kind of observation, one whereby the researcher is observing the movement, collisions and confluence of narratives through the medium of the lives of those they encounter.

Consequently, as soon as I began, the focus of my research began to shift. The issues I had initially identified, whilst they existed and had some relevance, were not as significant as I had thought. What very quickly became clear was that making sense of the industry and the labour process meant having to understand the lives of those who worked within it and this encompassed their lives beyond the call centre. The approach I chose allowed a great deal of flexibility, it had to as it recognised that “the field” and its boundaries would only become apparent once I was “in the field”.

The focus on lives also meant that my field was not constrained by physical space or in danger of being thwarted by the denial of access to a workplace. It allowed me to “extend the field” and look at what was happening in the industry on the Indian subcontinent. This was something which I could not have done if I had focussed upon specific workplaces rather than the working and wider lives of those who I met in New Delhi, Mumbai and Bangalore. This extension of the field was prompted by what I encountered initially in the North East. Very quickly the issue of the “off shoring” of call centre jobs to English speaking destinations overseas in order to cut labour costs came to the forefront. There was general concern amongst the workforce, their trade unions, parts of

the industry and the local media that the call centre jobs which had arrived in the area in the previous decade would depart as quickly as they had appeared. The prime destination for off shoring was at that time India, as it could provide a highly educated, English speaking and IT literate labour force and still deliver reduced labour costs. This led me to start thinking about the industry in India. How much did the Indian call centre industry have in common with its North Eastern relation? Perhaps most importantly what were the lives of Indian call centre workers like? Would they be so different from their equivalents here? Consequently the idea of carrying out some fieldwork in India came about, to serve as a comparison to the North East context and to provide further diversity for the study as a whole. It also gave a wider global dimension to a study concerned with what is undeniably a global industry. I contend that what developed was a method which was highly practical as it allowed flexibility for the researcher and allowed greater diversity to be captured.

This thesis explores the central tension regarding work and wider social change which has been a feature of social scientific debate from the 19th century onwards. It goes on to consider the importance and the role of context in shaping places, practices and lives. It concentrates on the lives of the individuals who live within these contexts and outlines the results, reporting the dialogue which the research process established. In the North East these individuals are what Byrne (2005, 2) has described as the “missing middle” in recent discussions of British class structure. They are neither marginalised nor demonised, they are not poor or rich and they are not winners, nor are they losers. Byrne poses the questions of who make up the “missing middle” and where they can be located within the class structure:

What do they do in terms of work? By Zweig's definition they do working-class jobs – a lot of men still doing skilled manual work, women in white collar, manual work, younger people of both sexes in the white collar helot jobs of the new call centre economy. Are these people working class? By the brands on their tongues they are

Byrne (2005, 2: 807).

This is not an account of the labour process. It is rather an account of how lives are lived, planned and conducted within socioscaples and worksaples. It attempts to make a contribution to knowledge about Byrne's absent "middle mass:"

The absence here is of knowledge about people like these. How do they live? Statistically we know a lot – they fill in census forms and Neighbourhood Statistics...But we know very little about how they think, how they feel about work, about their identities in these places, about their schools and about their hopes for the future

Byrne (2005, 2: 808).

In India, the place of call centre workers is somewhat different. They represent more than a missing middle, and they are generally young, single, well educated and by local standards very well paid. But they are subjected to scrutiny and viewed with a degree of suspicion by wider Indian society, as the lifestyle that goes with a working culture which frequently includes high profile consumption and night work is seen as at best unwholesome, and at worst improper. This is, of course, part of a wider narrative about change in Indian society and the anxieties and questions it raises. This research has also attempted to offer a space for those involved to tell their stories, discuss questions of identity and explore the themes described above.

Social Change and Social Structures

The issues of how we live, how social change occurs and the nature of the relationship between the central areas of social life have been a matter of both great interest and great speculation throughout the history of the social sciences. Over the past two centuries, commentators have examined general social change, and attempted to offer explanations based around “grand theory” and upon empirical findings. This debate, although almost constant, has changed its appearance, terms of reference and general drift over this period. During this period, the emergence of capitalism and industrialism transformed both how we live and how we work. Wage labour, in terms of its presence or its absence increasingly defined each individual’s existence.

This thesis seeks to outline and explore the nature of these debates. Whilst it asks what the key aspects of concern are today, it also attempts to show what might be gained by returning to concepts and principles forged in the past and building upon them. Ultimately, it asks how the call centre industry, an apparently “new” industry using “new” technology, can be understood in the light of past and current debates and the questions which the industry when considered as a case raises for those debates.

At the outset of this research my focus was the workplace itself, with the initial idea to investigate how relations between workplace and worker are strongly defined by the information technology infrastructure which exists in such work places. Also, to look at human resources strategies which, at first glance, appeared to encroach upon, and colonise the leisure hours of workers in order to reinforce team identities and their allied control structure under the guises of “fun” and “team-building.” Very quickly, I

discovered that whilst these were issues for those working within the industry, they were relatively minor ones. Much higher up the agenda were concerns about relations with team leaders and management, shift patterns, and time off. These concerns were not so much about the immediate working environment, but about how the demands of the workplace impacted upon their lives in the world outside of the workplace. What also became clear was that life beyond the immediate workplace was almost always present for these workers, often in the form of aspirations. These were sometimes very well defined, for example “I’m working here part time to fund my degree course which will let me move on to what I really want to do”. Sometimes they were much vaguer, such as “my aim is not to be working here in a year’s time”. What became apparent was that understanding and exploring these lives was critical, the call centre industry served as a way to access these lives. Yes, the industry was important but as a case study and an access point rather than just a thing in itself.

I do not wish to diminish nor underestimate the importance of work within society. It is a central and defining influence of life, but it is not the only one. As I explored the lives of the individuals I encountered, the importance of the places where they lived and the cultures they were born into became more and more prominent. What is more, it became apparent that without understanding these other aspects of life a meaningful account of the role work played within those lives could not be produced. What I am trying to stress is the importance of exploring and trying to understand the *social action* which is prompted and produced by changes within the world of work. Social action has been far less visible within the social sciences than its counterpart that of social structure, which has dominated the debate on the nature of industrial society and change within it for the

best part of two centuries. Or put another way, the story of changing structures is well documented. However, the story of how individuals make sense of this change and make lives within these structures requires much more attention than it has hitherto received. Structures are important, yes, but structures can only be fully understood when their contents are examined, contents which are made of social action.

Social Change and Social Science

The question of changes to work and how to interpret them is one which has been with us throughout the modern era. Changing patterns of industry and work hold a central place within the social sciences. The decline of feudalism and the rise of large scale industrial production organized around what became known as “the factory system,” and its consequent impact on social life, lay at the heart of the “Founding Fathers” work. Marx, Weber and Durkheim all sought to explain the coming of industrial society its meaning and its consequences. Importantly all of them speculated as to its future development, and what this might mean for the lives which would be lived in the next phase of society. All produced different visions of the future, which in many ways reflected and reinforced their analytical schemas for understanding the present.

Karl Marx abhorred the inequities which industrial capitalism bred, but he was confident that future might allow the liberation of human creativity, now that industry promised the “conquest of necessity.” Conversely, Weber was pessimistic about the future, fearing the destruction of individuality by the increasing dominance of “legal rational bureaucracy” which, by the end of his lifetime, was firmly established as industrial capitalism’s operating system. Durkheim, meanwhile, was concerned that whilst the new division of

labour offered freedom from the rigid norms and values of the declining “mechanistic societies”, the lack of norms offered by the “organic” social order also offered the prospect of a “pathological” society and “anomie” for humanity. However, what they all shared was a central concern with social evolution. They also felt able to make grand universal predictions about “the shape of things to come”. Importantly, all the writers of the classical age saw work as important and central to explaining the rapidly changing world about them.

Why are the above comments important to a study of work in the early twenty-first century? Well, as Kumar (1978, 1995) has outlined, the work of the nineteenth century sociologists was about defining the character and parameters of industrial society. Thus the debate about whether we are now living in a fundamentally different form of society, one that is post industrial, has always taken as its baseline and constant backdrop, the work of sociology’s classical age. Post industrial theory can be argued to have begun in the works of the nineteenth century. But, it is more commonly traced to the speculative theories or futurologies which emerged in the USA in the 1950’s and rapidly spread to Europe. The post industrial theorists such as Daniel Bell, Alain Torainne, Alvin Toffler, Rudolph Bahro, and Andre Gorz, to name but a few of the protagonists in this ongoing debate, had very different ideas and views about the changing nature of industrial societies, but all shared a common basic assumption that a transformation was occurring, a transformation which would:

eventually produce societies as different from the classically conceived industrial societies as those of the earlier agrarian societies

(Kumar 1978:191).

Kumar (1978) points out that post industrial theory of all varieties has several common themes. Firstly, an assumption that industrialism was/is in crisis. This has been elaborated in themes such as “limits to growth” and environmentalist post industrialism e.g. Gorz (1980) and Bahro (1984). Secondly, the theme of de-industrialization is at the heart of post industrial theory. De-industrialization refers broadly to the debate about the changing nature of the productive process and what it produces. To put it crudely, industrialism is seen as synonymous with the mass production of manufactured goods in factory settings. Also, this activity and its associated sub-processes for instance coal mining (as it produces raw materials in the form of fuel to power the productive process) are assumed to employ the majority of the labour force. Once manufacturing and related employment declines, as it has done in the G8 nation’s economies relative to other sectors over the past 40 years, it is argued that post-industrial society has arrived. This notion is central to the work of Daniel Bell (1974) and lies at the heart of the post-industrial agenda. The third strand which Kumar identifies is closely allied to the second. Changing patterns of work and employment are of concern to the “post industrial” theorists as they have tended to constitute their evidence for arguing that things have changed. For instance, Bell (1974) argued that the apparent dramatic increase in non-manual, white-collar work in the US during the 1950’s and 60’s supported his argument.

For post-industrialists the future of these areas has been the subject of intense speculation. Gorz (1982) argues that “deindustrialization” means the end of the class structure Marx identified. In particular Gorz argues that the working class has lost its historic potential to act as a “class for itself”. However, Gorz also envisaged the decline

of manual labour as offering the opportunity for a wide spread reappraisal about the role and value of wage labour in general in advanced societies. Post-industrial theory, therefore, can be seen as having a profound concern with the future, its shape, and identifying the key actors and the mechanisms which will take us there.

Kumar (1978) argues that this tendency for futurology within post-industrial theory can be attributed to several factors. Namely the perceived “crisis of industrialism” which was unfolding during the 1960’s, the widespread social change and conflict in the US during the same period illustrated by the struggle for civil rights, the rise of the feminist movement and finally, the technological advances of the period, which are best characterized by the space program. Kumar points out that faced with the need to explain large scale social change, many looked to the existing theoretical base. This base was of course classical sociology:

futurology, in casting around for a suitable conceptualization of large scale societal change, found only the evolutionary schemes of the past to hand and adopted these for its own purposes. In doing so the futurologists have recommended the characteristic task and pattern of nineteenth century sociology. Basically their procedure has been very simple. They accept that the nineteenth century scheme in its strict form will no longer do. “Industrial Society” as it has been understood hitherto cannot be taken as the fulfillment and the final end of social evolution. But all that has to be done is to add another stage to the sequence. The old story is given a new chapter with a different ending

Kumar (1978:191).

The significance of this is that it explains why post industrial thinkers seek to highlight and focus upon “novelty”. There is an inbuilt propensity to overlook continuity with industrial society. Difference is sought, often to the detriment of more complex

explanation. Change has to be big, qualitative and preferably traumatic. This schematic of historical epochs also requires clearly defined lines of transition. This allows societies to be placed neatly into them, and general characteristics which can be used to qualify these judgments. In this respect post industrialism is evolutionist in its approach to the world, in a similar sense to that of anthropology in the nineteenth century. It wishes to chart and explain societies according to their place in the hierarchy of development. What it tends to overlook is how those societies operate and the consequences for individual lives within them. There are also important differences at the global level of development, which the post industrial thinkers of the 1960's and 1970's did not fully consider. In an ongoing process emerging industrial societies can be argued to be transforming from pre industrial societies, whilst post industrial societies are largely dependent upon other societies, to fulfill industrial society functions for them. Manufacturing has not diminished in its importance in terms of production and consumption for post industrial societies, it has just been relocated. It can therefore be argued that the continued existence of industrial societies is a prerequisite for any post industrial society. The acceleration of this process in the last decades of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first centuries has led to the post-industrial debate being redefined around the notion of globalization.

Charting change, the challenge

Studying the global call centre industry in the North East of England or on the Indian subcontinent in the early twenty-first century is of course different to studying the Yorkshire coalfield in the 1950's: neither have "sole industries" in the way coal dominated "Ashton". However, the need to understand the way in which lives are lived within a dynamic and are shaped by both work and wider political, technological, global and local contexts is important. For Dennis *et al.* (1956), the major contextual change had been the impact of the nationalisation of the coal industry which had occurred in 1947 barely a decade before their study. For my study, it consists of the impact of "de-industrialisation" upon the North East, and the shock of the meteoric rise of the information technology (IT) and Telecoms industries in India over the past decade. For workers in the call centres of the North East and the subcontinent, the global context means that the spectre of their work being outsourced and off shored is ever present. The consequences of these events are present in the work place and the world outside the workplace in lives of workers. Dennis *et al.* (1956) took the broad ethnographic method of the anthropologist and turned its gaze away from the "exotic" to the "industrial". I make no claims to have produced any kind of anthropology. However, what this work can claim to offer is an example of what Burawoy *et al.* (2000) have called "global ethnography". This is a way to attempt to tell the stories of the lived reality of those working in an increasingly globalized world and to act as a counterpoint to the "grand theories" which choose to overlook and, all too often, discount their voices. Globalization is a term which has many meanings; there is no reason why it cannot be re-appropriated

and used to explore lives in multiple and seemingly dislocated settings rather than being a reason to deny then significance of those lives and experiences.

Key themes within this thesis

At this point I think it is useful to recap some of the key themes of the thesis. Some of these themes were apparent from the outset, others emerged very early in the research process. All of them became much more apparent and important during the course of the fieldwork. All of the themes have a common thread running through them, that of human agency and how individuals manage to engage and negotiate with very powerful structural economic forces. The ground where this engagement takes place is explored. Also the strategies which are employed by individuals in order to gain the best outcome as a result of this engagement are outlined.

There are four key themes, they are

- The space for agency within the labour process both in the work process itself and in the interface between work and non-work.

This theme explores how workers make the labour process work for them at work, and how they get work to fit in with or to support wider aspects of their lives.

- Work life interfaces and agency in shaping them.

The notion of the interface is commonly used within information technology. This theme attempts to utilise the term in order to demonstrate the process by which individuals manage the work and non work parts of their lives.

- Trajectories and careers, and the role of agency in shaping work life over time.

What became apparent at a very early stage of the research process was that turnover of labour in the call centre industry is very high. There was a literature about this, but it was primarily concerned with how labour might be retained. I was interested in where workers were departing to, and where call centre work was positioned on their career trajectories.

- How regional contexts shape working life and the possibility of agency.

This theme maps the wider background against which the processes and strategies deployed by individuals are played out. It also assesses how significant locality is in shaping individuals expectations of the world of work and the customs and practices of working life within those localities.

The structure of this thesis

The following outlines the broad structure of this thesis and offers readers a brief guide to the chapters and their contents.

Chapter one “Theories of the Global” examines the phenomenon of globalization and plethora of literature which the idea has spawned. It attempts to show how the roots of globalization are evident in older debates about post industrial society. It also attempts to evaluate globalization and to assess what place social action has within the globalization narrative; a narrative which is predominantly concerned with seemingly irresistible structural forces. Particular reference is made to the work of Burawoy and the notion of global ethnography.

Chapter two “Call Centre theory” explores the call centre and surveys the literature that has grown up around them. It also explains how the industry can be seen as a “case study” in order to explore themes of change and continuity in working life. These themes are important as they interlock with the structural narratives of globalization examined in chapter one. Reference is also made to one of social sciences central themes that of how change in workplace practices are linked to and seen as indicative of general social change on a much wider level.

Chapter three “Methodological issues and approaches to workplaces” outlines and explores the key methodological issues, the questions posed in chapters one and two raised. It discusses them with reference to existing studies of call centres and approaches to workplaces which attempt to examine social change at a more general level through them. The tools which were chosen for this research are discussed in depth and an assessment of their fitness for purpose is made.

Chapter four “Methods Used and notes on fieldwork” gives a predominantly narrative account of how the methodological issues were dealt with, and practical methods decided upon. As well as outlining the general strategy employed, its advantages disadvantages and their ethical implications; it also explains how methods were deployed, developed and modified in the light of experience on an ongoing basis

The next three chapters explore where the theoretical ideas and structural trends discussed in the two initial chapters meet individuals and their lives. They deal with the material that arose from my conversations with individuals working within the industry.

They explore their relationship with work, their lives outside of work and what I have termed their “life plans”.

In chapter five “Living the call centre-the experience of call centre work” the realities of working life in the call centre industry are explored by looking at the labour process and examining the accounts given by those within and around the industry. These include call centre agents, their team leaders, call centre performance and human resource managers. Additionally the experiences of those on the edges of the industry such as entrepreneurs, marketers and those involved with training call centre agents are also considered.

In chapter six “Interfaces: Work meets life and life meets work”, the notion of viewing the multiple junctures of work and non work life as an “interface” is examined. As mentioned above, this term has been used extensively in technological circles, but this chapter attempts to develop it as a social scientific concept in order to attempt to capture the complex interplay of multiple social forces which individuals negotiate with on a routine basis whilst trying to manage their working and non-working lives. Consequently it deals with the strategies that those in the industry employ to make this kind of work, work for them.

Chapter seven “Trajectories” examines the career trajectories of those I encountered in the industry and where work fitted with wider “lifeplans” is examined. The future is a key theme within this chapter. How those in the industry envisaged their future, and the part their working life played in their plans for it is the chapter’s prime concern. Connected to this issue are the patterns of behaviour that became apparent when working patterns were

examined. Three types of workers with different strategies the “stayers”, those “passing through” and the “serial agents” are described and discussed. Additionally this chapter explores not only processes of personal transition, but raises questions about the type and nature of the transition which the industry is undergoing and how this is linked to wider social change in the places where it is located.

Chapter eight “Localities and call centre work” attempts to evaluate the importance of place. Work and life does not happen in a vacuum it happens in particular places shaped by geography, history and politics. These are examined by way of the “biographies” of the regions examined in the thesis. This is a particularly important as the lives of individuals, their attitudes to life and work and their behaviour within the workplace is a product of these local contexts. The importance of such contexts is often swamped by the narrative of the global; instead the local’s importance as a mediator of global forces is examined and discussed.

The final chapter, chapter nine “Discussion and Conclusions-Global, Local ,Work, Life Interfaces” discusses and re-evaluates the key theoretical concerns outlined in the first two chapters in the light of the empirical material presented in chapters five, six, seven and eight. It then revisits the research themes which were outlined in the preceding section above. It reflects upon what has been discussed, what has been established and what needs further investigation. Finally, the chapter reflects upon the contribution of this thesis before offering some concluding comments.

Notes to Introduction

- (1) – The term “ethnography” has a long history within the Social sciences and has been used in a variety of ways. Within sociology there are two broad traditions of ethnography. The first equates ethnography with the practice of participant observation, as exemplified by the Chicago school. The second tradition is much broader and seeks to understand the research setting and the individuals within it as total cultures in a manner similar to that pioneered within anthropology, participant observation can be employed but equally it may not be. Within this thesis the term is used in the latter sense

CHAPTER ONE -THEORIES OF THE GLOBAL

The global and its impact

In order to address questions of work, employment, consumption and wider questions about how life is constituted and lived in the early twenty-first century, the question of the global and its impact needs to be given serious consideration. The global nature of the call centre industry and competition from around the globe means that an ever present global context forms the backdrop to the way in which the industry operates. Although this pressure is apparent in virtually all industries, it is particularly acute in the call centre industry. Consequently, all aspects - be they strategic decisions about location or relocation, decisions about staffing levels, everyday disputes and negotiations and the wider lives of those employed - take place within an increasingly global context. But, whilst the global cannot be ignored, neither should it be taken for granted, or accepted in an unthinking or uncritical manner. This chapter attempts to critically assess some of the explanations of the global which have appeared in the past two decades and ask what implications they have for this study.

The prefix of our times?

“Global” has become the prefix of our times. We talk of the “global economy”, “global recession”, “global networks” and are told that we should worry about “global warming”. The global is both large and overwhelming, but also pervasive and intimate at the same time. It is this high degree of visibility and a tendency to be difficult to pin down which has lead social scientists to devote a great deal of time and effort to studies of the global

and globalization in recent years. The answers to the questions about the nature of the global and the nature of globalization are diverse and broad ranging. There are two broad streams which most of the explanations can be assigned to. The first stream is concerned with globalization in a grand theoretical sense; this approach focuses on the macro aspects of the global. It is concerned with how the global is produced and structured by a process of globalization. Furthermore, these structural processes are seen as occurring at the expense of other levels of society, the global is produced by its consumption and reprocessing of the national the local and the individual.

The second stream or tendency sees the global not as consuming these other levels, instead there is interplay between them, and the global is composed of this interplay. This means that the lives of individuals both contribute to and are constituted by “the global”. This thesis is an attempt to rescue the narratives of individual lives, so often swamped or discounted by the macro type of globalization, and to demonstrate how “the global” needs to be understood through the lives of those who “live the global”. This will be done via a case study of the call centre industry. The industry is high globalized and is based upon the new technology that many claim to be the basis for globalization. As such call centres and those who work within them offer a way to explore globalization and its effects at both structural and individual levels

This chapter explores the parameters of the global in two ways: the first part outlines the rise of and unpacks some of the many varieties of globalisation theory, which have become commonplace within the social sciences over the last two decades.

The second part of the chapter attempts to ground some of this theory. Firstly, by asking how and where the impact of such theory may be evident and how it embeds itself within much more familiar fields such as the local. The issue subsequently addressed in the second part of the chapter, is one of practicality. It asks the question “How can the global be explored?” and considers the viability of research strategies aimed at “knowing the global”.

Theories of the global

There is a bewildering amount of literature on something called “globalization”. Globalization studies have become a highly influential and a very visible academic area cutting across the boundaries of many traditional subjects. The term means many things to many people and is used for many purposes. This brief survey cannot possibly hope to cover them all. Instead, it will identify some of the key currents and issues.

The first distinction to draw is a simple but highly important one. Globalization has become a mainstream term. For example, it is used extensively in the media, who often use the term with no definition at all beyond a vague idea that it refers to some process which is happening and is beyond our control.

Academic notions and theories of globalization, generally offer a more sophisticated view. Whilst there is broad agreement that there is some significant degree of structural socio economic change occurring which merits the use of the term “globalization”, the parameters and mechanisms by which it operates and its social consequences are extremely varied, for example Robinson (2007) lists no less than seven broad varieties of globalization within the academic sphere.

They are:

- World-systems theory
- Theories of Global Capitalism
- The Network Society
- Theories of Space, Place and Globalization
- Theories of Transnationality and Transnationalism
- Modernity, Post modernity and Globalization
- Theories of Global Culture

The second distinction, which is equally important, is that the study of globalization is not just about describing and analysing a social trend, as it is not possible to do this in any kind of objective manner. Globalization is a political term as the geographer Harvey (1990) has pointed out, and notions of globalization are often bound up with neo-liberal assumptions about a global economy. Globalization then is not only a social process but an ideological proposition and consequently a notion that requires critical engagement. The global and globalization can be seen as new extensions of, or a re-branding of the established hegemonic structures of capitalism, as global capitalism. The role of the mass media is itself, is something that has become truly global, and the very nature of the global media helps make the discourses of globalization increasingly real. The relationship between these processes is intimate and symbiotic. Examining the real and the rhetorical aspects of globalization, and critiquing them is then both inevitable and essential.

Globalization - ideas, disputes and boundaries

Globalization functions as both a descriptive term and a grand narrative in its own right. The implications which accompany such theories have, and continue to be rigorously debated. Globalization means different things to different people. The term is used in order to explain almost anything to do with change in the economic sphere. The loss of jobs, the scarcity of resources, the price of oil, the wholesale off shoring of industries, migration patterns all are deemed to be symptoms of globalization. Its use as a “catch all” term is paradoxically highlighted by the nature of those that oppose it. The “anti globalization” movement which was highly visible at G8 summits in the late 1990’s was a very loose coalition of greens, the far left, a variety of anarchist groups and often local groups with disputes with big business in the particular location of the meeting. To regard it as a coherent movement is clearly wrong, as is regarding globalization as a coherent entity. Globalization then is better understood as a field, rather than a singularity.

Yet, if we set aside the differences of opinion which exist over globalization, few commentators, if any would deny that something is going on, and that it is something that social scientists should be attempting to comprehend. Many of the issues in the globalization field overlap with the many other contexts. However, the boundaries of these contexts whether they are economic, historical or local are fluid and function primarily at a heuristic level. This is especially the case with technological issues. If we attempt to define the globalization thesis at its most basic Waters (1995) argues that globalization is essentially concerned with:

greater connectedness and deterritorialization

Waters (1995:136).

The interconnectedness that Waters is describing is often viewed as occurring within the economic, the political and the cultural sphere. The other important, if somewhat clumsy term, Waters uses is de-territorialization. This shows how globalization is also geographical and bound up intimately with the notions of both space and place. One of the key components of the globalization thesis is that place becomes less significant due to the overcoming of spatial division. Information technology is often cited as the technological driver which makes this possible as it overcomes space effortlessly rendering place irrelevant. This process is termed “time-space compression” (Giddens 1990) i.e. communication can now take place as quickly between London and Tokyo as between next-door neighbours. But, the significance of this process needs to be questioned. Firstly, is it really the case that space and place have become irrelevant due to the speed of communication? Secondly, is this anything new? Hasn’t this process been going on for centuries?

Globalization – A long time coming?

Globalization can be argued to be an ongoing long range process rather than something that has arrived in the last two decades. Indeed both Robertson (1992) and Arrighi (1994) argue that the globalizing process in the sense of an expansion of trade over ever larger distances can be traced back to the middle ages. Castells (1996) accepts that, what he terms a “world economy” has existed along the lines of that outlined above since at least the sixteenth century. But he argues that:

A global economy is something different: it is an economy with the capacity to work as, a unit in real time, or chosen time on a planetary scale. While capitalism is characterized by its relentless expansion, always trying to overcome limits in time and space, it was only in the late twentieth century that the world economy was able to become truly global on the basis of the new infrastructure provided by information and communication technologies and with the decisive help of deregulation and liberalization policies implemented by governments and international institutions

Castells (1996:101).

For Castells, we are now at the climax of the globalizing process, the current stage for him is not merely the latest installment of the story, it is instead the “endgame”. The answer to the problematic question of what exactly constitutes the difference between a world and international economy (which can be argued to have been realities for anywhere between one and three centuries) and a global economy (which is a relatively recent development over about the last three decades) appears to be two-fold for Castells. Firstly, there is now the ability to do business in real time via new technological innovations. Secondly, since the collapse of the Soviet bloc capitalism has been left unchallenged; it is the sole economic system, and with no rival, it is also unfettered. Hirst and Thompson (1996) have addressed the same question, but reach a very different conclusion. Hirst and Thompson are sceptical about the concept of globalization, but that said they make a serious attempt to overcome many of the problems of definition that beset the concept. They attempt to do this by constructing a Weberian “ideal type” of globalization. Within it Hirst and Thompson propose that a truly global economy should have certain distinct features:

In such a global system distinct national economies are subsumed and re-articulated into the system by international processes and transactions

Hirst and Thompson (1996:10).

Castells argues that this has already occurred. For him, the ability of the international money markets to function across national boundaries via technological systems is the thing that both constitutes and proves the existence of the global. But Hirst and Thompson attempt to differentiate the idea of the global from the idea of the international. They define an international economy as:

One in which processes that are determined at the level of national economies still dominate and international phenomena are outcomes that emerge from the distinct and differentiated performance of national economies

Hirst and Thompson (1996:10).

Castells overlooks this. His argument hinges upon the existence of a virtual world financial economy within which stocks, shares, currency, futures are being bought and sold around the globe at the stroke of a keyboard. Castells argument is that the process, by its very nature, changes everything. But does it? It certainly has an impact as the markets react quicker with major consequences. For example, the events of “Black Wednesday” and the panic reactions of government which sent the UK economy into recession in 1992 were made easier by such technology. However, such events had occurred previously and were not dependent upon technology. Castells argument is a “top down” one. For him, because there have been changes in the top strata of the world economic system, it follows that everything at all lower levels is also transformed. His argument focuses on the ways the game can now be played whilst at the same time it

neglects to ask who the players are. While it is true that there are multinational corporations who are bigger players than some nation states in the international market, this is not the case with other states which are still immensely important. This argument is of course further complicated and made more problematic by the global financial meltdown that occurred during 2008. The nature and range of the collapse seems to support the idea of global banking industry, and also serves to show the unstable nature of global systems which lack proper regulation. However, it does not follow that such systems cannot be regulated. Rather it is the case that national governments have chosen not to do so. This has meant national states bailing out and shoring up the global financial institutions. The events of the recent past make Hirst and Thompson's model of an international economy rather than that of Castells' notion of a truly global one look more convincing. What remains open is the question of how to regulate "global finance" in a way which will stop another meltdown occurring.

Arguably, this top stratum of the world economy is a poor reflection of the state of world trade. It is too volatile, too fickle, and too prone to fluctuation. Whilst its workings clearly have consequences for the wider economy so do many other factors. For example, investment decisions for a manufacturing venture will depend upon locations, materials, market accessibility, and the availability of labour with the right skills at the right cost. To see all economic life as determined by activity at this "highest" level is flawed. Studying this stratum can only give a partial and distorted indication of the state of the world economy. Hirst and Thompson (1996) argue that we are mistaking the international for the global, and that which occurs at the national level is still highly significant. Importantly this argument also recognizes that not just the economic power but also the

political will and political power of nation states are still important. Indeed, time seems to have increased the pertinence of Hirst and Thompson's argument, not only due to the collapse of the one area of the economy that had the best claim to be truly "global", but also in the light of rapid expansion in recent times of two vast economies with incredible potential, those of India and China.

The development of both of these economies can be attributed to political action to liberalize and develop these countries by their national governments. Whereas Castells' argument sees the global as both the cause and the consequence of the decline of the state's ability to influence the economic world, one does not have to look far to find contradictory evidence. If we examine the sweeping reforms overseen by Deng-Xiao-Ping in the early 1980's and Rajeev Gandhi in the early 1990's, they can be viewed from Castells' (1996) standpoint as "Statist" economies relinquishing their grip on economic affairs. But significantly neither state chose a "neo-liberal" path with the state retaining a major role in the facilitation of new economic development, whether by providing tax breaks to foreign investors or by constructing new infrastructure to allow new industries to develop. This does not sit easily within Castells' model or within the wider neo-liberal assumptions which surround globalization; as it clearly does not indicate the nation states' abdication from the economic sphere. Instead, a different process is at work, a process that is not so different to the trade patterns of the past. If we look at the historical development of global/international trade, it becomes apparent that nation states play a very important role. Hirst and Thompson argue that the world economy was more genuinely "international" in the period from 1870-1914 than it is today. Its key player was the British Empire, which had international military hegemony and was also

economically dominant via “gold standard” sterling. Commerce, the flow of capital and the migration of labour during this period, they argue, meant that:

the international economy was in many ways more open in the pre 1914 period than it has been at any time since”

Hirst and Thompson (1996:31).

The global/international economy then can be argued to be to trace its lineage back many centuries and many of the basic economic truths of global trade are the same today as they were in the nineteenth century. What are new are the rapid technological developments around information technologies that emerged in the closing decades of the twentieth century. The key questions are; what effect upon global trade do these technologies have in terms of the impact they have made upon its infrastructure? And what is the nature and potential size of the market for information technology (IT) goods in terms of hardware, software and related services? If IT and its related industries are seen as an enterprise which is subject to, and part the global economy rather than just a transformative revolutionary force, the question of technology’s role becomes much more tangible. IT is part of the world economy not solely a driver of economic change. In this sense rather than trying to understand globalization and the role of IT within it as a revolutionary model, it is perhaps more helpful to think of the world economy in terms of a model of international trade that has undergone a fairly radical makeover, but one which still retains all its pre-existing components.

Another element of globalization which contributes to Water’s idea of “interconnectedness” is cultural globalization. It is argued that as economic aspects of globalization accelerate so too does the homogenization of culture. This process can be

seen as political as it promotes the values of capitalism via certain goods and brand names; McDonalds, Marlboro, and Microsoft are just three examples from a very large list. However, this assumes that culture is constituted by consumption and very little else. Does buying and using so called “western goods” indicate the rejection of one’s own culture in favour of the culture where the goods originated from? Of course not; something more complex is happening. The desire to buy into “western culture” via branded goods in this way is better viewed as having something to do with questions of wealth, status and success within the contextual framework of the local culture rather than a rejection of it.

What very clearly emerges from this discussion of globalization is that there is no one definition of globalization which can adequately encompass the broad range of issues and perspectives associated with the idea. It is perhaps then folly to attempt to search for a definition of globalization, as it is also clear that this process is a highly dynamic one and any definition is likely to be of limited use as it will be rapidly superseded by new developments. Consequently rather than seeking a definition of the global it is more fruitful for the social scientist to consider the global as a problematic. One they should seek to consider within their studies on an ongoing basis.

Global meets Local or Global v Local?

The question of the local is examined in more depth later in the thesis; however, it is also an important component within a number of theories of globalization so it merits some discussion at this point too. The rise in the interest in the global has also been mirrored by an increased interest in the local. Theorists such as Roland Robertson (1992) have argued

that globalization should be understood as “glocalization”, a process whereby the global and the local have a much more intense relationship and have become more relevant to each other than ever before, again the national level is seen as diminished. The national is increasingly by-passed as global enterprises seek to locate parts of their businesses within certain localities rather than in certain countries or nation states. Robertson (1997) argues that “glocalization” is characterized by “complementary and interpenetrative relations” between the global and the local, in this way they can be seen as mutually constitutive. This of course may have cultural consequences but the driver is economic. As Smart (2007) points out the globalization is concerned with the creation of mass markets, mass consumption and the construction and utilization of a mass media in order to achieve these ends. We should not be surprised by this argues Smart as this facet of capitalism was pointed out by Marx as long ago as 1848. In a passage from the Communist Manifesto, Marx points out that capitalism has a propensity to create:

a cosmopolitan character to production in every country

Marx, (1992:83).

George Ritzer has written extensively on globalization and the global local relationship. Ritzer and Andrews (2007) argue that there is a tendency within globalization theory for the global and the local to be seen as a polarization, as dichotomous with the local in some way acting as a counterweight to the globalizing process, they characterize this as being exemplified by the phrase “think global act local”. This argument they point out is not altogether convincing. What is interesting is the idea Ritzer develops to build upon Robertson’s notion of glocalization. Ritzer proposes that there is another force at work which he terms “grobalization”:

globalization is bounded by “grobalization” (the imperialistic ambitions of nations, corporations, organizations and the like and that desire to impose themselves on various geographic areas) and “glocalization” (the interpretation of the global and the local resulting in unique outcomes in different geographic areas)

Andrews and Ritzer (2007) in Giulianotti, R. and Robertson, R. (2007:30).

This is useful as it allows the global and the local to coalesce rather than merely collide.

It also explains how globalization may be widespread and immensely powerful, but it does not produce a uniform or universal form in every location. Place then, even in the age of globalization matters, and from this it follows that the lives of those within these spaces matter too. These issues will be returned to later as part of a discussion on the consequences of globalization. But before that we turn to the role and place of technology within globalization.

Globalization and Technology

The relationship between the global and the technological is both important and intimate. Whilst it is possible to conceive of these concepts separately and define their contours, they require each other in order to fully reveal themselves. Explanations of global phenomena often require technological examples and explanations to support and sustain them, whilst arguments regarding the power of technology often cite its global impact as a key example. The role of technology within the process of social change is a theme that is at least as old as the social scientific project itself. Technological innovation and changing forms of workplace organization are nothing new, they have been central to debates about the transformation of industrial society since the mid twentieth century. At

the centre of this debate lies the proposition that; “if technology changes, then so does society”. This is the essential feature of what has become known as technological determinism. Whilst it is true that technology has a social impact there is also a need to consider such a proposition on a wider and more complex level. When we examine “technology”, we tend to concentrate on new and radically different techniques and processes. Consequently the consideration of technology is forward looking, and future orientated. Established technology is taken for granted, instead the spotlight falls upon the “cutting edge”. A famous example of this tendency was Harold Wilson’s vision of “a new Britain forged in the white heat of technology.” This example is, of course, self evidently the utilization of technology for ideological purposes. However, social scientists and other commentators have been no different, preferring to concentrate on novelty and radical transformation rather than continuity.

It can be argued that the ideological aspects which surround the idea of technology are tied up with its relationship with the enlightenment project, notions of progress and grand theory. This can be seen within what can be broadly termed “information/network society” literature of the 1990’s which as discussed earlier is exemplified by the work of Castells (1996). This literature is particularly striking as it arose at the time when the social sciences were besotted with ideas about Post-Modernity and the rejection of grand theoretical schemes was fashionable. But here was a traditional grand theory which was able to gain widespread acceptance. This was due to the way it explained and the place it afforded to new technology. This discourse I would argue became successfully integrated with ideas about globalization and formed an extremely powerful and persuasive axis, globalization was seen as possible due to new technology and globalization was used as

evidence to prove the power of that technology. Robinson (2007) characterizes Castells work as:

a 'technologicistic' approach to globalization. While his theory shares with world system and global capitalism approaches an analysis of the capitalist system and its dynamic, it is not the logic of capitalist development but that of technological change that is seen to exercise underlying causal determination in the myriad of processes referred to as globalization

Robinson (2007) in Ritzer (ed.) (2007:132).

Consideration of the technological aspects of globalization must also engage with the way in which technology functions at a symbolic and ideological level, as well as considering wider contextual aspects. For instance, what is often overlooked is the extent to which widespread change can occur within the world of work, without the fundamental relationships between the market, capital and labour changing. Arguably, new technologies serve and reinforce those relationships (or at least the dominant ones) rather than radically changing them. Technology is often less about transformation and more about the consolidation of capital's dominance. If we consider technological changes, such as the containerization of shipping, they are not at first sight radically new or different, and they occurred over a relatively long time-scale but have had far reaching consequences. Such changes are perhaps much more relevant to the state of world trade and the global market at this present moment than the latest IT product. The cutting edge is important but to concentrate on it solely without considering wider aspects misses the bigger picture. Without the containerization of world shipping, would a global economy be possible? Is the world economy exemplified upon the high tech "time space" compression offered by the internet or the ability to make shoes in China, and transport

them to Western Europe where they are still cheap enough to have a market and turn a profit? The technology which makes the latter possible is highly important but its arrival has not been as dramatic or glamorous as the devices of the so-called digital revolution. But as I have already mentioned, this is nothing new. The question of technology as a driver of social change in the age of globalization was also central to globalization theory's predecessor post-industrialism.

Globalization and Post-industrialism

A question which was central to post-industrial thinking, and which ranks highly in the globalization debate, is the issue of what a society's key commodities are. Change of this sort can be used to speculate about the general character of that society. The spotlight has fallen upon "information" and "knowledge". This combination acts as a powerful axis within post-industrial theory as it offered a way to explain changes in the workplace in terms of the labour process. It also allows the service sector of the economy to produce a recognizable commodity that usurps the place of industrial society's manufactured goods. Such a view also allows the rapid development of information technology in the post World War Two era to be seen as a powerful "driving mechanism" for the transition to a new form of society. Whilst talk of post-industrial society is comparatively rare in the social sciences at present, discussion of the "information society" or "information age" within the context of an increasingly globalized economy abounds across every discipline which is concerned with techno-human relationships. The notion that a new form of society is ushered in by the rise of a new technology is powerful, and at face value, appealing. It is undeniable that the information technology explosion of the late

twentieth/early twenty first century has had a profound impact upon the economic and social relationships in our society. The progressive miniaturization of the microchip and the development of the high output battery have produced visible and lived differences in a remarkably short space of time. However, the question of whether the societies which have produced the laptop/palm top PC, the internet and mobile video phone have done so because their “modus operandi” have changed fundamentally, or will do so as a consequence of these inventions, is something else.

This question leads us back to part of the nineteenth century theorists legacy, that of structure and action. The tendency for social theories and their supporters to stand either side of the structure/action divide led to Dawe (1970) arguing that two distinct sociological traditions exist. Post industrial theory, globalization theory and theories of the information society stand firmly within the structure camp; individuals are the products of their times rather than their architects. This is not to say that such theories ignore the individual, they do not. Allied with post modern thinking many information age theorists see the possibility for individuals to express their identity more freely than ever before. However, the power of individual action is circumscribed. Collective action is deemed as something which may well have been appropriate in the industrial age but is now deemed anachronistic and inappropriate and no longer able to transform social relationships within the dominant social structures. Instead, individuals’ opportunities to manage and transform their own lives via lifestyle choices via a process of reflexivity have been stressed in the work of Beck (1992) and Giddens (1990) and Bauman (1998). Individuals may transform themselves in order to adapt to the structural context they find themselves in, but changing that structure is seen as beyond them. Central to Castells’

(1996) thesis is the idea of informational “flows”. For Castells, the speed at which information and capital can be exchanged is a central characteristic of the “Network Society” (1996). The global communications network for Castells is more than just a tool for global capitalism; it is part of its very being, its nervous system. Its effects are not limited to just the economic realm, it also transforms social relationships. Thus, information technology is the determining factor in the “network society”. Structural transformation can therefore be seen the consequence of technological developments.

The debt to 19th century social theory is clear, such thinking follows a base/superstructure model in the manner many have explained Marx’s analysis of capitalism. It also allows Castells to add a “new chapter” to the story of industrial development. Krishan Kumar (1995) argues that information theorists explain the impact of knowledge on the world of work in two ways:

One is the upgrading of the knowledge content of existing work, in the sense that information technology adds rather than subtracts from the skill of workers. The other is the creation and expansion of new work in the knowledge sector, such that information workers come to predominate in the economy

Kumar (1995:23).

If we assume that “information work” equates to what was traditionally termed “white collar work” we can trace this theme back to the post industrial theorists of the nineteen sixties and seventies. Bell in “The coming of post-industrial society” (1974) characterized the predominance of white collar work as central to a post industrial economy. However, numbers can be misleading. Braverman (1974) argued that whilst white collar work was becoming predominant, it was no longer what it once was, i.e. highly skilled and allowing

the worker a high degree of autonomy. Instead, Braverman suggested that the “proletarianisation” of white collar work was taking place, via the extension of “Taylorist” management of the labour process from the shop floor to the back office. Braverman’s point is important as it suggests continuity with the labour process that dominated industrial society. It also shows why we should be wary of technological determinism. Braverman focuses on the experience of workers and the management of the workplace; these are clearly in the realm of “action.” Therefore, if we are to examine the claims of information theorists such as Castells, their account of the labour process must be explored.

Castells (1996) argues that the workers of the network society fall into two broad categories. Firstly the majority of the working population he terms “generic labour”. These workers have no specific information skills, nor do they appear to be contributing to the direct development or maintenance of the network. In industrial terms they are unskilled or at best semi skilled workers. Castells’ second category of workers are described as ‘informational producers’, Castells sees these workers as having a privileged position within the labour market as they are the programmers and code writers which the network requires, a technocracy for want of a better term. These skills make them highly employable, and as such they are highly autonomous. Such arguments are not new. Byrne (2002, 1) points out that this distinction looks very like the Leninist idea of the “aristocracy of labour”. Nor is such a division unique in post industrial thought, Gorz (1982) divides the work force into what he terms the “traditional working class” and the “neoproletariat” which he also refer to as the “non -class of non-workers”. The former group is highly skilled, essential to the productive process, and can derive their identity

from their labour. They are, argues Gorz, an ever decreasing minority. The latter are workers who, when and if, they work do so to fill particular, often time-limited, jobs. They lack security and they do not derive their identity from their labour. Both Gorz and Castells are discussing what Marx termed the “reserve army of labour.” This supply of workers is ready to replace existing labour and, as such, undermines the capacity for resistance amongst the existing work force. Again, it can be argued that if this analysis is correct there are grounds for seeing these developments as having continuity with industrial society rather than evidence of its end.

Nation-states and the global

However, this avenue of argument also needs to consider a number of other factors. As Byrne (2002, 1) has argued the question of workers ability to resist the dictates of global capital is not purely economic. The “information society” theorists often make the mistake of seeing the economic interconnectedness that new communications technology has made possible as synonymous with the decline of political power in general, and in particular the nation state, whose obituary has now been in production for about four decades. Regarding the capacity for workers to take collective action, it has been national laws which have made massive differences. If we take France and the UK as examples their economies are comparable in many ways, but the rights they afford to their working populations could hardly be more different. However, national policies may also affect the movement of global capital. For Castells, the ‘flow’ of global capital moves to where conditions are most favourable. This is of course is not a new phenomenon, it is political economy such as Adam Smith, John Stuart Mill or Marx would have recognized. But,

unlike today's theorists they all agreed upon was the capacity of the state to regulate the activities of capital. In short, politics still matters. The action of states upon global economic structures still matters. The bail out of the banking sector in 2008 challenges the idea that states have far less capacity to shape and influence the demands of global economics. Thus, the political management and regulation of industry by national, regional and local government cannot be ignored. To use Castells terms, capital may operate in 'flows' but political structures still retain the power to divert the river.

Models of change and changing models

What should by now be apparent is that post industrial theory, information society theory, and many models of globalization work in a manner that stresses and promotes ideas of large scale discontinuity with the past and cites technology as the determining element. The real picture is not so simple, whilst modification has occurred, often quite radically; continuity is visible and remains important. For example, information society theorists in their haste to see information and knowledge as "dominant commodities" defining a new era have neglected the importance of those same commodities within industrial society. As Kumar puts it:

The information society theorists can be attacked...for their short sighted historical perspective

Kumar (1995:17).

Kumar cites James Beniger's work which argues the so-called digital revolution of the late twentieth century was the culmination of a "control revolution" which began almost a century before. The development of this control system, not just the technology,

according to Beniger (1986) is what characterizes industrial society. Industrial technology could not reach its potential without an appropriate industrial model of organization.

Webster and Robbins (1987) also make a similar point. They argue that an essential development in the rise of industrial society was “Taylorism,” the application of “scientific” management to the production process. Taylorism, in the way it seeks to refine the division of labour via the separation of tasks and their standardization, is overwhelmingly about knowledge. It seeks to apply knowledge to work, in order to make it measurable and, ultimately, profitable. Taylorism is often seen as synonymous with “Fordism” which is essentially the use of a moving production line organized on Taylorist principles to mass produce manufactured goods. However, the two, whilst they combined to great effect in factory production, are not inseparable. Car production is often cited as *the* Taylorist industry and it certainly provides us with some useful examples of the power of scientific management. As Webster and Robbins (1987) point out, Taylorism is not confined to manufacturing settings its general principles are applicable in virtually all workplaces. Whilst technology opens new possibilities for products and the systems used to produce them, it is not capable of organizing the labour process that demands the modification of human action. Technological innovation alone is not enough. At one level this is obvious, different factories, companies and organizations in the same industries operate in different ways and have different characteristics or cultures if you will. But it is a variability which makes sense if organization is seen as the driver, with technology as its tool rather than technology alone.

Towards a “weightless” economy? Infrastructure and products

The facilitation of global trade via technology which makes “time space compression”, and real time transactions a possibility has been a major issue for theorists of Globalization e.g., Harvey (1990) Giddens (1990) and of course Castells (1996). As already discussed technology is not just a facilitator of global trade though, it is also a product in its own right, both part of the essential infrastructure of global trade but also one of its major product lines. Throughout my research, many of the operations I contacted spoke about their products and services as being “weightless.” By the use of this metaphor they meant that the good(s) or service(s) did not involve the physical delivery of good(s) or service(s) to a specific location. Instead, the product or service could be activated or enabled via remote means, “down a wire”. A virtual rather than a physical interaction occurs. This applies to most IT software products, which can be distributed, serviced and updated from the web. The call centre is an example which offers an opportunity via which it may be possible to get a glimpse of an emerging “weightless economy.” They are part the supporting infrastructure. Call centres can sell “weightless products”. One such product is digital satellite television a customer may wish to buy additional services, usually sporting events or perhaps extra movie channels and the product arrives down the wire in minutes. Call centres are also used to sell “solid/heavy “traditional products. For example, “DELL” brand laptop PC’s are usually sold online as Dell have no traditional branded retail outlets. Initial enquiries are made on line and transactions with a call centre based on the Indian subcontinent. There are several significant aspects about such a purchase, firstly as has already been pointed out

“DELL” offers PC’s at a lower cost than many of its competitors due to the fact that it has no traditional retail outlets and, in fact, it uses this as a selling point. Secondly, although the transaction is processed in India, the actual goods may be located anywhere in the world and dispatched from that location.

The call centre makes possible the separation of sales or customer services from sites of production and distribution of manufactured products. This is novel in terms of the extent to which it is now occurring. Traditionally customer service was done by local dealer networks or the factory itself. This example serves to illustrate how technology functions as part of and as a major creative force within the development of global capitalisms infrastructure. That same infrastructure also makes technology products more easily and readily available. Another way to put this is that call centres and the technological foundations upon which they are built are not only able to service “weightless” products of the type discussed above, but they are capable of making traditional “heavy” i.e. tangible goods metaphorically “lighter” by reducing costs. Systems built upon technological innovation can be seen as having this effect throughout history, as transportation technology has moved on, goods have become effectively “lighter”, i.e. more goods can be transported at a cheaper cost which in turn makes them more competitive. Just as the transportation of goods by ship became cheaper as ships got bigger and more efficient, due to the advent of steam in the 19th century, the process of containerization in the latter half of the twentieth century allowed goods to remain “light” at the point of disembarkation from the ship. Previously, the time and costs associated with unloading cargos and the need for, and the consequent cost of dock labour added “weight” in the form of cost to those goods. Increasingly, “weight” (cost) is now saved

not only by efficient transportation, but also by the transformation of related services, such as customer service which now is far more likely to happen via an interaction with a call centre rather than on a face-to-face basis. Technology also offers the possibility of eliminating the human aspect of this interaction by getting the customer to interact with their database directly via the internet. Cost is reduced and the goods become consequently “lighter”. This makes a global economy a viable proposition rather than just a technical possibility.

The nature of technological goods of course differs from more traditional goods. Technological goods and services are developing and producing new markets at a much faster rate than the market for say cars. Technological development is still rapidly advancing rendering products and services obsolete by offering the possibility of selling updated products, and also to produce and supply new products to new markets as technological development advances. This of course is in addition to supplying existing technology to existing markets which are demanding more and more goods. For example, the mobile phone market in India is already huge but is nowhere near its full potential.

The technological aspects of the infrastructure, coupled with an increasing demand for IT based products (a demand in which the infrastructure itself plays a central part) ensures their technological reproduction and evolution. Markets can now be reached without the need to send real salesmen around the globe. But companies still locate in places, why is this the case? The companies and operations which I encountered during the course of my research, located in particular places for a number of reasons, the labour force, tax breaks, accessibility, and even the availability of parking spaces fixed businesses which at first glance appeared to be able to locate anywhere, within certain localities.

The metaphor of “weightlessness” has its limitations. Yes, the product itself is “weightless” in terms of marketing, distribution, and even servicing, but the labour to produce those products is in relatively *fixed* locations. Yes, such business could locate elsewhere, but could not locate just anywhere. Whilst technological innovation has rendered some traditional infrastructural questions largely irrelevant, it has little impact upon issues such as the labour force and the level of skills available.

Technology, applications, ideologies and limitations

Technology can be viewed as part of the production process, and also as a product in itself. However, to get a truer picture we must also look at how technologies are utilized. All technologies are not equal, this is largely self evident. But what is often not apparent in literature concerning IT is that it is *how* the technology is used that adds value to it. Digital fibre optic networks can be used in the process of answering directory enquiries or for trading on the international stock market two processes which are clearly not the same nor equal in value. These distinctions around how IT is used are evident within the business literature around technology that speaks of “knowledge based IT” and recognizes the stratification within the industry something that social scientists have thus far struggled to grasp. Garnham (1998) points this out and attributes it the ideological aspects which surround technological issues, in a similar manner to the way they are entangled with global issues:

Confrontation with the theory of the Information Society, both as science and ideology, is now unavoidable. Here is a theory of communication massively presenting itself as both a way of understanding the present historical moment and the dominant development of trends in society and at the same time as the favoured legitimating ideology for the dominant economic and political power holders

Garnham 1998, in Webster (Ed) (2002:165).

Technology is highly important, there are limitations as to what it can explain, and some of the explanations offered are ideological prescriptions dressed in a persuasive, but thin coating of technological determinism. Technology cannot be the answer to the questions of why some places have developed IT based industries, and why some of these areas have developed the sectors of that industry with a higher knowledge base. To do this requires a socio-economic analysis that encompasses but also looks beyond technology. An analysis is required that appreciates how a place's culture, history and people are also part of the story.

Exploring the global

Exploring the global is no easy task; the first problem is deciding what it is. What we have already established how difficult this is, as Jessop (2001) has argued what he terms the “myths of globalization” all too often:

ignore the messiness of the world and the many inconvenient factors that this produces

(Jessop 2001:440).

When considering how we might explore the global what becomes apparent is that it is embedded within a multitude of other issues and contexts. What the geographer Herod

(2003) has termed “labour geographies” are identifiable, but not nearly as well defined as they once were, again, things have become “messy”. Places are no longer synonymous with communities involved in the same occupation. It can be argued that the most identifiable instances of this are in traditional specialized industries which become more visible as they decline. For example, McBride’s (2006) study of Tyneside’s remaining marine engineering workforce provides an illustration of such a process.

So where is the global? I wish to argue that the global is embedded in technologies, within localities and most significantly within the lives of those who live within it. The notion of seeing the global as a composite comes across strongly within the work of John Eade (1997) and also of Martin Albrow (1997). Writing as the editor of a collection entitled “Living the Global City-Globalization as a local process” Eade explained the books approach;

our research strategy has focused on how peoples everyday lives are caught up in the globalization process

Eade (1997:3).

If the global is entwined with the everyday lives of individuals, the knowing it becomes an ethnographic enterprise. A similar point is made by Burawoy *et al.* (2000) who have put forward the idea that diverse, locally situated studies can be used to illustrate:

ethnography’s concern with concrete lived experience can sharpen the abstractions of globalization theories into more precise and meaningful conceptual tools

Burawoy *et al.* (2000: xiv).

Therefore, it can be said that instead of being further diminished by the structural demands of globalization, the individual and their lived experience is of greater

importance to researchers than ever before, as without it the global becomes unknowable and inaccessible. As Eade puts it:

we want to demonstrate how the contested arena which surrounds globalization can be related more specifically to the everyday life of the people

Eade (1997:11).

Articles written for both the Eade and Burawoy texts mentioned above provide further illustrations about how the global is accessed more fully if it is do so via an understanding of lives within places rather than just an understanding of the place alone.

Martin Albrow's article "Travelling beyond local cultures: Socioscapes in a global city" (1997) looks at how the idea of community might be re-imagined, Albrow notes how traditional models have seen community as being part of a distinct local culture, one which immigrants adjust to and become integrated into. However, in a global city such as London, such a model becomes unsustainable. Albrow argues that we are faced with a choice; to either see community as irretrievably lost or to re-imagine it. He concentrates on the lives of those living in Tooting, (South West London) using information gathered via in depth interviews to illustrate his ideas he draws on Appadurai's (1990) notion of the "ethnoscape". He then argues that what is happening in a place like Tooting is that there are multiple "Co-existing Social spheres" and that these "differing coexisting realities" can be seen "socioscapes." These are differently constituted for individuals and the wider groups to which they belong but Albrow sees these diversities co-existing as the essential ingredient of a community in a global city. Sheba George's "Dirty nurses and Men who play: Gender and Class in Transnational Migration" which appears in Burawoy *et al.* (2000) also illustrates that the researcher needs to look beyond the immediate environment if wider important realities are to be grasped. The article shows

how Keralan women working in high status and well paid jobs in New York, remained circumscribed by the cultural assumptions about their work and status which were imported to the new spatial setting from their original cultural context. This led to the strange situation whereby, the women were the bread winners but the men retained far more social status. Without the application of a global template and an ethnographic approach, making sense of such a community would be very difficult indeed.

I wish to do something similar but I wish to explore not just individuals in communities or individuals in workplaces, or individual's private lives. Instead I wish to show how the global constitutes and colonizes all of these areas, and as such the global is something which is embedded within lives at multiple levels. These lives are dynamic, not static; they have trajectories which need both mapping and explaining.

Investigating a global industry- The case of the call centre

It can be argued that if we accept that infrastructure is more than just physical structures, we must see "globalization" as a process which, must be seen in terms wider than just economics. The context which allows the call centre industry to operate on a trans-national basis consists of a number of elements which make it possible. Some of these elements are relatively stable, such as the capability of technological systems to make trans-national interaction possible and the existence of a common language between the country of call origin and the country of call destination. Some elements though are relatively volatile; competition for business is fierce, meaning that work is often insecure and susceptible to both outsourcing to third party companies and off shoring to locations elsewhere in the global market in pursuit of ever cheaper cost. The global allows, and

encourages, the industry to operate from many locations but, in turn, it also ensures that those locations remain relatively insecure, with the possibility of being usurped by somewhere similar. This, in turn, is useful in keeping the industry competitive, but problematic for those working within it.

The potential that their work would be moved elsewhere via the process of off shoring was a topic which arose during the fieldwork for this thesis. This occurred not only amongst workers, but also amongst managers, and not only in the North East of England but also on the Indian subcontinent. Off shoring is often characterized as a West to East process, with work moving from say the North East of England to Mumbai, India. But the spectre of off shoring moves with the work, it is not diminished by the journey. Concerns about the “off shoring” not of call centre work but of industrial production in general are voiced in India, but the potential destination is different, it is China. Call centre work of course faces competition from other destinations with English speaking workforces, in recent years Africa has emerged as an off shore call centre destination with South Africa leading the way followed closely by Kenya. Both destinations have received considerable international marketing at trade fairs such as Call Centre Expo.

It is misleading to view globalization as a process that causes the wholesale movement of call centre enterprises across spaces in the search for lower and lower costs, in a “race to the bottom” (Jessop 2001:441). This does occur, but the process is not just a one-way street, instead the idea of a “spatial fix” (**See note (1)**) as suggested by the geographer Doreen Massey (Massey 1973, 1984 and 2007) is far more convincing. But the myth of an industry seeking ever cheaper labour and privileging that commodity over all the other

factors involved with running a successful operation is a very powerful one. As the geographers Castree *et al.* (2004) point out, within all capitalist enterprises:

locational decisions of capitalist firms are infinitely more complex than simply seeking out cheap workers. The skill levels, compliance, initiative and work rate of labourers are all vitally important, as are the regulating environment and the relative location of the place being considered. Nonetheless the myth of cheap labour exerts a powerful hold

(Castree *et al.* 2004:20-21).

The following example reflects the geographers Castree *et al.*'s (2004) ideas far better than the far simpler and more often heard "cheap labour" explanation. In 2004, Lloyds-TSB off shored its Tyneside operation, but retained its nearby Wearside centre. Furthermore, these operations, although 6,000 miles apart, do not operate in isolation, they have a working relationship. The Sunderland operation is responsible for the monitoring and call marking for the call centre in Mumbai as well as for the operation in Swansea. The context that the call centre industry operates in is one in which the industry is highly mobile as a consequence of technological innovation, but restricted by more traditional parameters regarding space, skills and labour force. The question of where to locate call centres is not particularly restricted by technological concerns. It is true that they could not function without a certain level of telecommunications infrastructure i.e. high-speed phone lines, in terms of physical hardware but as these have become increasingly commonplace, the costs of utilizing the infrastructure and its reliability have become bigger issues than just its availability. Consequently, this means that call centre operators have an ever-wider range of options available to them when they are considering where to locate. The rapidly changing nature of telecommunications

hardware coupled with a need to remain competitive also contributes towards the industry's nomadic tendencies (capital investment in new hardware within a call centre is required on a very regular and short term basis, typically 5-10 years) (Contactbanel, 2003). Employers look to mitigate these fixed capital technology costs by minimizing overheads in terms of rent, taxes and, of course, wages. However, it is the same technology that makes this global "merry go round" possible. However as Coyle (2010) points out localities are important and have an impact upon where call centres locate.

What are essential are call agents, staff; in particular those who have lives which are able to accommodate call centre work. Consequently, if we can understand what it is to "live the call centre" it allows us an insight into the processes of globalization which are central to the industry. The call centre industry then, serves as way to access wider issues. The industry itself has been subject to much academic and non academic enquiry ever since the mid nineteen nineties. The subsequent chapter will outline how and why the call centre industry is a particularly useful conduit for researchers. It will explore the basic but essential question "What is a call centre?" and map the shape and scope of the industry, before moving on to look at how theorists have attempted to understand it.

As we have established, whilst the exact meaning and definition of globalization can be debated and disputed from many angles, it is perhaps more pertinent to leave questions of definition aside and address the issue of the consequences of globalization, particularly what difference it makes to lives. The consequences of the global economy can be seen in many aspects of social and economic life, and commentators have tended to focus upon recent and dramatic transformations. Difference and diversity are often highlighted.

For instance the geographers Castree *et al.* (2004) begin their exploration of “Spaces of work” by giving brief biographical sketches of a variety of workers in very different jobs from all around the world. They begin by asking a very important question:

What do these stories tell us?

Castree *et al.*(2004:5)

They argue that despite the evident differences between their workers there are also what they term “deep-seated similarities” (2004:6) those similarities they claim are broadly social and geographical. It can be argued that this has always been the case, the global does not arrive overnight it needs to be established and embedded over a period of time. If we look at geography, this can be seen as a factor in determining an area/regions place in the global order of things. However it is also important to look at the biographies of the workers in those places and focus not only on where they are at present, but on where they are going to. In other words trajectories are very important, the empirical material which emerged from interviews with those working within the call centre industry made it very clear that for the majority of workers call centre work was not a destination it was more often than a staging post en route to the career they really wanted. They either entered the industry with an exit strategy in mind or formulated one whilst working within it, often due to new skills they developed as part of their jobs. This makes sense as has been argued above the global if nothing else is a dynamic process, consequently it makes sense that the lived experience of globalization is also a dynamic experience.

This chapter has attempted to unravel some of the ways in which the processes and consequences of globalization have been addressed. It can be argued that those approaches can be seen to fall to either side of the central divide within social scientific

explanations, that of structure and action. Approaches such as Castell's (1996) are clearly structural and this has implications for how questions of space and place are approached. Effectively the questions of space and place are about economic geography. A structural based perspective is happy with an answer which explains where things are located and produces an explanation for how that is possible. For Castells it is technology that answers the question i.e. industries locate in particular places because they can. This is a process that has been enabled by new communications technologies. Globalization is explained within this model as essentially an interaction of capital and technology. Fair enough, however what this perspective fails to do is move on to questions about lives. Globalization can be viewed as a process that shapes and informs the lives of individuals. If this perspective is followed it is Action rather than Structure which is prioritized. Burawoy's "Global Ethnography" approach seeks to understand globalization by focusing on it as a lived experience. Such an approach of course does need to take account of the structures within which action occurs in order to work and so it cannot ignore structural issues. The difference then is one of focus. This research whilst informed by structural conceptions of globalization has the lived experience of the global as its focus.

Notes to Chapter One

(1) It should be noted that Massey used this term prior to Harvey (1982, 1985). Also, Massey uses the term in a different way to Harvey. She uses it to refer to the historical processes by which industrial production has located and relocated to specific geographical areas. Harvey instead concerned with the problem of over accumulation within capitalist production and his notion of the “spatial fix” refers to the process by which the crisis of over accumulation is relieved by moving capital or labour to a different territories. This solution relieves the surplus by moving it into a region that has a higher demand for it. For Harvey over accumulation also involves the creation of new markets. If demand does not exist for excess accumulation, then one can be created by opening up new markets.

CHAPTER TWO –CALL CENTRE THEORY

Living the global? Living the call centre

The call centre industry is central to this thesis, but the thesis is not about the call centre industry per se. The industry instead provides an arena and an opportunity due to its proximity to the global economy within which questions about globalized work and globalized life can be asked. Interestingly, call centres and globalization theory are contemporaneous, both flourishing and becoming prominent from the mid 1990's onwards.

One of globalization theory's key concerns has been the colonization of the national and the local by the global, and also as we have seen in the preceding chapter the role played by technology in the process. When I initially approached the call centre as a research area, I was also interested in the themes of colonization and technology. Colonization, as it appeared to me that the high degree of control call agents were under within the workplace was being extended to areas beyond the workplace, under the guise of "teambuilding" social activities. The role of technology and its utilisation as a way to control and direct call agents and minimize their control over the labour process was also initially thought to be an area which would be prominent. When this apparent colonization of leisure time was explored with workers, it turned out to be no more of a pressure than attending the office Christmas party might be in any workplace. As for the technology and surveillance, workers rarely found this to be highly problematic and related the ways in which they dealt with, contained and subverted technologically driven

control strategies (most frequently by simply ignoring them). But what did emerge instead and became very important was the theme of how and where the worlds of work and non work interface, and how managing this interface was an important an ongoing project for those working in call centres. This is an idea which I will return to in greater depth later, but it is important to flag the issue up at this stage as it illustrates what I mean by “living the call centre”. This idea is derived from studies such as Dennis *et al.* “Coal is our Life“ (1956) which demonstrates how the production of coal in the town of “Ashton” in South Yorkshire during the 1950’s not only dominated the economy of the area but also the social relations of the area in general. In the same tradition, I am asking where call centre work fits within the lifescapes of those who work within the industry. The idea of the lifescape draws on Albrow’s (1997) notion of the socioscape and includes questions about gender, family structure and trajectories of life and work. These aspects are focussed on deliberately in order to redress the balance, by shifting the focus away from issues of structure onto those which stress individuals and how they act within and attempt to renegotiate their relationships with those structures. I contend that call centres provide a good case within which these issues can be addressed. Ragin and Becker in their (1992) work “What is a case” point out the need for well chosen case studies and the need for rigour when examining them. My choice of this case is a based on a desire to say something about *who* the people in this industry are, and also to say, that although work is important there is more to their lives than work alone. These narratives certainly exist within existing literatures and traditions, bringing them to the fore, evaluating them and taking them forward is what this section aims to do.

This chapter then deals with four strands of literature which concern call centre work and the wider areas of social life which I wish to explore and access via their relationship with the industry. They are, firstly a literature which is specifically about the call centre industry, secondly the wider literature about the labour process in general, thirdly, a literature which deals with issues of place and the spatial location of work, and finally the literature which deals with the re-imagination of both work and wider social life.

The call centre and other cases

The rise of what has become known as the call centre industry over the past fifteen to twenty years has been swift and has had a widespread impact, not only on those who have found employment within the industry, but also upon anyone who wishes to access customer services, make enquiries, or buy certain goods. On the surface, the call centre phenomenon looks novel and appears to be a prime candidate to bolster the position of information society theorists. Undoubtedly, the development of, and the falling cost of complex communications infrastructure in recent history made such operations viable and the element of “time space compression” which the technology affords allowed calls made in the UK to be answered in India or any other part of the world if required. However, can call centres be seen as “high tech” industries? The dichotomy of “informational producers” and “generic labourers” which Manuel Castells describes in “The Rise of the Network Society” (1996) would at first glance appear to fit the industry very well, with the categories being respectively applied to those involved with maintaining and fine tuning the technology for optimum performance and the call centre agents working from scripts with limited autonomy.

Alternatively, it is possible to see the call centre as “post-industrial” in the classical sense as put forward by Daniel Bell (1974). It is undoubtedly a service industry and its workforce white-collar. Additionally, in the UK call centre clusters have emerged in areas where traditional heavy industries have declined. The call centre can also be explained rather better in the language of industrial society as something made possible by technology and rendered viable by Taylorist methods of organization. The schema Castells (1996) proposes lacks a place for the “human resources consultant” or the “performance manager”; whilst Bell’s explanation ignores the issue of skills remuneration and the status of workers within the industry. The call centre and its workforce offers the sociologist an opportunity to examine what appears to be a post industrial workplace, via its location, organization and the lives of those who work within it. This is possible via the process of “casing” which has been outlined by Ragin (1992) this idea will be further discussed in the methodology chapters. However, at this point, it is sufficient to point out that within the case of the industry casing proceeds by focusing on places, and in turn a further casing brings us to individual lives. Casing is a research tactic, a process by which the focus of research can be made increasingly acute. The use of this tactic allows the investigation of the many narratives, which include narratives of space, place and lives which in total constitute the industry. It also allows the trajectories of those narratives to be mapped. Comparisons can be drawn and attention drawn to both difference and convergence amongst these narratives.

The focus so far has been upon the way in which sociological thinkers have attempted to describe the development of industrial and post-industrial societies via the production of

theoretical schemata. What is required is the testing of these ideas via the medium of the lives of those who work in the industry, this way it can serve as a substantive example via which some of these ideas can be tested. So at this point a survey of the ways in which the call centre has been theorized by academic commentators in general and theorists of the labour process in particular is required.

Call centres, 21st century factory work? - Call centres and labour process theory

Call centres are often referred to as the factories of the 21st century by academics e.g. Fernie and Metcalfe (1998) in the media, or sometimes by workers themselves.

(See note (1)) It can be argued that there are strong residual industrial cultures in areas such the North East of England, Williams (1973) and it is sometimes suggested that those who now work in call centres would have worked in factories in the relatively recent past. However, this does not mean that working in a call centre is equivalent to working in a factory. Such a statement is highly problematic on a number of levels, but it is one which needs to be addressed and serves as a useful starting point for this discussion. At a general theoretical level it raises the issue of post-fordism Kumar (1995) summarizes post fordism's economic aspects as being:

the rise of a global market and of global corporations, and the decline of national enterprises and the nation state as the effective units of production and regulation; flexible specialization and the dispersal and decentralization of production, replacing mass marketing and mass production; flatter hierarchies and an emphasis on communication rather than command in organizations; vertical and horizontal disintegration, and an increase in subcontracting, franchising, internal marketing within firms, and the hive off of functions; rise in the number of flexi-time, part-time, temporary, self-employed and home workers.

Kumar (1995:52).

The call centre industry contributes to many of the above processes and is also subject to a number of these trends. However, the exact nature of the labour process in call centres is problematic and not clear cut. There is not just one model of call centre work organization, as Taylor *et al.* (2002) have pointed out. There are also often contrasting styles of management deployed within the industry. Houlihan (2002) found four different styles to be evident amongst the workplaces she surveyed. But this should come as no surprise. If we consider the traditional industrial factory there are many different types of factories with very different labour processes operating within them. This, of course has consequences for those working within each differing process. This and the role played by technology in these processes was explored by Blauner (1964) who differentiated between craft production (e.g. printing), machine tending (e.g. textile production) assembly line work (e.g. automobile production) and new industries such as the chemical industry which he saw as sharing the characteristics of autonomy for workers which had been evident in craft production. Blauner's ideas have been debated and disputed widely, and here is not the place to dissect them again. However, they do serve to illustrate how differing types of factory work exist, and how these affect the experience of workers within them. The model of team working employed in most call centre operations superficially appears to be very similar to the "Japanised" team working model which is associated with the car industry. This is outlined in detail by Garrahan and Stewart (1992) and Graham (1995) amongst many others. The central feature of this is that peer pressure within the team and competition with other teams is central to boosting productivity. The processes that the team carries out are also subjected to taylorist scientific management.

What goes on in a call centre environment is different. Tasks and the call process are highly monitored and subject to Taylorist management just as in a traditional Fordist setting. But if we consider what is produced in call centres and the way it is produced, things look rather different. The “product” is either the completion of a sales transaction or the resolution of a customer service issue, be it anything from a general enquiry to a complaint. Whereas teams in automobile production rely on each other to complete their designated tasks and teams cannot function if the team prior to them fails to complete their task, there is no such chain of dependency within call centre settings. Calls are routed to individual agents by software systems and if they arrive at the wrong place it is just a matter of transferring the call. Teams are essentially units working on similar tasks or groups which are formed primarily for coaching purposes. Although within a team setting, the tasks agents engage in are in no way dependent upon each other. Call agents are usually given incentives which relate to their own performance and sales, not that of a team as a whole. This means that the process itself is flexible, and that teams can be reconfigured and given new tasks at relatively short notice and on a regular basis. It also means that new workers can be integrated easily too. This is much more problematic to achieve within assembly line settings.

However, it is important not to underestimate the demands which this way of working places upon individual workers who are subject to ever present targets and very high levels of monitoring. As Taylor and Bain (1999) have contended, the call centre model relies on an “assembly line in the head” of the call agent who is expected to manage the process and complete a minimum number of interactions within certain times. Having agents who can do this is central to any call centre operation. The “assembly line in head”

model of work places a great deal of pressure on call agents but it is also potentially advantageous to them. The point is that the key process is in their head, and the ability to manage and cope with such situation is what makes them employable; as such the central skill is generic, transferable, portable and most crucially in demand. The organization of call centre work then is not best understood as fordist in the traditional sense nor is it about machine tending; machines are important but essentially useless without agents. Within a call centre workers are in the same physical space, but their work is their own and it is not dependent upon the actions of other agents “up the line”. This means that flexibility is possible because workers can work the shifts that suit them. As long as the management can ensure that they have enough agents to meet call demand at any given time, there is no reason why this should not be the case. As such, call centre workers skills are portable, they are in a position to take their labour and skills elsewhere if they wish to and demand is present. The sustainability of that demand of course constitutes a very large “if”.

In the past decade and a half, the call centre industry has been given considerable attention by the academic world. This has focused around two major areas of study. The first is quantitative, dealing with the absolute numbers involved in the industry and the distribution of them, it considers demographic variables such as the age and gender of workers in the industry, for example see DTI (2004) ContactBabel (2003, 2004, 2005, 2006 etc) (yearly reports on the industry). The second area which is of more interest to this thesis has been call centres, their organization and the labour process which operates within them, with contributions being made from all disciplines within the social sciences

and business studies. This literature has been varied and produced ongoing debates about how to conceptualize and best explain this model of workplace organization.

The call centre industry has been of particular interest to labour process theorists, due to the fact that it is a white collar industry, but one which has clearly been subjected to a process of “proletarianisation” in the manner proposed by Braverman in his highly influential “Labour and monopoly Capital” (1974). Braverman’s text was central to the development of Labour process theory and continues to be highly influential within the field. Another highly influential work which developed from, and sometimes in opposition to Braverman’s ideas, is Burawoy’s “Manufacturing consent” (1979)

The questions posed by Burawoy (1979) namely: “Why do workers work as hard as they do?” and “Why do workers routinely consent to their own exploitation?” are highly relevant to a call centre environment. Thus, labour process theory is concerned with both the organization and the culture of the work place.

Some analyses of the call centre such Fernie and Metcalfe (1998) argued that these new organizational forms of the work place could be seen as panoptic spaces and were representative of a wider social trend toward a surveillance society. But as many, Bain and Taylor (2000) amongst them, have pointed out such a view is simplistic and empirically wrong, such a view is only sustainable by overlooking the reality of the labour process. Call centre operations can only be successful if good or at the very least tolerably good relations are fostered and maintained with the workforce. Motivation is of high priority within “team based work strategies” which are the norm within call centre environments. Despite the high level of electronic monitoring of calls which is available

to management, the carrot rather than the stick prevails, with incentives for both good sales and good practice. This allows management costs to be minimized, as “flatter” structures can be used. Team leaders, whilst senior to call agents, are not paid considerably more, but are offered incentives based on their team’s performance in the same way as agents. Innovation often comes from teams rather than being imposed on a “top-down” basis. It is, however, difficult to go beyond these general features, as practice varies widely around the industry.

Commentators, such as Bain and Taylor (2000) Taylor and Bain (2001) and Taylor *et al.* (2009, 1) have noted the growth of unionization in the industry and a willingness to challenge managerial decisions in both Europe and on the Indian subcontinent. Yet it can be questioned whether the establishment of “traditional” trade union structures in order to engage in labour struggles via the type of collective organizations their industrial counterparts did is the most appropriate model of industrial relations for industry. The potential for resistance amongst call centre workers clearly exists but it can be argued that, exit or the threat of exit from the work place is often a more useful tactic. Smith (2006) in his discussion of labour mobility points this out arguing that although exit is often an effective technique for workers, particularly in conditions of high demand, it has traditionally been seen as an “inferior” form of resistance:

in keeping with the dominant industrial relations and labour process perspective, labour turnover was judged negatively and as inferior to voice (unionism, collective internal bargaining activity). This was partly because it was perceived as an individual act, but also, where it impacts on worker's consciousness, it was judged to be detrimental by impairing the development of group norms that are considered necessary for workplace collectivism.

(Smith 2006:405).

Additionally, evidence collected from the Indian experience UNITES (2006), Noronha and D'Cruz (2006) and most recently Taylor *et al.* (2009, 1) has demonstrated how a nascent call centre trade union organisations within that society have needed to project a different image to that which trade unions traditionally have in India. This has been due to several factors. Amongst these are history, trade unions have associated with the communist left front, and organised in working class blue collar industries. As the call centre work force on the subcontinent is by virtue of its education from a middle class background with less historical affiliation to trade unionism. As such, campaigns have focused on issues of individuals' health and safety, with particular regard to the stress brought on by long term nightshifts and the serious problem of safe transport to work, particularly for women. There have been numerous instances of violence towards women call centre workers in a number of Indian cities, for example in December 2010 two men, one of them a call centre driver were arrested in connection with the abduction and rape of a call centre worker and the attempted abduction of another in New Delhi. In one particularly brutal incident in 2005, a female call centre worker Pratibha Srikanthamurthy in Bangalore was raped and murdered by her driver. Although transport is provided by employers, they frequently deny any responsibility for any such incidents. Road traffic accidents are very frequent in India and often affect workers. In 2006 the UNITES union

was successful in persuading employers to pay compensation to the family of a call centre worker killed in an accident on the way to work . It is through the representation of individuals and tackling specific grievances for them that a wider sense of the union as a collective entity is being built.

Call centres: variations on a theme

The notion then of call centres as “electronic sweatshops” is clearly not accurate. Just as some industrial factories are sweatshops and others examples of good practice and industrial relations the same goes for call centres. The reason why they cannot be viewed as such is the central paradox of the call centre industry. While often caricatured as work which is low skilled and could be done by robots, call centre work is rarely as its public image suggests. It should also be noted that the absolute level of education for all workers has not been static. In absolute terms, the educational level of all workers has risen, and as such comparing those who work in call centre environments today is not the same as comparing them with those who did semi skilled or routine white collar clerical work fifty years ago. Employees require IT competence, listening skills, customer care skills, and the ability to absorb and understand product specific information, to name but a few. As such, call centre work is not unskilled in any sense or easily fitted into Castells category of “generic labour.” Call centre agent training is also relatively lengthy and costly for employers (typically 5-6 weeks initially). This training will also require constant updating as the products and the services offered change. This means that what would have been seen as investment via research and development in traditional manufacturing industries cannot be separated from human resources and staff training

within the call centre industry. The problem is, that while call centre staff clearly represent an investment, and their retention is desired, it is only by limiting wages costs that call centre operations remain a viable proposition. As such, call centres require locations where skills are available but demand for those skills in short supply. This is the major driver behind moves towards off shoring call centre operations to the Indian subcontinent, and more recently other countries with an accessible English speaking labour force such as South Africa, Kenya and Malta to name but a few have been actively promoting themselves as new destinations for the industry. Often viewed as a race “to the bottom” in terms of wage savings the off shoring of work to India has attracted has extensive attention in Britain in recent years from both the media and commentators alike. Taylor and Bain (2005) surveyed the call centre industry in Scotland and critically investigated the Indian call centre industry its key drivers and labour process, in order to assess the idea that off shoring is somehow a “seamless” process .They found that this was not the case and concluded:

that the Indian industry reproduces in exaggerated and culturally distinctive forms, a labour process that has proved problematical for employers and employees alike in the UK and elsewhere.

(Taylor and Bain, 2005:261).

In a later paper, Taylor and Bain (2008, 1) attempted to evaluate the response to both the threat and reality of off shoring from trade unions in both UK and India. They found a variety of responses, strategies and degree of success. Some were intensely local whilst others internationalist. They argue that there is the possibility of gaining global agreements which benefit workers in different locations, but at the present time, there

remains a considerable gap between the potential and the reality of effective transnational union activity. This offers an interesting and different stand point on the problematic proposition of “thinking globally and acting locally” as noted by Ritzer (2004) and outlined above.

Emotional labour in call centre work

Call centre workers face a number of pressures. They work in an industry, which offers limited job security, relatively modest financial recompense, and requires the use of initiative and what Hochschild (1983) termed “emotional labour” in interactions with customers. Emotional labour contends Hochschild involves the effort to seem to feel and to try to actually feel the "right" feeling for the job, and to try to induce the "right" feeling in certain others. This has led a number of commentators to focus on the recruitment, training, and development of call agents. Both Callaghan and Thompson (2002) and Deery *et al.* (2002) stress the importance of individual attitude as the key skill for employers to identify at the initial stage of recruitment if they are to be transformed into successful call centre agents, with the emotional capacity to deal with work. However, the question of how agents manage to continue as “emotional labourers” in the long-term and the consequences this may have both upon them and the industry has been left largely unanswered. For employers in particular the emotional consequences of emotional labour are only of interest if they are manifested within the workplace itself.

Is a different approach required?

Glucksmann (2004) in an important contribution to debate on call centre work questioned whether an approach which explores call centre work using a labour process approach based on a workplace to workplace basis, is the way forward, instead the wider implications of the model and what it indicates about the wider economy should be considered, as she explains:

Situating their place and role in the larger process may be crucial to understanding them and their differing significance in different sectors of economic activity

(Glucksmann, 2004:799).

This view about the need to understand the call centre model in a broad as well as specific context is also put forward by Ellis and Taylor (2006) although in different terms to that of Glucksmann (indeed Taylor and Bain take issue with Glucksmann's "five configurations" of call centre work in their (2007) paper "Reflections on the call centre-a reply to Glucksmann). Ellis and Taylor (2006) trace the way in which the development of a call centre model within British Gas can be seen as part of a wider reconfiguration and reinvention of the business after its privatization in the mid 1980's. However, they also study the consequences of this transition for British Gas white-collar workers, with particular emphasis on the erosion of their autonomy by these new practices.

Russell (2008) in his wide overview of what he terms the first decade of call centre research points out that there have been many different approaches to the industry. He usefully identifies a clear divide within the literature:

It is important to distinguish between work that is principally about the call centre and that which uses the call centre as a research venue to study other things or as a metaphor for wider social change.

(Russell 2008:196)

This research of course identifies strongly with the latter description; however as Russell further explains these positions are not mutually exclusive as there is often what he terms “considerable overlap.”

Diversity then is evident within the literature about industry, and there is no agreed typology which comprehensively explains call centre work. But it can be argued that there is a common tension which lies at the heart of virtually all call centre operations.

The contradictions of the call centre model - a deep rooted dilemma?

It is perfectly possible to take a different approach and say that despite all the variations of management style and practice in call centres, they all have high rates of turnover and this suggests that there is something in the basic “modus operandi” of all call centre operations which is at the root of the problem. Deery and Kinnie (2004) in their discussion of the nature and management of call centre work cite Korczynski’s (2002) analysis of call centre work’s central tension or dilemma. They summarize it as:

a need to be cost efficient and a desire to be customer-orientated. He suggests that these twin objectives are fundamentally contradictory. On the one hand organizations seek to reduce costs per customer transaction by increasing the speed with which calls are processed, yet on the other hand they extol the virtues of customer service and encourage their employees to be quality orientated.

(Deery, Kinnie *et al.*, 2004:4)

This basic tension manifests itself in many ways, and explains the problem discussed above, i.e. the desire to find a management style and foster an environment within which workers can offer a quality service is hamstrung by the quantitative issues of cost and speed. It can also be argued that what is going on can be explained as the industry's demand for a very high degree of flexibility from its workers. The traditional way of thinking about flexibility, sees employers attempting to maximize workforce flexibility by demanding ever increasing efforts from their workers, usually by expecting them to adapt to whatever work is required of them. Flexibility of this sort is striven for in call centre environments, but is clearly a major cause of attrition, due to the fact that all too often flexibility is a one way street. It can be argued that within any market where labour is scarce flexibility on the employers' part will also be called for. Perhaps what is more crucial is the way in which this flexibility is attained, the extent to which workers are able to achieve it and the purposes, for which they use it.

Call centres and the spatial reconstitution of places.

Call centres can be approached from a different perspective, that of social and economic geography. This is important, post-industrial theorists largely concentrated their efforts upon nation states, seeing them as synonymous with societies. However, geographical approaches offer a level of regional explanation. They allow the possibility of industrial development occurring at differing paces within nation states and attempt to explain the uneven nature of development. As well as underlining the importance of place, economic geography also has another important contribution to make to any study concerning itself with the idea of post-industrialism. Where the network society theorists have stressed

novelty and the rise of new ways of working, economic geographers such as Rowthorn and Wells (1987) and Massey (1984,1986) have sought to understand new developments by charting the decline of old patterns of production and work i.e. the process of “de-industrialization”.

The idea of de-industrialization is neglected to a great extent by post industrial theorists. Bell (1974) for example appears to equate it with the point at which any society has a larger absolute number of white collar rather than blue-collar workers. This is clearly not the case. The contraction of absolute numbers of workers in the manufacturing sector in Britain has clearly occurred over the last four decades from an absolute peak in the mid nineteen sixties. However, this does not mean that industries have simply ceased to exist; many are able due to technological innovation, to produce goods more competitively and with greatly reduced workforces. Others, rather than disappear, have sought lower costs and higher productivity by relocating to off shore locations. Daniels (1986) in his contribution to Martin and Rowthorn (1986) “Producer services and the post-industrial economy” helpfully points out that de-industrialization is not a phenomena confined to the manufacturing sector alone, as services such as distribution and transport tend to decline in line with falling manufacturing output. Just as theorists of globalization and post-industrialism endeavor to predict the future, theorists of de-industrialization look to the past in order to find a plausible narrative .The geographer Doreen Massey has argued that much of the story of de-industrialization in Britain and its impact upon the regions can only be explained if we look at Britain’s international position at the time when the majority of the industrial structures emerged, i.e. the nineteenth century and its position of global, military and economic dominance. Massey points out how geographers have

long explained the internal spatial structures of former colonial territories in a context relating to that colonial past; however they have been reluctant to do the same for their former imperial powers:

understanding the internal organization of the British economy, its regional differences, and the rise and fall of its cities, cannot be done by focusing only on the internal organization of Britain. It is necessary ...to place the UK economy also in its international context to understand its changing international role

Massey 1986, in Martin and Rowthorn (1986: 32).

Massey argues that de-industrialization has been apparent within the British economy since the end of the nineteenth century. A process which largely concurrent with Britain's long decline from its zenith as an imperial power at the beginning of the twentieth century. Political and military dominance had been based upon, and did much to maintain, economic success. This example, whilst contestable in many ways, has much to offer. Firstly, it shows how global scale economic change is nothing novel. The globalization of the last twenty years can be seen in the context of a broader historical picture. Secondly, it also offers a picture of glocalisation and shows how regional industrial development and decline in Britain was based upon the economic restraint of other economies. An often cited example of this is the Lancashire cotton trade; it is difficult to see how the North West of England could have dominated the trade in manufactured textiles for a century without the help of the British East India Company and, subsequently, the colonial administration to suppress the trade in manufactured cotton goods which originated on the sub-continent. Thirdly, an analysis of this sort shows how economic development is not just a matter of capital, spaces, technology and prices within a closed system. Political systems have always had and still retain the

power to shape economic structures. This may be active and overt as outlined in the previous example regarding cotton. However, political decisions may have unplanned economic consequences. Massey gives the example of the decline of England's North East coal field. The Great Northern coalfield, as it was known had fed the rapid industrial development of the North East creating a powerful industrial complex in the nineteenth century, producing steel, arms, and of course ships. Many of those ships were colliers, as the coalfield became an important exporter, sending coal all over the world but predominantly to the Baltic, Germany, Holland, Belgium and France. The coalfield's year of peak output was 1913. The Peace of Versailles, Massey points out, emasculated these markets for North East coal as France and the Low Countries received German coal as part of war reparations direct from Germany.

In summary, geographical analyses serve to point out several things if we are to make sense of the post industrial. Firstly, de-industrialization and a shift towards something that might be termed post-industrial work is a long term process that requires an understanding of history. It is not something that happens overnight. Secondly, the rate and impact of this process is not uniform. Its impact varies upon a regional basis, and, indeed, in some ways this process may be part of what defines them as regions. Thirdly, political decisions, at the global, national and regional levels matter within this process. Fourthly, technology, whilst important, can in no way be seen as the sole driver of this process. The work of Castells (1996) has been extensively discussed in previous chapters, but it is important to point out that, whilst Castells work can be seen as part of the post-industrial school of thought within sociology, his analysis has much in common with those of economic geographers. The four points I outline are all evident within his idea of

the “networked society”, except that Castells stresses the importance of technology as a determining factor to a far greater extent, whilst simultaneously denying the importance of political action.

Call centres, why here? Or there?

As previously mentioned, the rapid establishment of call centre operations can be understood in a number of different ways. Firstly, these jobs can be seen as service sector jobs, replacing manufacturing jobs in the region. Secondly, it can be argued that the region proves attractive due to support with start up costs being on offer from regional bodies and lower wage costs relative to other areas of the country. Thirdly, that these industries are temporary phenomena with places like the North East acting as a “stepping stone” prior to their off shore relocation in search of ever lower costs. This argument is more convincing when the distribution of call centre jobs across the UK is considered, for example Richardson and Marshall (1996) point out how call centre clusters emerged in peripheral areas of the UK which had been in long-term industrial decline, such as Tyne and Wear, Clydeside, Merseyside and South Wales. This is difficult to answer, as although the call centre industry in Tyne and Wear has changed dramatically over the past decade, it has been a story of centres opening and closing, a process of churn rather than one of decline. Fourthly, and alternatively, that this is nothing new at all. This argument rests upon two factors. These are the regions industrial history and the content of the work itself. The industrial history of the area from 1945 onwards, as broadly, can be argued to have been in constant transition, with both the development and decline of industries occurring simultaneously. In this sense, de-industrialization and broad

questions about the post-industrial future of the North East can be argued to be half a century old. If this is accepted the region can be seen as post industrial but with a much more complicated reality than the theories of Bell and other post-industrialists like him would suggest. The question that remains is whether current industries have viable futures or will disappear as quickly as they emerged? Arguably, it is neither one nor the other, also decline may not in the future be due to the movement or off shoring of call agent jobs, it may be due to other trends. For example, in February 2010 the “Shop Direct group” formerly and better known as “Littlewoods” in Sunderland announced the closure of its call centre with the loss of 900 jobs due not to off shoring but a change in consumer behaviour, the growth of internet shopping bypassing the need for an interaction with a call agent. The Sunderland Echo reported:

Four years ago, the firm was fielding 33 million calls a year. Today, that is down to 19 million. Over Christmas, 85 per cent of its business was handled online

(Sunderland Echo 08/02/2010)

The content of the work in the call centre industry and working practices also need to be examined. Broadly, call centre work is caricatured into two contrasting models. One which portrays it as “high tech” white collar work, and another which sees the call centre as a high surveillance “electronic sweatshop”; see Fernie and Metcalf (1998).

The truth is that call centre work requires flexible workers with a wide set of skills. The workplace is as susceptible to taylorist methods of management as any factory space, a point which is clearly demonstrated by Taylor and Bain (2001) however the diversity of services that call centres provide, mean that output and efficiency are far more difficult to

assess than in traditional manufacture. The other point to note is that the call centre can perhaps be better understood as a form of organization rather than an industry in the traditional sense. This is because the services they offer were all offered in different forms prior to the call centres existence. If we take the selling of insurance as an example, this was once done on a “door to door” basis i.e. (the man from the “Pru”) or on an over the counter basis in high street shops. In this sense, the development of call centres in the North East, rather than being seen as a wholly novel and marking a break with the regions past, is better understood in terms of that past context and the continuities which remain. The way to do this is to enquire about lives, both in the workplace and beyond it. For instance, the cultural tradition of a place may well prove significant in how it views particular type of work. Belt, Richardson and Webster (2002) comment on the gendering of work within call centres, placing it within broader debates around men’s and women’s work. What becomes clear is that the gendering of such work takes place with the wider context of gender and work within a locality. Within the context of the North East of England, the historical context of men’s work being traditionally industrial, manual and full time means that call centre work which is non manual and often part time is seen within the context of women’s work, a context which developed in the later twentieth century where women’s work developed, in areas such as electronics, light engineering, and garment finishing. Consequently, call centre work can be argued to be more gendered in some places more than others. On a wider level the region’s industrial past is ever present; the title of Richardson, Belt and Marshall’s (2000) paper “Taking calls to Newcastle: the regional implications of the growth in call centres” consciously draws on the regions coal mining and exporting tradition which established the absurdity of “taking

coals to Newcastle.” The importance of context in generating the type of customer agent interactions the industry requires is stressed by Coyle (2010) who points to the importance of locality as an ingredient in producing a successful call centre product:

Those aspects of the call centre labour process that require a voice to voice and relatively complex interaction between advisors and customers have proved very difficult to transfer to different national contexts. Deeply embedded in the call centre labour process are taken for granted knowledge and skills that only become apparent when lifted out of the local social relations that produced them.

(Coyle 2010: 291)

Beyond structure, the importance of narrative

Thus far, we have examined the structure-based theories of post-industrial thinkers, globalization and network society theorists and those seeking to explain “de-industrialization”. But what of the boundary between work and the world outside of work? All the ideas so far outlined above in terms of post-industrial, information society, de-industrialization theory and organizational studies of call centres themselves stress the importance of macro level structural forces. Whilst these are undoubtedly important, what is needed is a perspective from the social actors who inhabit this context.

How work shapes individuals lives has long been a central issue in the sociology of work. It can of course be traced back to classical theory, but is perhaps better expressed by the “industrial ethnographies” of the twentieth century such as Dennis *et al.* (1956) “Coal is our life” - a text which I have referred to above and will do so again. The book examines the life of a Yorkshire mining community in depth and attempts to demonstrate how the social structure of the community is dominated by the demands and working practices of

the mining industry. Family relationships, leisure and political views are all presented as shaped by the institution of work. The point to note is that this relationship is intense and remarkable in “Coal is our life” as it is taking place within a community with only one major source of wage labour. Consequently its effects on the community appear uniform and dominant. It is difficult to imagine such a study being possible only 50 years later in Britain; this in itself tells us something about de-industrialization, but also shows how the plurality of workplaces, in communities has become increasingly commonplace. But the question of whether this can be said to be a post-industrial phenomenon is less clear cut. Mining communities such as “Ashton” (in reality the Yorkshire town of Featherstone) were not typical representatives of “industrial society.” Mining in terms of its working practices and social relationships within the pit had far less in common with mass production in a factory setting, than call centre work does. It can also be argued that mining communities were exceptions within industrial societies as they were self contained and relatively isolated communities. Also, the very close relationship between work and wider social life produced an illusion of permanence; the depth of the relationship suggested longevity for these communities which in reality were often little more than three generations old. By the 1960’s the idea of a direct and uniform effect of work on workers lives beyond the factory gates was being questioned and reassessed. In Goldthorpe *et al.* (1969) the relationship between work and wider social life was argued to be becoming more “privatized”. Traditionally, this was seen as being primarily about changing patterns of class relations and identity. However, it is also possible to see the debate sparked by Goldthorpe *et al.* as being the start of a reassessment of the boundaries

and relations between work and wider aspects of life, which is evident in the current debates around “work–life balance”.

Post-industrial lives in a networked world? Work, and its place in the lifescape.

What role does call centre work play in the life of the workers engaged in it? How do they perceive it? Is it a good job? A bad job? Something temporary? A career? Or is it just a way to earn, in order to consume? How important are the relationships they have with fellow workers? Do they socialize with colleagues outside of the workplace? Is their situation limited by this type of work? Does it provide them with opportunities other types of work could not? How do their peers view their work? What do their peers do? Is it a pathway to another possible future?

By attempting to answer these questions, it may be possible to judge whether this type of work is much the same as any other, or whether it has certain patterns, rhythms, customs and consequences for those engaged in it. If so, what can the experience of “living the call centre” tell us about life and work in a post-industrial age? If the problem of determinism is to be avoided in an analysis of the work/non work life relationship, an exploration and appreciation how relationships in the world of non-work interface with, and influence, what occurs within the realm of work is required.

For example, family structures have changed. In Britain, the culture of owner occupation established over the last quarter century and rapidly rising house prices, means that children are not permanently leaving home until later in life. This, in itself, is not unusual as it can be argued that this was the case for previous generations. However, there is a big

difference. Rather than becoming net contributors to the household economy, as was the norm in “industrial society”, children are more likely to remain at home in order to enjoy parental economic support with their earnings going toward their own consumption and/or savings with a view to independence at some point in the future. In turn, it might be suggested that developments such as this benefit the labour market as it makes relatively insecure, and relatively low paid work possible, by the fact that the real cost of living is not borne by workers with such domestic circumstances. In this way, work which might have only been feasible for second income earners in the past has found a new work force.

The status of work in terms of a hierarchy of material wealth is also worth examining. The expansion of owner occupation means that more and more of the population now hold capital themselves, or are likely to inherit property. As such, work, whilst still highly important, is not the *sole* source of wealth in the manner which characterized industrial wage labour. This, of course, is not the case for all, but for many it may be highly significant. Another development which may also be significant is that of dual income earning households. Workers from such households were common in the North East of England and in India, both areas within which married women working would have been somewhat unusual to say the least until the mid twentieth century. It can be argued that although part of globalization, the call centre phenomenon in the North East or India is also bound up with a complex regional past and present that is informed and shaped by both the global and the local. The question that this begs for the sociologist is, by what means can these trends be grasped at both the micro level? Where are the individual lives that are bound up with these processes? How are they changing, and what is the nature of

that change? The challenge which the social scientist is presented with is one that requires the re-imagination and re-appraisal of work itself.

Re-imagining work - Beyond reordering

Whilst post-industrial thinkers and information society theorists have argued that work has changed, and that this indicates wider social change, their assumption has been that, whilst the way in which work is carried out, i.e. its form has changed, its nature and essential characteristics have not. Effectively, they see work as being re-ordered and this in turn produces a re-ordering of wider society. This section examines ideas around the notion that the “meaning of work” has changed, is changing or needs to change fundamentally. The “Affluent worker” studies Goldthorpe *et al.* (1969) can be argued to be the start of a trend within the social sciences which saw social identity becoming less associated with what people “produce” via the process of work, and increasingly identified as something that they create via a process of consumption. Perhaps the best expression of this reflexive, consumptive, post-industrial, post-modern individuality can be found in Giddens (1990) and, also, the work of Bauman (1998, 1) who argues that we have now become a society orientated around consumption rather than production, and, that as the freedom to consume is based upon the consumer choice of individuals this shift supports the idea of the “privatization of social life” and denies the possibility of collective actions and/or solutions.

This idea of “you are what you consume”, aside from the fact that those who champion it and typically offer little empirical evidence to support their arguments, has many

limitations. Firstly, consumption in a capitalist society always has, and always will, require financial resources. For the vast majority of the population these financial resources have to be gained via wage labour. As such, work might not directly determine identity in the way that it once did, but without work and wages, the potential to transform one's identity via consumption is unobtainable. The point can also be made that transforming one's own identity via consumption is not new, or post-industrial, it was always possible given enough resources, and was the main characteristic of Veblen's "leisure class" of a century ago. Secondly, and crucially, the idea of the individual creating their identity via consumption gives too much primacy to material goods and services in determining identity. Whilst this is undoubtedly part of the process, it cannot explain relationships with family, peers, and the community. In short, it ignores the role of culture and its effects upon individual actions both within and beyond the workplace.

An alternative view of the nature of post industrial work in terms of how it may transform workers lives is offered by Gorz (1982). This argument rejects the traditional Marxist view that the work place is the arena where a revolutionary transformation of society will originate. It also rejects consumption centred explanations where work has no value beyond its monetary exchange value. Consequently, Gorz offers a view that stands outside of mainstream conceptions of work. Gorz (1982) argued that work was no longer the creative force with the revolutionary potential that Marxism had historically bestowed upon it. This was due largely to the fact that the majority of work was no longer concerned with the "conquest of necessity." In Gorz's view, work was instead increasingly concerned with the manufacture of needs and subsequently servicing those needs. His basic premise that capitalism has become an irrational process which needs to

create ever increasing demand in order to perpetuate its own existence is very similar to the argument outlined by Herbert Marcuse (1964) in “One dimensional Man”:

when a society produces in order to provide work rather than works in order to produce, then work as a whole has no meaning

Gorz (1982:72).

Central to Gorz’s argument is the idea that capital serves the needs of capital not the needs of individuals or societies. It can be argued that this was ever the case; however the point Gorz makes is that previously the industrial process produced what Marx had termed its “own gravediggers” in the shape of the industrial proletariat. The mutation of capitalism over the past century means that this by-product of the productive process is no longer produced. This analysis leads to two major questions for Gorz to deal with. Firstly, how can class structure now be understood? Secondly, what, if any, are the prospects for qualitative social change and, if there are indeed any, what are the mechanisms by which they might occur?

Gorz (1982) argued that the traditional industrial proletariat was fragmenting. This was largely due to the replacement of semi skilled and unskilled workers jobs as technology became more cost effective than human muscle. Gorz envisaged two emergent groups; firstly, an elite group of highly skilled workers whose knowledge guaranteed their position and futures within the workplace and secondly, a reconfigured group of semi-skilled and unskilled workers who he calls the “neo-proletariat” or the “non class of non workers”. This group is denied long-term job security and move jobs in order to secure a living. They do not define themselves through their work. Questions of identity and self

actualization are very important to Gorz due to his long association with existential philosophy and his close friendship with one of its major exponents John Paul Sartre. Work alone does not offer a pathway toward either individual or collective liberation. As he explains:

While the industrial proletariat derived an objective power from the transformation of matter, so that it perceived itself as a material force underpinning the whole course of society, the neo-proletariat can be defined as a non force, without objective social importance excluded from society. Since it plays no part in the production of society it envisages society's development as something external, akin to a spectacle or a show. It sees no point in taking over the machine like structure which, as it sees it, defines contemporary society nor placing anything whatsoever under its control. What matters instead is to appropriate areas of autonomy outside of and in opposition to the logic of society, so as to allow the unobstructed realisation of individual development *alongside* and *over* that machine like structure

Gorz (1982:73).

The way towards self-actualisation and the realisation of both individual and social potential then according to Gorz, lies outside of the world of work, and requires a fundamental re-thinking of work's place within society. Liberation will be found in the rearrangement of domestic life and civil society, something that Gorz attempts to outline in his essay "Utopia for a Possible Dual Society" which first appeared in his 1980 work "Ecology as politics". Gorz envisages a society where work is radically transformed, citizens "work less" and "consume better". Work is still present and important in society but it is governed by different imperatives, goods will be produced to be durable and socially useful rather than for profit. Change, then, comes not through work and the appropriation of the productive system, but by a radical rejection of the present rationale of that system.

However, it is not clear how this radical transformation will come about. It cannot come from the non-class of non-workers, the neoproletariat, as they are not, according to Gorz, capable of either collective action or even able to conceive of what a different type of society might look like:

The lack of an overall conception of future society fundamentally distinguishes the new post-industrial proletariat from the class which according to Marx, was invested with a historical mission. The neoproletariat has nothing to expect of contemporary society or of its subsequent evolution

Gorz (1982:73).

Gorz is by no means unique in arguing that social class and work/occupation have lost their historic linkage. For example, the work of Klaus Eder (1993) presents class as primarily the relations of production which were dominant in industrial, which have survived and become part of the wider culture. Class is still important for Eder and derives from industrial society's basic structure, even if that structure is now eroding; those relations are now reproduced at a wider cultural level than the workplace.

So how is the radical transformation of work which Gorz advocates to come about? The answer is, at best, unclear. Gorz appears to argue that it is individuals who will shape their own destiny by the rejection of the status quo, as he outlines in the following passage:

The logic of capital has brought us to the threshold of liberation. But it can only be crossed at the price of a radical break, in which productivism is replaced by a different rationality. This rupture can only come from individuals themselves. The realm of freedom can never arise out of material processes; it can only be established by a constitutive act which, aware of its free subjectivity, asserts itself as an absolute end in itself within each individual

Gorz (1982:74).

Gorz is arguing that radical change will occur not as the end product of a collective endeavour, but as a result of an aggregation of individuals rejecting their current way of working and living. This argument is problematic and not always totally convincing, however it does offer hope. Individuals and their actions can make a difference. The alternative to this view is too bleak as it views individuals as incapable of transforming themselves, let alone their surroundings. Such a view has been expressed by Charlesworth (2000). Charlesworth's provocative and profoundly pessimistic book "A Phenomenology of Working class experience" explores the lives of people living in post-industrial Rotherham, South Yorkshire. His conclusions are bleak; he regards his participants as broken and incapable of changing their situation. Savage (2000) summarises Charlesworth's thesis succinctly:

Charlesworth's argument is clear and direct. Far from working class culture being marked by solidarity or resistance, he sees it as characterized by conservatism and by enforced acceptance of the realities of the inegalitarian social order. He emphasizes the way that this brute reality of working class life leads to the articulation of a culture of necessity, and to a passivity that can only be denied through the embracing of the hard realities of the everyday

Savage (2000).

If we consider call centres and their workers, it is difficult to cast call agents in the mould Charlesworth describes. But it can be argued that the workforce largely fits in with Gorz's idea of a "non-class of non-workers" or neoproletariat. This is partly due to the structure of the industry i.e. flat hierarchies, limited opportunities for advancement and relatively poor rewards in return for multiple skill sets plus the global context which makes workers tenure in the industry insecure but can, conversely, mean that their

commitment to the industry is short-term. This idea of a lack of commitment from workers who see their future beyond the industry and this form of work, is an important area for investigation, and one which may explain why despite many efforts attrition rates in the industry remain so high. Gorz's ideas also bring to the fore the question of whether workers see their work as having transformative power, or social worth, or whether these are things to be achieved in spite of work or beyond the workplace. Gorz also talks about individuals developing their own personal autonomy in areas beyond the workplace; again this area is worthy of exploration.

Realising personal potential

Related to the question of how significant social networks outside the workplace are, is the way in which individuals manage structures and negotiate these networks in order to improve their situations and increase their personal autonomy. It is important not to automatically discount the agentic potential of those working within such settings. If work does not offer fulfilment, security, or appropriate financial rewards, these things have to be sought elsewhere and the means to get there has to be created by the action of individuals, consequently agency is incentivised. In other words, are workers more likely to create different futures for themselves than they did in the past? And is this due to necessity? Is it the case that these individuals are not rejecting work per se but rejecting a particular type of work, in search of a future in other, "better" careers?

Gorz raises some fundamental questions about how change might be possible and the shape this might take. This means investigating whether or not call centre workers feel that their work is something that can be improved. If the former is the case, the question

becomes one of how this might be achievable, i.e. is this something that can be achieved via a collective endeavour such as traditional trade unionism, or is it something that is negotiated by individuals or informal groupings of individuals through their interactions with team leaders and managers? If the latter is the case, and work is seen as something which cannot be changed for the better, then the issue to pursue will be what opportunities do workers have to change their lives beyond their immediate workplace? And what are the strategies that they use in order to try and achieve this? In this manner, the issue of self-actualisation that is so central to Gorz's ideas can be explored in a meaningful manner.

Re-imagining work, re-thinking the lifescape

Structural processes such as changes to economies and industries are, of course, ongoing and dynamic, but the aspirations of individuals and their own life courses are also dynamic processes which are in turn part of that wider process. How people work and what they aspire to work at are part of wider "life plans", and these plans deserve attention. Leisering and Walker (1998) argue that each individual's "life course" can be viewed as a dynamic process. They see each individual as following specific trajectories which are a sequence of different states (e.g. poverty, employment) and transitions, which they see as governed essentially by the choices an individual makes. I see their point about understanding individual lives as dynamic trajectories as a very important one. However, they present their "dynamic" individual as the product of the recent past and their emphasis on individual choice is in line with the views of Giddens (1990) and Bauman (1998, 1). I would make two points. Firstly, individual lives have always been

dynamic, the dynamism and aspiration of individuals to gain better, prospects, wages and conditions was a key part of industrial society. One only needs to look at migration patterns of workers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century's to see that. My second point is that individual trajectories are chosen but, within certain limits. Such choices are often bound up with the trajectories of places and spaces and their attendant cultures. For example, Callaghan (1998) found in her research with young people in the North East, that aspirations were often expressed, not just in terms of jobs or salaries, but were often about the area and type of house they wanted to live in. As such, the trajectory was about getting to a particular place, physically as well as financially. Consequently, this process is about how individuals conceive of the social world around them, what Albrow (1997) terms the "socoscape". The notion of the "socoscape" allows the context of places communities and the trajectories of individuals to meet and interface. Rossi (2007) summarizes the "socoscape" as:

the lived experience of all social relations in a locality...the local intersection of sociospheres the latter consisting of the wider relations of the occupants of the socioscape.

Rossi (2007:418).

As such, it is clear that the trajectories, aspirations and dynamism of individuals needs to be explored in terms of reference wider than the workplace, as emerging from the broader context of their lives and as part of a wider "life-plan."

The boundary between work and life has been a topic of wide discussion over the past decade or so. Discussion has largely centred on the management of working life and non

working life. Within the UK, this discussion has been played out against a background which has assumed workers are working longer hours to the detriment of their lives beyond the workplace. The UK has the longest average working hours within the EU. Too much work therefore is characterized as being as bad as too little. The issue is essentially seen in terms of being relatively straightforward and solvable; it is a case of redressing the balance, and restoring equilibrium. How is this to be done? Well government policy is seen as having a part to play via legislation to guarantee employment rights, which allow flexible working. Individuals are also encouraged to manage time and work /non work better as part of a more generalized agenda around the rather nebulous notion of “wellbeing”. “Work-life balance” is an issue that has also been taken up by employers and trade unions alike. The assumption on both sides is that the balance can be found via a process of negotiation backed by appropriate legislation. However the meaning of Work life balance (WLB) is highly contested, with a multiplicity of definitions. There is considerable debate about the term and what it means. Reiter (2007) argues that the way to make sense of the competing definitions in this field is by examining the moral framework which under pins the notion of balance:

the field is hindered by a lack of agreement over the term balance and the moral implications of the definition.

(Reiter 2007:274)

Reiter goes on to discuss some of the key problems relating to the term and notes how writers take the term largely for granted without paying it enough attention.

As Kirchmeyer (2000) contends:

Those who write about work-life balance do not identify routinely what they mean by this term and rarely is meaning sought.

(Kirchmeyer 2000:81)

More comprehensively Lewis *et al.* (2003) point out that:

The term work life balance remains problematic because the term over generalizes the roles played in the non work sphere and oversimplifies the division of spheres.

(Lewis *et al.* 2003:829)

Reiter attempts to make sense of the definitions by creating a typology based upon four categories, situationist, absolutist, subjectivist and exceptionalist. She largely dismisses the absolutist and exceptionalist definitions. This is because; she explains that neither focuses on the individual. Absolutism is concerned with coming up with a “right” definition of the term and has an inbuilt assumption that a universal definition is possible for all. Exceptionalist definitions she argues are largely based upon utilitarian assumptions about producing the “greatest good for the greatest number”. She then explains that the situationist and subjectivist definitions imply that many different forms of balance are possible. Subjectivists argue that any moral evaluation must depend solely upon personal perspective; consequently no wider definition is possible. However situationalism is useful as it allows a definition with a degree of flexibility:

Using a situationist definition of balance people could be grouped according to their values and situational variables such as family structure, life stage, gender, and career or income levels with varying definitions of WLB for different segments.

Reiter (2007:275)

What is at stake within the debate around work life balance is how the concept can have coherence but not at the expense of excluding the lived experience of real people.

Warhurst *et al.* (2008) propose that in addition to the debate on “work–life balance” there are two other broad areas of debate. The first area deals with the problem of defining and demarcating the boundaries between work and life, and the other deals with the issue of “Work life patterns”. In relation to the first area they discuss attempts by commentators such as Nippert-Eng (1996) to more clearly define the work–life boundary. Nippert-Eng, argues that workers engage in “boundary work”. Warhurst *et al.* (2008) summarize her idea as:

the active mental management and organization of practices and artefacts so as to create the segmentation of or integration of home and work. Integration occurs when “home” and “work” is one and the same, one giant category for social existence, for no conceptual boundary separates its contents of meaning. Segmentation occurs when the boundary between work and home is clear and impregnable everything belongs to home or work

Warhurst *et al.* (2008:10).

This is interesting, but it would appear that although the idea of a boundary which workers negotiate is evident, the notion of a boundary itself is not problematised, i.e. it can be asked whether Nippert-Eng’s “integrators” have effectively dismissed or disregarded the work life boundary, but it is clearly not the case that their lives have become “all work”. However, if the nature of the boundaries is questioned then different possibilities appear. Cilliers (2001) argues that boundaries are often misunderstood and rather than being a problematic issue for those attempting to describe and understand systems they can in fact be of help:

our understanding of boundaries can be given a little more content by considering the following two issues. The first concerns the nature of boundaries. We often fall into the trap of thinking of a boundary as something that separates one thing from another. We should rather think of a boundary as something that constitutes that which is bounded. This shift will help us to see the boundary as something enabling rather than as confining

Cilliers (2001:141).

If Cillier's point is taken on board, then the work life boundary is something that is not fixed and has a degree of instability. I would argue that the key issue for individuals is the ability they have to negotiate, limit, and extend these boundaries. The position of the boundary is not key issue, but the ability to move it is. I will return to this theme presently, but I now wish to deal with the area that Warhurst *et al.* (2008) term work life patterns. They pick up on ideas developed by Bourdieu (1990), and they argue that:

These patterns comprise any practices that an individual produces: those related to job descriptions and contractual obligations, commuting, education and training, family activities and maintaining friendships, pursuing sports and leisure activities or political and religious interests. While work-life patterns can be externally observed, how they are experienced can vary for the individual concerned

Warhurst *et al.* (2008:12).

This seems perfectly reasonable; what is being considered are the wider implications of work and its impact upon what can be termed lifestyle. This is also something that is highly variable and dependent upon the contexts of work and lives. They summarize them thus;

these patterns are shaped by the characteristic of work practices, structural constraints lifestyles and logics

(Warhurst *et al.*, 2008:16).

I would largely agree with these ideas; however, I would question the degree to which work and life is viewed as a dichotomy and also the degree of emphasis which is placed upon structural factors at the expense of individual action. The issue of work-life boundaries cannot be neatly differentiated from that of work-life patterns. Changing patterns mean shifting boundaries and vice versa. Also there are multiple factors and agents involved in this process, which link together in a process which is better thought of as a process of interfaces. The concept of “interfaces” is well established within IT and discussions regarding ergonomics, but it can be argued to be equally applicable to the social world. No established social definition of “interface” exists; a point I shall return to in the empirical discussions later. However, it can be said to have several essential features; firstly, it is a space where differing interests meet, and secondly, it is place where they are negotiated and managed. This military definition captures these features:

A boundary or point common to two or more similar or dissimilar command and control systems, sub-systems, or other entities against which or at which necessary information flow takes place.

Military dictionary online found at:

<http://www.answers.com/topic/interface/military>.

For example, one of my research participants had to structure the times she was able to work at a local call centre around her full time university course. This also depended upon the availability of her mother in law to provide childcare, and this in turn depended upon her shift work patterns. This is a complex relationship which needs constant management and renegotiation. It is also easy to jump to the conclusion that the defining

and least flexible element in the equation was work, it was not. Instead, it was the University timetable which offered the least degree of flexibility.

This is important as it shows how the defining factor within the “work–life pattern” was closely linked to personal aspiration, rather than the demands of the workplace. This point is recognized to a degree by Warhurst *et al.* (2008:17) who point out that:

work-life patterns can change as individual work and lifecycles progress.

Warhurst *et al.* (2008:17)

I agree but would argue that this process is often far more active, as in the case outlined above. It is in fact, often the case that “work–life” patterns are changed for a specific purpose as individuals take on certain forms of work in order to change and progress the lifecycle. For many, living the call centre is part of that lifecycle and part of their lifescape; what is not clear is the duration of its presence within that lifescape. This is one of the tasks that the empirical investigation needs to address. Before closing this chapter and moving on to the methodological discussion, I propose to clarify the key points and research questions raised in this chapter and the globalization chapter that preceded it.

Key questions and tasks for the empirical research

The research questions for this project, due to the methodological approach outlined in the subsequent methods chapters, were not narrowly defined. Instead, arising from the theoretical material there were a number of areas which arose and presented themselves as the key areas for empirical investigation. These were:

1. The relationship between changing forms of work and wider social and technological change; the interaction of global and local forces and conditions

and the extent to which call centre work serves as a case study in order to access these wider issues.

2. The impact such changes have upon the lives of those who are part of the industry and how does their work fit within the broader life plans that they construct. I will now outline some of the questions these tasks posed in a little more detail.

The first area required a critical investigation of a number of aspects, these are:

1. The investigation of the global-local dynamic, this required a discussion about the nature of locality in general and the localities specific to this study. This was addressed by the construction of the concept of biographies of place and the outlining of biographies for each of the localities in the study.
2. Next the position of the call centre industry within these localities was explored in terms of the local economy, its relationship with institutions of governance and through the eyes of those involved with strategic issues for the industry, such as entrepreneurs, managers, trade union officials and training providers.
3. The question of the call centre industry's place within and longer term future within the localities discussed was also explored.
4. All of the above findings were used in order to contribute towards the assessment of the proposition that "if work changes then so does society" in the concluding

chapter. The other contribution to the attempt to address the proposition will come from the second key area.

The second key area of study was;

1. The impact the changes outlined above have upon the lives of those who are part of the industry and how does their work fit within the broader life plans that they construct. This involved interviewing people working within the industry in the North East of England and India. This allowed the assessment of whether workers have very different experiences due to the localities within which they work.
 - The key questions which were explored with individuals these included:
 - How did they get into call centre work?
 - How did they feel about it?
 - How did such work fit with their wider lives?
 - What were their long term career aspirations and life plans?
 - What part did call centre work play in helping them to achieve these broader goals?

These were the key areas and tasks for the empirical investigation. However, I was also conscious that other areas of importance which I as an outsider to the call centre industry was not aware of which might arise in the course of the fieldwork. This meant that the extension of these tasks might be necessary and this did in fact occur.

Notes to chapter two

- (1) The following quotation offers an example of how workers conceive of the call centre work as factory work.

I would say that a lot of people who possibly worked at factories 20 years ago and work in call centres now there is obviously quite a lot of different people working as well but there are lot of people who've left school with no qualifications and things like that and have done temporary work in places like 2-Touch which tend to be the holding pool for call centres like "More Than" and "T-Mobile" as they tend to ask for experience and they go there and do that and then they get a job at one of the other call centres. I do think it's possibly the same sort of culture as factory work was 20 years ago

Interview with Carly, September 2006.

CHAPTER THREE-METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES AND APPROACHES TO WORKPLACES

This section outlines the methodological strategy that I adopted and discusses how and why it was chosen. It does so by considering the key research questions and asking how it is possible to answer them and what approach this requires. After discussing the broad strategy adopted, that of “global ethnography” as developed by Burawoy *et al.* (2000), the chapter examines and discusses approaches that have been used by those researching the call centre industry. It will also discuss the methodological issues arising from studying the relationship between work and wider social life. Further consideration is given to interviews, methodological characteristics, and of course the ethical issues that were envisaged at the outset of the research as well as those that subsequently arose. Finally, reference is made to the relevance and use of “grounded theory” and its methodological tools which played a part within this study and its compatibility with the extended case method approach advocated by Burawoy.

The call centre: a comparative case study

As outlined in the preceding chapters, this project attempts to address a number of topics. These include questions about whether the call centre industry can be seen as novel in any way. This is due to its means of organization and the utilization of new technology. This is in turn closely related to the question of whether this working environment can be viewed as post industrial in any way, or whether its operation is compatible or comparable with industrial workspaces, the obvious comparison being that of the factory.

Next come questions regarding the relations of the work place; not only in terms of hierarchies and relationships between workers and the strategies used by them in the workplace, but how those relations spill over into the rest of their lives; for instance, the extent to which they socialize with colleagues, the way in which their work life is structured around the demands of family or the aspirations of study. In short, how call centre work interfaces with the non-work lives of the industry's workers. These questions are asked within wider contexts; those of the global and the local and as such they too require extensive explanation. Therefore, it can be argued that in order to understand the call centre industry fully, the wider issues around it need explanation. As I outlined in the previous chapter, it can also be argued that the call centre industry can be seen as a case study, a way to gain access to insights about workplaces, their practices and wider life within the broader contexts of industrial change and the global economy. Methodologically, this study is by its very nature a comparative piece, as are virtually all social scientific analyses which see social phenomena to be typical, representative, or unique, in some way. Attention is drawn to each case by reference to its similarity or difference to the previous or next case. This study has much in common with the Weberian tradition of comparison which searches for variance, seeking insight from the differences which are evident between cases. It is not, however, a cross national comparative study of the type outlined by Esping-Andersen (1990) where the key difference is seen as being the context provided by the nation state within which the research takes place. These differences will be important but so will differences between cases with the same national backgrounds.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, within the broad case of the call centre industry, further “casing” in of the type outlined by Ragin (1992) means that the narratives of individuals who work in or around the industry are accessed by casing firstly the industry, secondly geographical areas, thirdly specific workplaces and fourthly those who work within those workplaces. It might also be argued that a further casing is required to differentiate call agents and those in roles which manage them. The process of casing is illustrated by Ragin (1992) via his discussion of Wieviokra’s study of terrorism. Ragin argues that casing is a process or tactic which social researchers use in order to:

link the empirical and the theoretical- to use theory to make sense of evidence and to use evidence to sharpen and refine theory. This interplay helps us to produce theoretically structured descriptions of the empirical world that are both meaningful and useful

Ragin (1992:225).

Casing, then, is a process or a way of working through a subject area; importantly, a case may have more than one meaning. As Ragin further explains:

A case is not inherently one thing or another, but a way station in the process of producing empirical social science. Cases are multiple in most research efforts because ideas and evidence may be linked in many different ways

Ragin (1992:225).

The multiple natures of cases are taken up by Byrne (2009). In his discussion of complex, realist and configurational approaches to cases he outlines six different descriptions of the nature of cases. Some writers describe cases as empirical entities whilst others see them as the products of the research process; these of course are not mutually exclusive positions.

Consequently, cases can operate and inform us about what is going on, on more than just one level; a theme which is further explored in the next section, via the idea of global ethnography. This is a process which can be argued to have the process of casing at its centre i.e. the nature of globalization is explored via cases evident at the level of localities and communities within which further casings in turn occur.

Global ethnography

As can be seen from the points made above, the questions ranged from those which were about the global level through to those about individual life within a locality. If either aspect was ignored, or neglected, then the overall conclusions would be much diminished. This study would become either an exercise in global grand theory, which I was keen to avoid, or an ethnography which was trapped within the confines of “the particular” i.e. its insights were limited to those of particular people, in particular workplaces, in particular locations, at particular times and which did not seek to enter into a wider dialogue with wider structural issues beyond the “particular”. But how could this be achieved? How to approach the global whilst maintaining a focus on human action at a local level, and vice versa, was the problem. This problem is, of course, nothing new it was just the manifestation of the traditional tendency for sociological explanations to diverge toward either “structure” or “action” (Dawe 1970).

The work of Michael Burawoy was of great importance in offering a way to reconcile these aspects. Burawoy’s work is first and foremost concerned with the labour process, indeed his “Manufacturing Consent” (1979) is one of the cornerstones of what has

become known as “labour process theory.” Burawoy is convinced, as am I, of the centrality of work to social life. This is highlighted early in “Manufacturing Consent” by the use of this quotation from Marx’s “German ideology”:

the first premise of all human existence and therefore all history, the premise, namely that men must be in a position to live in order to be able to “make history”. But life involves before everything else eating and drinking, a habitation, clothing and many other things. The first historical act is thus the production of the means to satisfy those needs, the production of material life itself.

Marx, cited in Burawoy (1979:14).

Burawoy’s approach to work, and how to understand it, has essentially been about trying to understand the labour process from the point of view of those involved within it. His methodology throughout his career has been to, wherever possible, participate in those processes directly, working in the mining industry, factories and the steel industry. As such, his approach can be said to be ethnographic. Burawoy has also sought to explain and incorporate into his explanations the significance of the wider socio-economic contexts within which the labour process operates. Examples of this include Burawoy’s research in the state steel industry in Hungary in the 1980’s and his work in post communist Russia in the early 1990’s. Burawoy can be argued to have achieved the difficult balance of researching particular places but being able to apply those experiences in order to say something about far wider practices, processes and trends.

In his more recent works, Burawoy has become more involved with questions about methodology, in particular how to deal with, and answer, the powerful structural grand theoretical arguments which underpin the notion of globalization. Burawoy argues that a

key problem within the globalization debate is that theorists argue that change at the global level has led to radical transformations at the local level, whilst others argue that the demonstration of continuity at the global level can be taken as evidence that nothing is occurring at the local level.

For a study such as mine, this problem is a reality, how can both of the technologically deterministic pathways discussed earlier be avoided? A way forward is offered by Burawoy through the notion of “global ethnography”.

Such an idea is appealing largely because of its practicality. Burawoy’s notion offers a viable methodological strategy by which the theoretical idea’s about the processes of “glocalization” which is described by Robertson (1992) as a process whereby relations at both the global and local levels are transformed as a consequence of:

the interpenetration of the universalization of particularization and the particularization of universalism.

Robertson (1992:100)

can be investigated at the empirical level.

As Burawoy explains:

radicals and sceptics alike write history by postulating changes or continuities at the global level that are presumed to imprint themselves on the local level. We have found no such isomorphism between local and global. At both levels movement is manifold and multiple, combined and reversible, uneven and unpredictable. We, therefore, work in the opposite way ascending from the local to the globally stitching together our ethnographies. But this has its problems too. It cannot be done *tabula rasa*. We need an orientating map that is attentive to both the local and the global simultaneously, that would allow us to compose the global from below

Burawoy *et al.* (2000:343).

The challenge then is to study local realities and remain theoretically informed, without becoming fixated upon one theoretical approach. Whilst I had suspicions about what might be found, I was not in the business of trying to formulate, disprove or prove any form of hypotheses or validate any narrow theoretical position. However, it was also important to consider the methodological stance which I took throughout the course of the research. That stance is something that has become clearer over the course of the work. Reflecting upon the process has made me realize how much of the understanding I developed of the industry in the North East was informed and entwined with my living and working in the region and associating with those who worked in and around the industry. O’Riain in his discussion of the nature of the ethnographic case study explains that:

the theoretical debates to which I extended the case proved to be multiple and varied across the life cycle of the ethnography itself.

O’Riain in Byrne and Ragin, (2009: 297).

He explains how the ethnographic study he had begun by working as a technical writer in a software team in Ireland outgrew its original parameters, leading him into areas he had originally not considered, thus extending the ethnographic case. O’Riain states that these extensions were multiple. He argues that what occurred in the wake of his original study was that the ethnographic context, whilst still highly important as a foundation or anchor point, became progressively extended. As he explains:

but that context had been extended theoretically, empirically and personally. The character of the ethnographic case had been made more inclusive but also more problematic.

O’Riain in Byrne and Ragin (2009:290).

To clarify this further, what O’Riain found was that as the original project came to an end, his colleague’s behaviour changed as they went in pursuit of their next piece of work. This was often in direct competition with their team mates on the original project and this, he explains, made him rethink and re-theorize his position:

Suddenly the case I was studying was no longer my local world of solidarity, but a local social world that shifted and changed with the pressures and opportunities of global markets, brought into the work place through the rhythm of project deadlines.

O’Riain in Byrne and Ragin (2009:289-290).

Hence, theoretical extension occurred. Empirical extension occurred as he followed the workers he had worked alongside through subsequent jobs and into contact with a wider community of software developers and technical writers, which lead him into different places and settings. Empirical extension was about the extension of the case study into different spaces. Personal extension concerned O’Riain’s realization that, despite appearances to the contrary, he had much more in common with those he was studying in terms of biographical context than he had first thought:

As I read through the life histories of my co-workers, the similarities between their lives and my own became evident. Despite the differences between education and software, it turned out that our shared experiences in those months were embedded within a shared history of the Irish professional classes. I had spent some years on the opposite side of a university campus from one of my colleagues, many of us had emigrated for more challenging work and rewarding careers and then later returned, and I worked the same long, irregular hours I criticized in the software workplace.

O’Riain in Byrne and Ragin (2009:290).

This point about personal extension is crucial; it is bound up with both the research process and research question, but also allows a sense of how the research process is a process of personal discovery and development. The case study then is best seen as a catalyst or starting point. I have included these points as they have great resonance with what has happened to me during the course of this project. My initial case, the call centre industry in the North East of England, underwent theoretical extension on an ongoing basis, beginning with questions about the labour process and control, expanding to encompass many more questions about those who worked in the industry and their lives beyond the workplace. Empirical extension occurred as I had the opportunity to investigate another space, namely the Indian subcontinent. Consequently, although it is quite possible to see this study as a comparative study between the North East examples and those from the Indian subcontinent, this was not what I originally intended. The comparisons within geographical contexts are of as much importance of those between them. Nonetheless, empirical extensions mean that this can be read as a comparative study, should one wish to do so. Personal extensions were also evident due to my living and working in the North East. The local context of the industry here is part of the fabric of my everyday life and on another level, many friends, acquaintances, and students of mine had direct connections to the industry. However, I had relationships with them which were built around other factors apart from their involvement in the industry and my interest in it as a researcher. O’Riain sums up the dynamic nature of the process:

With each extension came new questions, new interviewees and new situations to be explored. The extension of the ethnographic case depended upon the personal journey of the ethnographer- from the team to the industry, forward into the exploration of careers and backwards through the recognition of shared personal histories. These made the boundaries of the case porous, the unit of analysis complex and the object of study a moving target.

O’Riain in Byrne and Ragin (2009:296).

Approaching the call centre - a brief survey

Call centres have been extensively discussed and debated over the past decade and a number of often radically different approaches towards them have been taken. Sometimes they have been used primarily as examples to support more general theoretical positions and as such, they are often thought to be indicative of something wider and more general. Such an approach is relatively common within social scientific research in general, and examples of it in relation to call centres include Fernie and Metcalf (1998) and Glucksmann (2004). For example, Fernie and Metcalf (1998) wished to present call centres as “electronic panoptica” and essentially constructed a model of call centre work in order to support their theoretical points whilst ignoring features, which did not sit comfortably with the Foucauldian model which they wished to promote (this point is fully developed by Bain and Taylor (2000)). This tendency to generalize where convenient, and ignore diversity in order to preserve the integrity of a theoretical position, is important to avoid. As Bain and Taylor (2000) further comment, diversity becomes increasingly apparent once call centre work comes under scrutiny at a wider and more grounded level:

despite similarities in the integration of computer and telephone technologies, centres differ in relation to a number of important variables-size, industrial sector and market, complexity and length of call cycle time, nature of operations (inbound, outbound or combined), the nature and effectiveness of representative institutions including trade unions, and management style and priorities.

Bain and Taylor (2000:7).

Such a position is one where the labour process itself is central, essentially the same position taken by Burawoy. The labour process is central to work and consequently very important to social life in general. As such the researcher must try to understand and engage with the context within which the work is occurring in order to fully understand it. This process may require a multiplicity of approaches if it is to be successful, including interviews, focus groups and observation, of both the direct and participant kind. Research of any kind, but in particular, that which is done in any workplace setting raises the question asked by Howard Becker over forty years ago, that of “Whose side are we on?” (1967). Within the study of work, it can be argued that there are several commonly held positions. Studies such as Fernie and Metcalf’s largely ignore the question; the work place in their instance only serves to prove a theoretical point and little else. Labour process theorists largely side with workers and seek to represent their concerns with variable degrees of overt/covert political commitment. This is similar to what, in the UK at least, was until recently the position taken by most researchers in the field of what was termed “industrial relations”. The other most common position is largely technical but implicitly on the side of management. This approach views the labour process as something that is there to be made leaner and more efficient. This approach is largely the direct descendent of Taylorism/scientific management and is common to many business/management studies approaches.

My research has tried to capture some of the interplay of these forces and the backdrop against which they occur. To achieve this meant acknowledging that a complex interplay of circumstance and organization was operating, and that this lies at the heart of the research. If the relations of the workplace and how they went beyond it were not adequately researched, then it would not have been possible to reach any meaningful conclusions about the novelty of the call centre and its place in an industrial or post-industrial epoch. Research carried out in the call centre industry has largely focused on the workplace and the labour process. There are a number of reasons for this. Firstly, the majority of studies hitherto undertaken have originated from the perspective of business/management studies or the labour process/labour relations stance, which are of course well established. The industry itself, conducts research with a preference for quantitative and summative data, for example, the annual reports by Contactbabel. Some commentators have “a foot in both camps”; for example, Deery, Iverson and Walsh (2002) focused on the effect of the labour process upon workers and the resulting turnover of labour, demonstrating both that call centre work is emotional labour and suggesting strategies by which employers attempt to minimize the negative effects of this. This could be of use to both management and organized labour. Another instance of a more traditional labour process approach is Callaghan and Thompson’s (2001) paper “Edwards Revisited: Technical Control and Call centres.” This study sought to evaluate Edward’s ideas about technical control, originally developed in the context of factory settings in a call centre environment. They investigated a call centre in Scotland which they identify as “Telebank”, an organization with about 2000 employees. Again, direct

discussion with the workforce was at the heart of the methodological approach, as they explain:

Data collection took the form of taped semi-structured interviews with 24 CSRs (customer service representatives) from 2 teams and 14 managers. In addition there was non-participant observation of recruitment, training and the labour process. Repeat visits were made to the research site over a period of nine months. Finally a research diary was kept containing additional observations and contextual comments

Callaghan and Thompson (2001:17).

Thus, they based their research on a case study approach in order to verify and inform their conclusions. The case study approach is useful, and widely used when investigating the world of work. However, the case is more often than not equivalent to one particular workplace. In my own investigations, I did not want to be limited to particular workplaces, as the wider circumstances of workers lives were equally important to me. I have also taken a case study approach, but my cases were not specific work places they were instead geographical regions, namely the North East of England and the Indian subcontinent. As such, it was also necessary to effectively research and produce biographies for each region, with particular reference to their industrial and wider socioeconomic history. The importance and role of biography in sociology has been much discussed and can be seen as closely related to the “structure/action” debate. C. Wright Mills in “The Sociological Imagination” (1959) discussed the notion of individual biography at length, memorably declaring that:

neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both.

(Wright Mills, 1959: 12).

My idea was to provide biographies of the regions within which the biographies of individuals could be located. The acknowledgement of each region as a case also reflected my desire to see working in the call centre industry as a complex pattern of interactions. As such, I did not want to equate region with structure and individuals with action in traditional terms as, to do so, might have suggested that region determined work and life. Instead, I wished to say that place made a difference and was an important context which shaped the industry and its working practices, alongside other contexts, such as the global.

Making Comparisons

The methodological strategy has attempted via the extended case study method utilized by Burawoy in “Global Ethnography” and the casing process to create a space within which the global and the local, structure and agency are represented in a variety of different forms, in the guise of cases. I use the term case in its widest sense as these cases may be individuals, but they may equally be places or situations. Consequently, it can be argued that a comparative strategy is at the heart of the research. However as Ragin (1987) has pointed out that:

there have been several attempts to delineate the boundaries of comparative social science. Yet there is still little agreement today concerning its domain.

Ragin (1987:3)

Ragin outlines three broad positions towards comparative research within the social sciences. Firstly, he examines the view that all research is by its very nature comparative

research. Ragin comments on and commends this view; however he argues that it is not tenable due to the differing orientations of researchers towards comparison. Ragin argues that this is particularly stark within social sciences as the comparative tradition has been dominated by qualitative approaches, which is, as he points out, unusual within the social scientific tradition. The second position he outlines is one whereby comparisons are made on a cross societal basis, i.e. the behavior or phenomena investigated are contrasted on the basis that they are occurring within different societies. The third position Ragin outlines is one where comparisons between cases are made on multiple levels.

It can be argued that it is this type of comparative perspective which lends itself to the process of “casing” which Ragin outlines in his (1992) work and is discussed in some depth above. Within this research the process of comparison was essential and utilized the multi level approach. The research could be conceived as being “cross societal” as it covers the call centre industry in the UK and India, but this would not be helpful, due to the fact that there were considerable differences between the different localities within the subcontinent and those who lived and worked within them. The process of comparison was instead one whereby *differences* between the cases were as important as *similarities* as each was considered in terms of its ability to represent a different “instance” (see below for a fuller discussion of the term). In order to fully understand the role of place and the importance of locality within the research it was important to realize that they could not be taken for granted.

Documents as sources - building regional biographies

In order to achieve portraits or biographies of the regions, a great deal of time was spent doing documentary. These varied and came in a number of forms, including industry reports, industry journals, local newspapers, local television reports and programmes. Where the North East of England was concerned, I was exposed to such information as part of my everyday existence. For instance, regional newspapers such as “The Sunderland Echo”, “The Shields Gazette” and the “Newcastle Evening Chronicle” were a logical starting point. I observed news regarding the industrial stories which dealt with the creation, loss, and sometimes the saving of jobs in the regions call centres. Many column inches were devoted to the issue of off shoring call centre work, particularly the closure of Lloyds TSB’s Newcastle operation in 2004. I did not confine my attentions to just the news stories, but also kept an eye on the jobs pages, noticing whether call centres were actively recruiting, either directly or via recruitment agencies. One additional trend which quickly became apparent from the local press was the involvement of local further and higher education institutions, as training providers for the industry, providing courses for would-be agents and diploma courses for their managers. These were, of course, just one of many documentary sources which played important parts in the initial stages of development of this project. Later in the process, I also accessed reports on the industry compiled by government departments e.g. DTI (2004) and the industry itself e.g. Contactbabels’ annual “state of the industry” reports. Also, the literature provided by local government and regional development agencies in order to try and attract call centres and other new businesses, was easily available on paper and online. It is important to consider the methodological implications of the use of such documents.

Scott (1990) argues that when considering any documentary source there are four basic criteria we should make reference to. These are: Authenticity, Credibility, Representativeness, and Meaning. To assess authenticity the key question is “is the evidence genuine and of an unquestionable origin?” For credibility the question is; “is the evidence free from error and distortion?” Regarding representativeness we should ask:

is the evidence typical of its kind, and, if not, is the extent of its untypicality known?

Scott (1990) cited in Bryman (2001:370-371).

Finally, meaning “is the evidence clear and comprehensive?” As is self evident, Scott’s criteria are extremely rigorous, and arguably, there may be some issues with most sources. Its value is as a heuristic device; a check list for the researcher to run through when considering a source. As mentioned above, many of the documentary sources about the North East were part of my general life and consciousness and, as such, it would have been easy to have been relatively uncritical towards them. A source of information I made use of and regularly read was “Call Centre Focus”, a monthly magazine which is an industry journal, dealing mainly with operational concerns regarding location, staffing, training, management styles and technology. I also attended the UK Industry trade fair, “Call Centre Expo” at the Birmingham NEC in 2006. It was important for me to do this in order to gain an insight into how the industry saw itself. Observing it in this way told me a great deal more than a focus group of call centre managers could, largely due to the fact that I could be a passive observer.

Trying to get a sense of the context the industry operates within on the Indian subcontinent via documentary sources was not quite as easy as it had been in the North East. In order to get a sense of the industry's public face I accessed the NASSCOM (India's IT and BPO industry representative body) website and made use of its online resources. In order to get a sense of what social and political commentators in India had to say about the industry, I accessed the online version of "Economic and Political weekly" on a regular basis (this publication discusses all things of interest to social scientists on the subcontinent. There is little in the UK to make a meaningful comparison with unfortunately). During my time in India, I read the newspapers every day, usually the "Times of India" or "The Hindu", again noting news stories relating to the call centre industry but, also, looking for their presence in advertisements and in the "situations vacant" columns. Thus far, whilst considering documents and their use and usefulness it has been the assumption that the authors of these documents are third parties, and usually unknown. However, one document which proved essential was one written by myself. During my field work in India I kept a daily journal; its purpose was personal and I intended it to be separate to my research notes. However, on reflection my research notes focused on meetings and conversations, which was fine, but I found myself wishing to locate and ground the memories of the meetings these notes stirred. I found this information in my journal where I had written accounts of each day where I had been who I had met how I had felt. Read together my supposedly "separate" notes and journal made much more sense. Consequently, they were enhanced in respect of Scott's four criteria. What the journal provided me with was a reminder of the context in which I found myself. I did not require these contextual reminders to the same extent, of course,

when considering research notes made at meetings in the North East of England, as I was examining the document from within that same context.

Researchers and their role in shaping research

The researcher is part of the research process and needs to make a conscious effort to understand and evaluate their part within the process and the bearing it has on the outcome of the research. This is, of course, nothing new; many studies of work and industry have stressed the importance of researchers developing an understanding of the link between place, work and workers have been carried out. If we return to my oft cited example of Dennis *et al.*'s (1956) "Coal is our Life", its central premise is that the community and the industry it was engaged in gave rise to a particular form of social life. However, this can be problematic as one of the authors points out in the preface to the second edition (1969):

in "Coal is our life", phenomena like the relations between husband and wife, or the nature of leisure activities are viewed primarily from the standpoint of grasping their interrelation with the forms of activity and social relationships imposed by the coal mining work upon which the community is based, this emphasis will tend to obscure that each of these particular relationships is extended beyond the community, in both space and time

Dennis, Henriques and Slaughter (1969:7).

Henriques is warning against assuming that work is always the central determining feature. So, in light of this I aimed to explore the degree to which work influences other parts of workers lives. "Coal is our Life" is effectively a work of industrial anthropology which uses the ethnographic approach pioneered by Malinowski and Radcliffe Brown.

But it is probably more closely related to the approach used by Jahoda and Larzasfeld in their study of an unemployed community in Austria “Marienthal” (2002). However, stressing the importance of locality as a frame of reference does not, necessarily, require a full blown ethnography.

The question of the politics of industrial life and the importance of locality in shaping them has been relatively common in the sociology of work. For example, this is evident in Richard Brown’s (1970) studies of Tyneside’s shipyard communities undertaken in the late 1960’s and early 1970’s. Garrahan and Stewart’s “The Nissan Enigma” (1992) spends a great deal of time outlining the significance of the Wearside locality. Beynon’s “Working for Ford” (1973) attempted to understand the Halewood plant, not just as a factory, but as a factory on Merseyside with a strong trade union tradition. These things are important because, if they are misunderstood or misrepresented other aspects of the research may well be rendered unintelligible or their significance diminished.

For example, in order to explain the importance Beynon assigned to the information given to him by the shop stewards, his key informants, it’s necessary to understand the history and significance of trade unionism on Merseyside. Many of Beynon’s critics failed to appreciate this and criticized his “bias” towards the stewards. However, it is doubtful that Beynon could have achieved and maintained his access over a long field period without the stewards’ goodwill. In many ways, given the context of the plant in the era which Beynon studied it, the stewards’ were much more important gate-keepers than Ford management were. His study arguably could have been done (and largely was) without the co-operation of the Ford Motor Company but not without the co-operation of

the stewards and their detailed knowledge of how the plant worked and of those who worked within it. The importance of trade unionism and union organization within Ford at Halewood also needs to be situated with the wider context of work on Merseyside. This demonstrates again the importance of regional biography to understanding context. It also illustrates the need for the researcher to recognize the limitations of their understanding and to re-evaluate it in the light of the knowledge of those in the field, on an ongoing basis.

Conducting the semi structured interviews

A major part of the research process consisted of undertaking semi-structured interviews and analyzing the results via the NVivo 2 software package. An account of how participants were approached and the interviews conducted is outlined fully in the next chapter. However, it is worth discussing some of the general features of using interviewing as a methodological approach. May (1993), when attempting to define the nature of interviews cites Ackroyd and Hughes (1981), who argue that interviews are:

encounters between a researcher and a respondent in which the latter is asked a series of questions relevant to the subject of the research. The respondents' answers constitute the raw data analysed at a later point in time by the researcher

Ackroyd and Hughes (1981) cited in May (1993:91).

Most methodological discussions of interviews, e.g. Bryman (2001), May (1993), Denscombe (1998), emphasize the considerable amount of resources, particularly in terms of time which interviews require, and also raise questions about the reliability of the data collected through them. I would argue that whilst these points may serve as

useful contrasts and points of debate when attempting to differentiate interviewing from quantitative methods, they are of little relevance to my research. Firstly, interviews should not be seen as time-consuming; they were without exception for me time well spent and were always thought provoking. Issues regarding reliability were also outweighed by the high validity of the data produced and, also, rendered largely irrelevant by the adoption of a theoretical sampling strategy. More pertinent to me are points which Denscombe (1998) makes about the nature of the interview interaction/process itself. He points out that interviews are not conversations, an obvious point perhaps, but one often overlooked. He argues that there are three key assumptions at work, firstly, they involve the consent of the respondents, secondly, and responses are “on the record and for the record.” Thirdly, the researcher sets the agenda. These points remind the researcher to consider the dynamics and power issues which go on during interviews and be mindful of them. Luckily, I was an experienced interviewer and prior to starting this research project. However, I needed to remember that my participants were not usually experienced research participants and needed to be guided and helped through the process. This, however, involved walking a fine line. I had to take responsibility for the process and manage it but I had to do so without assuming too much, or coming across as bossy or authoritarian and intimidating the subject. This was very important as I was aware of how little I knew in comparison to my respondents. Interviews need to be an arena within which knowledge can be discussed and exchanged. As such, I am rather uncomfortable with the traditional terms “researcher” and “respondent” as it suggests a one-way flow of information, rather than an active two-way

flow of ideas. Throughout my fieldwork I tried to create a situation whereby the interviewees and I could both play out our roles within the interview process.

Bateson (1984) argues that research is an interactive process within which all the particular participants have particular roles. His points are made in relation to social surveys but I would argue that the points he makes hold good for the interaction in qualitative processes also:

I conceive of a social survey as a social system consisting of three participants (client, researcher and informant....) engaged in common task: the production of knowledge. To understand the data construction process and its problems one must understand the respective roles and functions of these three participants and their mode of interaction

Bateson (1984:8)

If Bateson's ideas are taken onboard, it is possible to understand what was going on in this process and to appreciate the interviews in the fullest sense possible. All of the participants were involved in the call centre industry and they told me how they viewed that industry. They were my window into the industry and by talking to them I encountered more facets of the industry than I could have done as an observer in one setting. Within the interviews I tried to facilitate as best as possible the conditions where the participants could recall, condense, examine and discuss their views. I would argue that this is a useful framework for understanding the interviews that I undertook, as it demonstrates how the research process in terms of data collection was to a great degree as Bateson (1984) argues collaborative one. My task was that of gathering and collating the insights of numerous individuals who all had a different positions and perceptions, and often strong opinions about the industry. The research could not have been

undertaken on the basis that the researcher is somehow further up the hierarchy of knowledge than anyone else.

Ethical issues

There were very few ethical concerns regarding the basic design of the research. I did not intend to do covert research within the workplace, or even overt observation. None of the participants were vulnerable individuals in any way and all were capable of giving informed consent. As such the four main areas/issues that normally give rise to ethical concerns in social research were avoided. These areas can be summarized as:

Whether there is harm to participants; whether there is a lack of informed consent; whether there is an invasion of privacy: whether deception is involved

Diener and Crandall (1978) cited in Bryman (2001:479).

Instead, ethical issues for the project were more about research practice and the conduct of the research. All participants had the research fully explained to them and the opportunity to ask any questions they wished to about the process. It was made clear that all responses were on the record and for the record. Participants were asked if they minded their comments being tape recorded; most did not. I did not use formal written consent forms but when recording, I always asked on tape at the start of the interview if they were comfortable with the explanation of the research I had given them and I asked them to confirm that they were happy to go ahead with the interview. Anonymity was also offered to participants and in most cases the names of participants and their workplaces have been changed in order to protect this. However, those who are public

figures such as academics, entrepreneurs or senior trade union officials have not been anonymised on the basis that they have made similar comments on the subjects I spoke to them about within the public domain on previous occasions.

Borrowing the tools of grounded theory

The last general methodological point to address is how the tools of grounded theory became part of my approach. These tools can be summarized as theoretical sampling, coding, theoretical saturation and constant comparison (Bryman, 2001). These tools are usually thought of as leading to particular outcomes. Bryman identifies these as: concept(s), category/categories, properties, hypotheses, and theory.

There has been debate about the differences between case study based methods, and the methodology of grounded theory. Indeed, this has been commented on by Burawoy on several occasions (1979, 1991, 1998 and 2000). His basic criticism of grounded theory is that it is positivist and non reflexive. Consequently, he regards it as inferior to the type of ethnographic, extended case method based research for which he is so well known. This debate merits some attention due to the fact that I have used the ideas and methods of Burawoy's extended case method and also utilized some of the tools of grounded theory.

It is important to note that Burawoy does not view the extended case method and grounded theory as polar opposites, on the contrary they have much in common as Burawoy (1991) himself points out:

the distinctiveness of grounded theory and the extended case method both of which accept that micro and macro are discrete and causally related levels of reality and that generalizations can be derived from the comparisons of particular social situations

Burawoy (1991:273-274)

He also accepts that both approaches have weaknesses as regards the generalizability of the findings they produce:

On the one hand the extended case method, by explicating the link between micro and macro, constitutes the social situation in terms of the particular external forces that shape it. It faces the problem of generalization. On the other hand, grounded theory, by pursuing generalizations across social situations, obscures the specific contextual determinations of the social situation.

Burawoy (1991:274)

The charge then is that grounded theory abandons the specificity of the contexts within which data is collected in order to try and form generalizable theory. Burawoy claims that the extended case method does not do this as it remains faithful to its particular context and the forces that shape it. I would agree that context is extremely important, however it can be argued that Burawoy over emphasizes the differences between the methods. Indeed he does not suggest that the product of the extended case method is a micro-sociology and nothing else, instead the method:

seeks to uncover the macro foundations of a microsociology. It takes the social situation as the point of empirical examination and works with given general concepts and laws about states, economies, legal orders and the like to understand how those microsituations are shaped by wider structures.

Burawoy (1991:282)

This is what is termed extension within the extended case method, however it can be argued that what is going on is a process by which the specific is related to the general.

Mjoset (2005) argues that Burawoy misunderstands grounded theory.

Mjoset takes up the charge that grounded theory removes the particular in order to generalize:

This claim ..that grounded theory strides towards covering laws through inductive procedures. This is simply wrong! Burawoy himself notes that Glaser and Strauss (1967:Ch 1V) distinguished between substantive and formal grounded theory. A substantive theory would be an explanation that at the present local research frontier is accepted by the research community as a valid account with reference to a specified context, such as the Nordic welfare states in the 1990's. a formal theory, in contrast, would be a module (some prefer the term mechanism) that can apply in various contexts (e.g. "the strength of weak ties" in network theory), but one that is not explanatory in and of itself. It only becomes explanatory when used in context.

Mjoset (2005:9)

What is clear is that despite the debate both the extended case method and grounded theory offer useful methodological tools for the researcher. I would also argue that within my research there is no attempt to form the type of general laws that Burawoy objects to. It also seems to me that the processes of moving from data to theory in the extended case method and grounded theory as illustrated by the two previous quotations have a very great deal in common.

I would also point out how this research is informed by the wider epistemological and ontological assumptions of critical realism, of which Burawoy himself is an exponent. Ackroyd (2004) argues that critical realism, as opposed to other approaches such as positivism:

allows researchers to be selective in their choice of investigatory tools. Insightful empirical research is a creative activity in which valuable insights cannot be produced by the routine use of particular research techniques

Ackroyd, in Ackroyd and Fleetwood (2004:137).

So for the critical realist, the selection of tools which are fit for purpose is essential, but the selection of those tools does not necessarily imply allegiance to a wider methodological stance. As Ackroyd further outlines:

Methods are a means of accomplishing things and should be thought of as being like tools. It all depends what kind of tasks there are to do and what is being sought to be accomplished what tool should be used.....we may become much more skilled in the use of some tools and spend much more time using them, but there is no point in thinking our favourite tool is the only one that is essential or valuable. Only a child takes a hammer from the tool box everytime.

Ackroyd, in Fleetwood and Ackroyd (2004:139).

In the same manner, I had no particular motive for using these tools other than their utility for the job in hand, nor did I consider that their utilization would commit the research to a wholesale grounded theory approach.

I have already discussed how crucial the ability to talk directly to workers about their experiences on a one to one basis was to the project. This required a methodological approach capable of allowing the researcher access to workers inside and outside of their workspace and drawing conclusions from the researcher's interpretation of the action. Also, and perhaps more importantly, was the need to allow call centre workers to reflect on the meaning of their work and allow them to articulate their own interpretations. Complexity was also central; Strauss (1987) argues that:

the basic question facing us is how to capture the complexity of reality (phenomena) we study and how to make convincing sense of it

(Strauss, 1987:12).

Strauss, of course, argues that the method of “grounded theory” that he jointly originated with Glaser (1967), is the best way to do this. The inductive approach had much to commend it as it allows theoretical development to occur over the course of the research project and, by its very nature, stops the researcher from modifying data in order to support a preconceived, theoretical model. As such, it seemed an appropriate methodological approach to draw on. I did not, however, wish to pursue my research wholly on the assumptions made by this methodological approach. Whilst I agreed broadly with the idea that it is important to ground theoretical explanations and conclusions within the data collected during a project such as this, this alone will not suffice. For this research to be successful, the researcher could not begin “tabula rasa” for both methodological and practical purposes. Methodologically, because to research the area without grounding the process within the context of both the locality and the industry would have been disastrous and also cast serious doubts upon the researcher’s credibility. This would have affected the project at a practical level, because if the researcher cannot demonstrate a certain level of understanding, it is unlikely that they will be successful in securing the co-operation of those in the industry and retaining their goodwill. Also, the researcher has to start somewhere; the challenge is to be able to display a level of knowledge of the subject which will allow informants to feel confident that the researcher is competent and well-informed without assuming too much and, consequently stifling, informant’s responses.

As has already been noted, if the reality of “Living the call centre” is to be grasped in any shape or form it must be shown in a way that can be recognized by those who live it. As such the need to talk to call centre workers, managers and those involved with the

industry on a wider basis was paramount. “Grounded theory” then provided food for thought and practical tools rather than a wholesale methodological approach. One can, I believe, as a critical realist “borrow a shovel without buying the whole farm.”

Conclusion

This chapter has tried to deal with the broad methodological approaches that the research drew upon. The next chapter deals with how those approaches became practical methods and how they were applied. It is now to how these methodological approaches became practical methods and were applied which we now turn.

CHAPTER FOUR-METHODS USED AND NOTES ON FIELDWORK

The core content of this thesis is based on semi structured interviews with call centre agents, team leaders and managers which were collected between 2003 and 2007. 35 interviews were carried out. Due to the nature of the project and the relative scarcity of resources available to a lone researcher, I used the strategy of theoretical sampling, which is often associated with grounded theory approaches. This was done in order to increase the breadth and diversity of information collected from the relatively small sample. Participants were selected and approached on the basis that they were not the same as those previously interviewed and they represented a different “instance” and a point of comparison; for a fuller picture, see Glaser and Strauss (1967), Ragin (1994).

The interviews explored workers motivation for working within the call centre industry, the strategies they employed in order to sustain themselves within it and their destinations. What emerged is a complex picture which does indeed involve the labour process within the workplace but, also, a great deal more. Factors such as a worker’s domestic arrangements, educational commitments, long term career goals and the state of local labour markets were all part of a pattern that emerged.

Sampling strategies

The approach I took drew on two well established strategies. Firstly that of theoretical sampling, a strategy which is associated with the methodological approach of grounded theory, and secondly the technique of snowball sampling.

Theoretical sampling is, as pointed out in the previous section, one of the tools of grounded theory which of course originated with Glaser and Strauss, they describe it thus:

theoretical sampling is the process of data collection for generating theory whereby the analyst jointly collects, codes, and analyzes his data and decides what data to collect next and where to find them, in order to develop his theory as it emerges. This process of data collection is controlled by the emerging theory.....The initial decisions for theoretical collection of data are based only on a general sociological perspective and on a general subject or problem area

Glaser and Strauss (1967:58).

Theoretical sampling allowed me to focus on particular instances, i.e. diversity within the relatively small amount of cases that I had the resources to examine. Although I was keen to examine as many different instances as I could, it was unlikely that I would be able to achieve what Glaser and Strauss term theoretical saturation.

Theoretical saturation is said to occur when all possible “instances” have been investigated. As Teddlie and Tashakkori (2009) explain the accumulation of instances is at the heart of a theoretical sampling strategy:

with theoretical sampling the researcher examines particular instances of the phenomenon of interest so that he or she can define and elaborate on its various manifestations.

Teddlie and Tashakkori (2009:177)

Saturation was not something which I thought was possible given the resources at my disposal. Additionally, the very nature of my research meant that it was going to generate further sets of questions rather than produce a comprehensive set of answers. However I did manage to cover a good range of instances, engaging with call centre employees, call

centre managers, local entrepreneurs, union official and those involved with the development of the industry in terms of both workforce training and the development of infrastructure. It is also important to remember as Bryman (2001) points out that:

Theoretical sampling refers to the sampling, not just of people, but also of settings and events.

Bryman (2001:305)

This would appear to link well with the earlier points made by Ragin (1987) and (1992) as it shows how a multilevel comparative approach and a process of casing can be complemented by a theoretical sampling strategy. Although it is important to point out that whilst Ragin is primarily concerned with the production of cases via these methods I was much more concerned with the development of typologies through these processes, this is illustrated by the discussion of “Stayers, Passers Through and Serial Agents” which can be found in chapter seven.

My cases occurred in a wide range of settings, on different continents and in very different local settings. Theoretical sampling is a sampling strategy that is both flexible and emergent, and this fitted the research strategy very well. A quantity based approach may well have been appropriate if my focus had been the labour process itself. However, as I have been at pains to point out, the labour process and people’s relationship with the industry served largely as a common starting point, a place to begin exploring wider issues about the workplace, the local environment, personal histories, situations and aspirations to name but a few. Also, theoretical sampling was also a highly practical strategy for me to use, as trying to use a probability based strategy would have introduced other problems. For example, I would have required a sample frame to draw a sample

from, such as a list of workers from a call centre operation. This would have been very difficult to obtain for a number of reasons. Firstly, issues of data protection and confidentiality would have made it difficult for employers to disclose this information to me. Secondly, it would have been highly unlikely that employers would have even been inclined to assist a researcher such as myself in gaining direct access to their workers. This was largely due to the issues which surrounded the call centre industry in general at the time, with the mass media focusing on questions regarding poor working conditions, excessive monitoring, poor pay for workers, poor service for customers and the off shoring of work to overseas locations. All these issues, and the attention they attracted, meant that researchers like me were regarded with suspicion at best, and at worst hostility. So asking for the names and addresses of the workforce in any given centre was unlikely to meet with a positive response. The issue of off shoring was particularly sensitive during the early stages of my research in the North East with the closure of “Lloyds TSB’s” Newcastle Telephone banking operation after its services were transferred to a centre in Mumbai. This prompted fears that the industry would disappear from the region just as quickly as it had appeared a decade earlier. Another problem which such a strategy would have been that access to call agents would have been facilitated via their managers. I would not have felt happy with this as I did not wish to be perceived as being associated with employers, this would potentially altered workers attitudes towards participation i.e. they may well have felt that they had no alternative other than to co-operate for fear of negative consequences. This would also have lead to problems regarding the reliability of data. If workers believed that their answers were not going to remain confidential, and would somehow find their way back to their team

leaders and managers, they were unlikely to give “full and frank” accounts of their working lives.

The next part of the sampling strategy used the highly practical snowball sampling technique. The snowball sampling approach is a non-probability sampling scheme in which you begin by sampling one person, then ask that person for the names of other people you might interview, then interview them and obtain a list of people from them, and so on. The idea has been used extensively in research since the 1950’s onwards, and was outlined in detail by Goodman (1961).

In order to try and move toward “saturation” it was necessary to have several snowballs in motion simultaneously. This was a highly practical tactic too, as snowballs by their very nature have a tendency to lose their momentum and melt! Thus, if this happened to one it meant that leads from one of the other snowballs could still be followed up. Getting access to people involved in the call centre industry in the North East was not particularly difficult as I had several friends and acquaintances that had connections with the industry, they suggested people and or organizations to contact. Of course, the next hurdle was to make contact and establish my credentials and explain the research. I would argue that this stage is crucial, first impressions do count and if initial contact is not managed well then potential participants vanish very quickly. I found the best thing to do was simply to contact people, explain who I was and the research, and take it from there. This was very productive and generally positive. Once access was gained and a rapport established, it was important to maintain it. My use of semi-structured interviews, as outlined above, allowed flexibility regarding the issues raised either by myself or the informant. This was

very important during the early stages because I had consciously acknowledged that although; I had broad ideas about the industry I did not know what the most important issues were for those working in it. Therefore, I always asked participants if there was anything that they wanted to talk about which I hadn't asked them about, or whether there were any important issues which they felt that I hadn't covered. The responses I got became integrated with my "interview schedule", a process that evolved with every encounter. As such, it was important to establish that I could contact them again to ask additional questions or clarify points already made. So one of the final questions I put to the participants was:

Would you be happy to talk to me again at some stage?

This also allowed me to contact participants again to ask for subsequent contacts if those they provided first time around proved unfruitful. My concluding question was in virtually every instance:

Do you know anyone who you think might be interested in talking to me?

More often than not, this produced a name and a number and sometimes more than one. From my point of view, recommendations of this sort were invaluable as it made initial contact far easier. The fact that they had been suggested by someone previously known to them established the credentials of the researcher in their minds much more rapidly than a "cold" approach would have done. It also allowed them to verify what might be involved and what might be asked from a known third party rather than them having to take the researcher's words at face value. Another major plus point with snowball sampling was

that it ensured that the momentum of the research was kept up on the researchers part. Potential informants had to be contacted in a matter of days not weeks if their co-operation was to be secured. The technique of course had its limitations. Workers were likely to recommend their friends, who sometimes had very similar situations and backgrounds to themselves and they were often from the same workplace. This did not help towards achieving the theoretical saturation required. This limitation was overcome by the already mentioned strategy of having multiple snowballs.

Participants involved with the research in the North East of England

The following is a list of those who I spoke to in the North East, their positions in the industry and the nature and extent of their contribution to the research. Where appropriate, the names of individuals and organizations have been changed in order to preserve anonymity.

Informant	Position/ Role	Participation in Research
"Alex"	Leader of Diploma in call centre management course University of Sunderland Business School	Interview participant and provided background on local education providers involvement in the industry.
"Sandra"	Course leader call centre Basic training course , City of Sunderland College	Interview participant
"June"	Call centre Liaison Officer, City of Sunderland College	Interview participant
"A"	Friend and Initial contact at Royal and Sun Alliance	Initial contact and "gatekeeper"
"D" & "J"	Personnel managers, UK Insurance company, call centre, Doxford Park, Sunderland.	Interview participants who also allowed me access to their call centre

"Gary"	Business Development manager City of Sunderland Council	Provided background on local and regional policy
"Jo"	Advisor City Direct Services , (City of Sunderland call centre)	Interview participant
"Dave"	Senior Advisor City Direct Services	Interview participant
"Liz"	Call centre Trainer (Private Sector)	Interview participant
"Shona"	Call centre consultant and training provider.	Interview participant and gatekeeper who introduced me to several trainees and training providers.
"Linda" "Barbara" and "Debbie"	Call centre Trainees, Bracken Hill Business Park Peterlee, County Durham	Interview participants
"Lisa"	Recruitment manager, Albany Direct call centre, Bracken Hill Business Park, Peterlee	Interview participant
"Rachel"	Call Agent, More than, Doxford Park	Key interview participant who introduced me to several other call centre agents
"Sabina"	Call Agent National Rail Enquiries , Newcastle	Interview participant
"Jenny"	Former Team leader, Barclays Doxford Park Sunderland	Interview participant
"Jannette"	Former Team leader, London Electric, Barclays Doxford Park, Sunderland	Interview participant
"Carla"	Call agent, More than, Doxford Park, Sunderland	Interview participant
"Carly"	Call agent, Multiple call centres in the North East	Interview participant
"Nicola"	Call Marker, Lloyds/TSB, Wessington, Sunderland	Interview participant
"Chris"	Call Agent and Centre Union rep, Lloyds /TSB Wessington, Sunderland	Interview participant
"Keith"	UNIFI Regional officer (UNFI is now part of AMICUS)	Gave information on the unions activities, by telephone.

“Peter”	TSB Staff association Regional rep	Outlined the strategy behind the campaigns run in the North East to prevent the off-shoring of work from Lloyds TSB’s Newcastle operation.
Paul Callaghan	Local IT Entrepreneur	Interview participant , who gave a perspective on technological developments and the “new economy” of the North East
“Helen and Steve”	Call centre agents who lived together and worked together	Interview participants

Research in India 2006

The second research location was the Indian subcontinent. Whilst this study did not set out to be a cross cultural comparative study, with the UK examples and instances being primarily compared with those in India, as mentioned above, it could be read in such a manner. But within this study, I would argue that comparison within the UK cases and the Indians cases is as important as comparison between the cases in the two locations. Accessing the industry in India served a number of purposes. Firstly, it was topical given the ongoing process of and debate around the issue of off shoring call centre work from the UK to locations such as the subcontinent. Secondly, it fitted well with the notion of a global ethnography methodological approach (discussed above) as it allowed an opportunity to explore the industry in a different context. Finally, it further contributed to the strategy of theoretical sampling by providing different instances and thus further contributing to theoretical saturation.

Access to the field in India was more problematic than it had been in the North East as I had no pre-existing contacts in the subcontinent. I initially approached the Indian IT and Communications Industries collective body NASSCOM asking whether they would be

willing to assist me with my research. I initially got no response; however, I was persistent and this eventually generated a rather curt reply informing me that NASSCOM had far too many requests from researchers than it could possibly assist with. So that was that for the Indian call centre industry's champion organization. I tried another approach; I contacted the British Council in both Delhi and Mumbai, hoping that they might be able to provide me with some contacts or suggestions of where to start. I got no response from Delhi at all which surprised me. Mumbai responded but completely misunderstood what I was trying to achieve. They thought I wanted to interview their staff as part of a research project, something which they politely declined to have anything to do with. These initial failures to gain any kind of positive response were rather disheartening. This was because of the relative ease which I had been able to access the industry in the North East. I approached some of my contacts in the North East, enquiring if they could put me in touch with those who deal with off shored aspects of their businesses. However, it emerged that these were managed by head offices beyond the region, or more often than not by third party companies who acted as brokers for off shored work, managing the whole off-shored operation for the UK company. They were reluctant, and often unable, to pass on details. However, I was able to eventually make contact with those in the industry in India and established several snowballs. One was with a company providing off shored solutions for call centre operations in the UK and the US. I managed to contact them via a friend who worked in the IT industry. He knew this company as they had been commissioned to provide the technical support service for a system which he had designed. I was introduced to, and subsequently contacted their relationship manager, whose role was to mediate and resolve any problems between the client and the call

centre operation in India. Through her, I managed to visit call centres in Mumbai and Pune and to talk with those involved with their management.

The second snowball was accessed through and set rolling by the late Peter Bain of Strathclyde University. Peter, in collaboration with Phil Taylor, had been at the forefront of research into call centres from the 1990's, and their work had formed much of the background reading I had done on the industry. I knew that Peter and Phil had spent time in India and had a good knowledge of the industry there. Peter responded to my initial email and suggested that I call him for a chat. He listened while I explained my research and told me about his own experiences in India. Peter contacted someone who had been a key contact for his research in India and introduced me and my research. Mr. Prasad is an organizer working in India for "UNI" (Union network international) one of the international trade unions based in Geneva, Switzerland. He put me in touch with other UNI representatives in India and also the recently founded UNITES (Union for IT Professionals) organization. I was able to meet both activists and workers from call centres in the New Delhi area, Mumbai and Bangalore areas. My field trip also luckily coincided with a conference marking UNITES first anniversary, to which I was invited. The conference was held in Mumbai, and gave me the opportunity to meet activists from around the country, international representatives from UNI and academics from India and further afield.

The final group of participants was three academics based at the Institute for Advanced Studies in Bangalore. They had carried out ethnographic research into the IT Software

industry in Bangalore and although not dealing directly with call centres, they were dealing with a similar industry with a similar demographic in the context of the same city.

Participants involved with the research in India

The following table lists those I spoke to prior to and during my time in India. As in the previous table, names of individuals and organizations have been changed when appropriate in order to maintain anonymity.

Informant	Position/Role	Participation in research
Peter Bain	Academic who had researched the call centre industry extensively in the UK and India	Key gate keeper who advised me how to approach the industry in India and provided me with contacts in the subcontinent
JSR Prasad	Indian Trade unionist Communication Workers union and UNI Union Network International	Important contact who gave me a wide number of people to contact with the communications industry in India
Karthik Sekhar	General secretary UNITES IT Professionals Union	Important contact who arranged for me to attend the UNITES Conference in Mumbai. Interview Participant
“JK”	Call centre relationship manager, brokers and oversees outsourced call centre operations in India	Principal Contact in the Management side of the Indian industry. Introduced me to a number of other contacts
“Rahul”	Call Centre operations manager, Pune	Satellite TV operations manager, key informant on the Indian domestic call centre industry
“Sandeep”	General Manager call centre, Borivali, Mumbai	Interview participant who allowed me access to his call centre operation in Mumbai.
“Sindu”	Call Agent ,HCL third party call centre Noida (Delhi), Union Activist	Interview participant and my initial contact in Delhi.
“P”	Call Agent, HCL third party call centre Noida (Delhi)	Interview participant

“Ragavan”	Call agent, HSBC call centre Bangalore	Interview participant
“Avi”	Call agent ICICI one Source Bangalore	Interview participant
“Raj”	Call agent, Bangalore	Interview participant
“Murali”	Accountant working in an “Outsourced” Third Party Accountancy operation	Interview participant
Phil Bowyer	General Secretary, UNI (Union Network International)	Interview participant
Dr Ernesto Narohna	Academic based at Indian institute of Management Ahmenabad	Met, and attended the paper session he gave along with Dr D’Cruz at the Mumbai UNITES conference.
Dr Premilla D’Cruz	Academic based at Indian institute of Management Ahmenabad	As above
“Prithvi”	Former call centre Team leader, call centre Recruitment Company MD	Interview participant
“Balu”	National representative Indian Communications workers Union	Interview participant
Dr Uphadaya	Academic based at the Institute for Advanced studies Bangalore	Met with and discussed their work on the IT industry in Bangalore
Dr Vasavi	Academic based at the Institute for Advanced studies Bangalore	Met with and discussed their work on the IT industry in Bangalore

Some comments on the interviews

As already discussed, I carried out semi-structured interviews in both the North East and in India. My approach, and what I asked, did not vary significantly, i.e. I did not have a set of North East questions and a set of India questions. The interviews were recorded onto tape, transcribed, then examined and analyzed with the assistance of the NVivo 2 qualitative analysis software package. Some participants did not want to be recorded and, in those instances, I made detailed notes during the meetings and wrote up any further observations and comments immediately after the interview had finished. There were also some meetings where a tape recording could not be made for other reasons, e.g. several

meetings took place in public settings where the level of background noise would have made sound recording impractical so, again, on these occasions detailed notes were made. I felt that it was important not to restrict the setting I was prepared to work in as it was important that the participant feel as comfortable as possible. As such, I let them choose where our meetings would take place. Consequently, meetings took place in university offices, pubs, cafés, hotel rooms, participants' homes and in workplaces.

Interview topics

I began all my interviews by explaining the study and ensuring that the participant was happy to talk to me and for the material to be used for written texts. I then asked them to tell me about their involvement in the call centre industry and how they had got into it. This tended to get them talking about their wider personal work history which would then be discussed and, more often than not, would include some explanation of their educational background too. If this didn't emerge it would be something that I would prompt for. I was also interested in participants' wider personal backgrounds so I would often ask about what their parents', siblings' or partners' occupations were. Basically, I was trying to get a biographical sketch of the participant before exploring their relationship with the industry in more depth. This was dependent upon their role, and it was important that I let them explain the particularities of their position and their workplace. This usually led to a discussion about where work fitted in with wider aspects of life such as family friends and other interests and projects. This area was very important as; again, it allowed an insight into the interface between work and wider biography.

Another issue which was always discussed was their future relationship with the industry; how they saw this developing, or ending, the reasons for this and of course what plans that they had for the future. The discussion around possible personal futures quite often led back to a wider discussion about the prospects for the industry as a whole in the area, something which most were quite happy to speculate on. Finally, all participants were given the opportunity to raise any points that they wished to discuss. This was valuable as it often turned out that specific workplaces had very specific issues which an outsider such as I would not have known about. I then took the opportunity to raise these subjects myself in subsequent interviews.

A note on context

It is worth mentioning that I prepared extensively before any interviewing took place. I examined academic literature, but I also examined statistics and reports on the industry in general and the specific areas studied and coverage in the local media. In the UK, I subscribed to a call centre industry monthly journal “Call Centre Focus” (CCF), and as mentioned previously in 2006 I also attended the industry’s trade convention “Call Centre Expo” at the NEC in Birmingham. Prior to going to India, I examined the various NASSCOM reports about the state of the industry in the subcontinent. I also monitored the domestic debate about the industry and call centre work in “Economic and Political Weekly”, which is a major arena for all things social scientific within India. So, having an idea of the context that my participants were in was important. This was easier to grasp in the North East as it was, and remains, my context.

However, it was also important that my impression of that context and what it meant did not get imposed upon my participants in my dialogue with them.

CHAPTER FIVE-LIVING THE CALL CENTRE- THE EXPERIENCE OF CALL CENTRE WORK

The call centre labour process has a number of generic features; however, the practices of work and workers and employers attitudes to work are shaped by their surroundings, consequently working in a call centre in the North East of England is a different experience to working in a call centre in Bangalore, or for that matter the experience of working in a call centre in the South of England. This chapter explores the experience of call centre work and its relationship and place within the wider cultures of work that surround it. It initially sets out and explains the cultures of work which are specific to the places where my participants lived and worked. Latterly, it explores the nature of those experiences for individuals within specific workplaces.

Cultures of work 1 - Call centre work in North East England

The North East of England defined to a great extent what is thought of as industrial society due to the fact that it was one of the world's very first industrialized regions. Images and ideas relating to the coal mining and heavy engineering that the region spawned not only inform conceptual views about industrial society, but also the everyday lived experience of those living in the region. Although there are virtually none of these industries left, the region still retains a very real industrial legacy. This legacy is in the landscape and the built environment: the physical bodies of many retain injuries and chronic diseases which came from industry in a culture which remains industrial despite the demise of industrial work. This is what Byrne (2002, 3: 279) has termed: "industrial

culture in a post-industrial world”. Byrne argues that what persists from industrial work are the social relations that surrounded it; what remains he terms an “industrial structure of feeling”. He explains this as:

the sentiments which inform and construct “ways of life”, ways of doing things, sense not just of personal but of collective identity, understanding of possibilities-survives beyond industrialism and remains, at least for the moment a common linking factor in the North East

Byrne (2002, 3:282).

How does this manifest itself in everyday life though? In particular how does it manifest itself in the workplace? In the spring of 2005, I went to meet a group of people who were on a training course funded by the local training enterprise council and being delivered by a call centre consultancy company. The aim was to give the students a basic training in call centre work, teaching the basic IT, skills, customer care skills, and voice skills necessary. They were then being supported as they sought work with the numerous call centre operators on the Bracken Hill business park in Peterlee, East Durham. As part of my visit, I accompanied the group to a recruitment open day being run by the “Albany” group’s call centre operation.(Albany is an insurance company, specializing in supplying replacement temporary vehicles for clients whose own vehicles off the road due to accidents, the company makes its money by recouping its costs from the third party’s insurer.) The group was quite diverse but the majority of them were women in their late twenties or early thirties, all were returning to the labour market, some after having children, others after the end of temporary contracts.

We had time after the visit to talk. I explained who I was and my research to them, and we got talking. At the time, I was recovering from a motorcycle accident, and was getting around on crutches. I had a large amount of metal work encasing my fractured shin. This proved a useful icebreaker as I immediately had to answer the group's questions about my injuries, and consequently they were open to my questions. I asked them what it was that attracted to them to call centre work. I was surprised by the reply:

Well its easy money, isn't it

Linda (name changed) 2005

The rest of the group nodded and agreed. I was caught off guard somewhat. I'm not sure what type of answer I had expected, perhaps something about a lack of opportunities elsewhere or something about the flexibility of the shift patterns yes, but "easy money"? I just hadn't expected it. I now know that this was because I'd never thought about call centre work from the perspective these women had on it. My immediate response was to ask "How?" (and probably look surprised). The women explained to me that the work was indoors, in a comfortable environment, that workers were able to sit down while working and that the work involved little physical effort, it was just about talking to people. It quickly became apparent that their view of call centre work as "easy money" (and my surprise at their reply) only made sense in the context of their previous experiences of work. Nearly all of the women had worked in factories a couple of them in garment finishing, but most of them in food processing. Linda had been a packer at the Walkers Crisps factory, work that meant physical activity whilst standing in a noisy environment, with activity dictated by the speed of the line, and few opportunities for

interaction with colleagues. When this is taken into account her perception of call centre work makes perfect sense.

It can be argued that as industrial work in the region declines further, eventually there will be no-one with this experience to bring the culture and habits of industrial work into the post industrial workspace. Indeed, several call centre workers I spoke to describe a generational difference as being evident in their work places, and demarcating groups of workers from one another. Rachel, who worked at Littlewoods, a very well established mail order company based in Sunderland told me that she thought this happened due to the firm's longevity and the continuity of employment for many workers. Littlewoods has:

been there years and years everyone in Sunderland has worked at Littlewoods or knows someone who has worked at Littlewoods at some point. My mother-in-law worked there when she was younger. It's older staff at Littlewoods really. There are a lot of people who've been there for twenty, thirty years or more, they get the long service medals at a big ceremony when they pass certain stages

Rachel, call centre agent, 2004.

The generation gap was exacerbated as the majority of workers had been used to doing the work of processing and dispatching mail order catalogues and goods using a paper based system. The computerization of this system and the call centre model of working were resisted. Both in terms of the technological change it brought, but also the working culture that went with it. As Rachel explained regarding the way of working:

they were used to the system way before we had the computers to keep the accounts on, some of them had been runners in the office and things like that...every time we had to learn something new about the computer system or when there was a new system introduced, they would all complain about it. They seemed to resist learning anything on the computers most of them. I mean there were exceptions but most of them were sort of... didn't like change, didn't like the new computer system, they preferred to write things down on paper

Rachel, call centre agent, 2004.

As for the culture of monitoring and surveillance that the call centre model brought with it, this was largely ineffective. I asked Rachel whether there was much effort to discipline the workforce at Littlewoods:

Not at Littlewoods, not really, no because, well, they just ignored them anyway. Like you got your cigarette break, your official break and then if you wanted to go for a cigarette during a shift, you were meant to put your name down on a piece of paper and the team leader would call you if there was a lull. But everyone just went, once an hour there would be a mass exodus to the tearoom, all the smokers would just go and have a cigarette

Rachel, call centre agent, 2004.

I think this point is significant as it shows how the habits and attitudes of older workers can be transmitted to their younger colleagues. So this can be seen as one of the ways that the residual culture is transmitted into the workplace and the workforce of the post-industrial North East.

Cultures of Work 2- Call centre work in India

The question of culture was an almost constant theme during my discussions with those involved with the call centre industry in India. Whilst the theme of culture was present during the fieldwork in the North East, it was not really referred to as such; the way it

was discussed was much more in sense of the “way we do things round here” both in terms of work and the world beyond work. For example, when I asked Rachel about why she had working started in call centres her reply can only be understood if the working culture and opportunities available in her locality are considered:

Well it’s highly paid compared to other part time work, such as shelf stacking which I’d done in the past, part time work in shops and things like that behind the counter. And you got to sit down all day, and it was inside, and it...was convenient hours really

Interview with Rachel, call centre agent, 2004

The way in which I discussed culture with my informants in India was rather different. Culture was discussed in essentially oppositional terms, usually in very broad terms, for example, the working practices of foreign businesses, or the third party outsourced providers are seen as a threat to, or as undermining “traditional” Indian culture. This was particularly evident in some of the Indian media’s coverage of the industry and those working within it. For example, in my discussion with Sindhu a call centre agent the idea of culture was a major theme. Sindhu works for a company providing technical support service to broadband customers in the UK. She is the Dehli Area Secretary for UNITES, a small but rapidly growing union for call centre and other BPO employees. Sindhu told me that a task that the union faces is challenging the negative popular image that the call centre industry currently has within India. Sindhu told me about a recent “Times of India” article, “Big bad BPO’s” (26/10/06) which she felt was indicative of this negative attitude. Sindhu told me that the media is uncomfortable with the industry. Consequently, they portray its workers as being hedonistic; they question their morality as they work at night, in settings where men and women are not separated. These workers

also have the money to relax by partying and drinking. As such, their working lives and the industry in general are seen as a threat to traditional Indian values. Sindhu felt that this attitude was rather peculiar as many young professionals, doctors and nurses for example, were doing night-work and their morality was not questioned in this manner. She had written a letter to the “Times of India” in reply to the article to point this out. This attitude was not confined to Delhi, I also heard about it from workers in Mumbai, Pune, and Bangalore. So why is this occurring? Call centre workers such as Sindhu are highly educated, work very hard and, if they are working within operations which serve the UK and the US, they are effectively on permanent night shifts. So their commitment to work and their industriousness are not questioned. The Indian media are not so much distressed by the work itself, what lies behind the “moral panic” is a concern about the type of lifestyle that this type of work creates. This revolves around a mixture of issues, firstly the call centre workforce in India is young, predominantly in the 20-35 age group, and it is also mixed. Mixed workplaces have not been the norm in India, occupations and workplaces are still, in many areas of the economy highly segregated. The nature of the shift patterns means that this group is isolated from their wider peer group and consequently they tend to socialize amongst themselves. Whilst the focus in the media is on morality, a major issue which came up time and again was the health of workers and the effects of call centre employment. There is much concern about the effects of night work and stress upon call centre workers. This was a key campaigning issue for UNITES, who with the support of UNI (Union Network International) were running a campaign called “Stop the BOSS” BOSS being an acronym for “Burn out stress syndrome”. A major part of this was distributing health advice packs to workers. The issues of health

did not feature to any great extent within the fieldwork in the North East of England and the issues regarding the moral welfare of workers were frankly non-existent. However, it can be argued that the experience of the North East's industrial past can help us make sense of the reactions to the call-centre industry in the Indian subcontinent. If we attempt to look beyond the moral panic and concerns regarding health which surround the industry in the subcontinent, it becomes apparent that the reason why this work is popular and sought after is that it is highly paid. Call centre workers can earn between 12,000 and 15,000 rupees per month (potentially more after overtime). This equates to somewhere between £180 and £220 per month. This figure may seem low in a Western European context, however in India this figure is around three times the average household income per month, which is around 4,500rs (India Together Website <http://www.indiatogether.org/photo/2003/class.htm>).

It is also far in excess of what graduates entering the labour market (which are who these workers typically are) are usually paid, (typically around 7-8,000rs per month). In Mumbai I went to speak to Sandeep who is head of GSA Infotech a call centre operation in the suburb of Borivali. GSA Infotech is a third party operation taking outsourced work on a contractual basis for UK and US clients. At the time of my visit in 2006 it employed around 250 agents. What was remarkable about Sandeep though was his age; he was only 27, very young for a boss in India. Sandeep was quite conscious of his unusual position, and although it is very difficult for young people to rise from being call agents to being bosses, there is at least the possibility in this sector of the economy, whereas within the professions there is no chance of such a rapid rise through the structure. What they offer instead, Sandeep told me, is a degree of security and better long-term prospects of

promotion. But wages are relatively poor for graduates starting in say medicine or engineering, and are typically around 5,000rs per month. Consequently, call centre work is very attractive. Rather tellingly, Sandeep himself was a graduate in the field of mechanical engineering. However, what the call centre industry lacks are the long-term opportunities for progression and promotion, due to the industries “flat” structure. Sandeep acknowledged that most of his workers were unlikely to progress in the manner in which he had, but he also pointed out that this was of little concern to most of them. These young single people were living usually in parental homes or in shared flats with friends who work in similar jobs. Most of them, said Sandeep were spending money whenever they weren’t earning it. High wages allow them to go out, consume, party and generally have a good time. Only after several years does the question of where the job might be leading to arise. It is this high level of pay for a group who has traditionally not been well paid, and who are in a position to dispose of this income by consuming on a fairly conspicuous basis that is at the heart of the Indian media’s moral concerns. Hard work is a highly prized and respected value in India, but young people working hard, being highly paid for that work and spending their wages, this is something different and as such is treated with suspicion; this is a new way of working which allows a different type of lifestyle. This can be argued to be an example of what Williams (1973) called an emergent culture. An emergent culture is a culture which is different to, and potentially challenging to, the dominant culture. Williams further distinguishes between what he terms “alternative” and “oppositional” within emergent cultures:

the effective decision, as to whether a practice is alternative or oppositional, is often now made within a very much narrower scope. There is a simple theoretical distinction between alternative and oppositional, that is to say between someone who simply finds a different way to live and wishes to be left alone with it, and someone who finds a different way to live and wants to change society in its light

Williams (1973:10-11).

The dominant culture in India can happily incorporate the work ethic and capital accumulation that the call centre and IT industries offer but is reluctant to incorporate the lifestyle that is associated with it. In relation to the point Williams makes, these emergent industries are at the “alternative” level it would seem, rather than the “oppositional.” However, the diversity of work and working practices in India, which range from subsistence farming to the most advanced IT hardware and software, makes it difficult to talk of a dominant culture if one wishes to align that culture and lifestyle with a set of working practices which form a common understanding. India’s culture is less specific and because it is so difficult to coherently define what it consists of, it tends to define what it is, by what it is not, and highlights that which it sees as alien and potentially threatening.

This theme also arose in my discussion with the UNITES General Secretary Karthik Sekhar. Karthik argued that this was nothing new but could be seen as a recurrent theme in Indian history, he argued that there had been similar reactions to the post-independence reforms of the Nehru government. Karthik pointed out that this had been heightened in Bangalore which was singled out for technological development. The emergent culture had been that of industrialism, challenging the dominance of agriculture in the country

and mercantilism within the cities. However, Karthik was optimistic believing that Indian culture tends to persist as its values are strong but also very flexible.

Call centre work and lived experience. Comparable cultures?

So how is the call centre workforce of the Indian subcontinent today comparable to the Industrial workforce of the North East in the past? It can be argued that a common link between these different times and places are the emergence of groups of workers which are highly paid, highly sought after and also contribute to the region's economy via consumption. As Byrne (2002, 3) reminds us the industrial workers of the North East were highly paid, when in work:

through the periods of prosperity the industrial workers were very high spenders-
spend it while you have it for tomorrow you may be dead

Byrne (2002, 3:283).

And if not dead, you may well be out of work. This notion culture of consumption, has also played a big part in the North East's attempt to define itself "post-industry" with Newcastle in the 1980's and 1990's defining itself as a "party-city" and developing the night-time economy; See Chatterton and Hollands (2000). As such, young people going out partying and spending money is a well-established tradition in the North East, in fact it is a very strong and enduring element of the residual industrial culture. The night-time economy in India is much more diverse, due to regional differences, state laws and tolerance policies regarding entertainment and alcohol in particular mean that each city is a case in itself. However, striking similarities can be found, M.G. road in Bangalore has a night-time economy recognizable and indeed comparable to anyone used to going out for

the evening in Newcastle or Sunderland. The targeted client group is similar too, the under thirties with high amounts of disposable income.

Whilst call centre workers clearly represent this consumer group in Bangalore, things are less clear in the North East. I would argue that this is largely due to the diversity of background, ages, and circumstances of the call centre work-force in the region, as well as the fact that they are not as well paid as the Indian workforce in terms of what their wages will buy. As such, then the call centre industry and its workers can be seen as reflecting the cultural contexts within which they operate, something which explains why call centres are found in particular places, when it is technologically possible to locate them almost anywhere. Consequently, it becomes apparent that the cultural context within which the call centre industry operates is very important, as it shapes the attitudes, expectations and behaviour of those within the industry.

Working lives or living work?

My initial ideas about the industry and those working within it, once I began talking to people changed rapidly. My initial thoughts had centred on issues of control of the labour force within call centre environments, which I envisaged as having two broad strands. Firstly, the way in which the labour force was controlled and regulated by technological means, i.e. the automated call dialler systems and the ability by management to monitor their behaviour from remote settings. Secondly, I wanted to enquire about a different type of control mechanism. The team-based working which is extensively used in call centres seemed to me to suggest a high pressure situation designed to encourage competition both between teams within the workplace and between individuals within the team. Team

based working also suggested that there was a wider system of social control at work here as well. Such control relies on peer pressure between workers, but can also be engineered and encouraged by team leaders and senior management. Additionally, the call centre industry appeared to encourage its workers to indulge in a peculiar type of compulsory “fun”. This was heavily emphasised in an interesting documentary on Norwich Union’s call centre operations both in England and on the Indian subcontinent entitled, “Who do you think you’re talking to,” which was broadcast by the BBC in February 2005. Within the work place this manifested itself as fancy dress days often to support charities such as “Comic Relief” and “Children in Need”, and it seemed to me that a worker in a team-working situation would have very little, or almost no, option of opting out of such activities. It also seemed to me that such activities went beyond the workplace too with organised team nights out which workers were expected to participate in. So, in short, my expectations were rather pessimistic, my basic thinking was that call centre workers were subjected to a high degree of technological control in their work and this was reinforced by a system of social control in the workplace. Furthermore, that social system appeared to cross or attempt to cross the boundaries of the workplace and colonise the leisure world of call centre workers.

But this initial perception and changed as soon as I began to seek out and talk to call centre workers. It wasn’t that these things didn’t happen within the industry it was just that they were not uniform and systematic in the manner in which I’d theorised them.

Very tight control of teams was undermined by the nature of the labour force to a great degree. The need to provide flexible shift patterns meant that teams were often a group of people who worked on the same process with a common team leader; they were not a

group that always worked the same hours with the same colleagues. Consequently, the familiarity with colleagues required for any sort of peer pressure to operate was largely absent. This variation in working hours also meant that there were fewer times when the teams could socialise as a group outside of the workplace. Team nights out, when they occurred, were really no different to any other work setting, i.e. organised for Christmas or for team member's birthdays or when colleagues left the organisation. The amount of organised socialising was often down to team leaders. The team leader's role whilst appearing to be a disciplinary one is much more than that, with a great degree of coaching involved. Also, team leaders are held responsible for the performance of their teams, meaning that too strong a disciplinary approach can easily backfire. I asked all my initial contacts about whether there was pressure to socialise outside of the workplace and found that social activities were largely informal and dependent upon team dynamics. Rachel told me that at her call centre team nights out were encouraged and happened on a regular basis:

Yeah well they are quite keen on the teams being friendly and socialising with each other so most teams have a team night out fairly regularly, say every two-three months they'll all go out as a team and maybe members of that team will see each other socially outside of work. They'll go for a meal usually or a club or something like that

Interview with Rachel, 2003.

Rachel sometimes found these nights out difficult to attend due to childcare issues, however she didn't feel that this caused any particular problems. Although team social nights were encouraged there was no real penalty for non-attendance. For others, the social aspect of work, with teams working together, and playing together, was something

which already belonged to a previous era, something that Jannette looked back upon positively:

it was such a social environment, there were lots of nights out, you spent a lot of time with the people you were working with outside of work. At the time when I joined we had a proper social committee and works nights out all the time. Karaoke nights and stuff.

Interview with Jannette, 2004.

However, things changed quickly and the social committee was disbanded, I asked Jannette what she put this down to?

There are different kinds of people. The people who are there now are much younger than perhaps they were initially. The old fogeys amongst us would go to a karaoke night or a race night or something like that, the younger ones wouldn't, they would want to be in town clubbing. That's maybe why that is different now. A lot of it is to do with the shifts because some people never meet, you just don't get to see people. I was on key times, "earlys" when I left and I would never see people on the late shift. I might know the names but I wouldn't know the faces. We wouldn't even be in the building at the same time

Interview with Jannette, 2004.

This lack of a tight-knit group of colleagues was something that Jannette missed, but it suited others well, as they had little desire to socialise with their colleagues outside of the workplace. Things were different for the workers in India though. Working on US or UK call processes meant that workers were working shifts and, of course, their friends who did not work in call centres, did not. So, for many of them socialising with colleagues had become increasingly the norm, as they were no longer able to fit in with the social timetables of their former friends. There was also less diversity amongst Indian workers, with the vast majority of them being single and under thirty, common leisure was more

possible but, again as in the North East, I found little to suggest that work, in terms of the rules and relationships of the workplace had colonised worker's leisure-time. Rather, the high wages that Indian call centre workers earn mean that they have all sorts of leisure possibilities which would otherwise not be open to them. However, in other ways for some workers work commanded a much more central position within their lives. Something which occurs in India which is unheard of in the UK is the phenomenon of workers migrating in order to work in the call centre industry. The size of the Indian subcontinent means that the call centre industry is still concentrated near to the major population centres. Workers live close to work, travelling home to visit family perhaps once a month. This was fairly common in the Delhi area as there are currently no other major call centre concentrations in the North of the country. Sindhu told me how several of her colleagues came from the Punjab, lived in shared accommodation with colleagues or relatives in Delhi and returned home when funds and shifts permitted. As such, their lifestyle was necessarily work dominated.

Whilst some of my initial assumptions about what it might be like to work in a call centre were proved to be incorrect, some proved more accurate, or at least reflected the general image of the industry and its labour process. The industry sought tight control of its workers through the labour process, and in turn workers developed strategies to resist this process. One method of control is that of scripting, whereby the call agent has little opportunity for any initiative. As one call centre agent who worked at a centre dealing with rail enquiries reflected:

It's a really tight script. We've got automated answering so you record your message at the beginning of your shift and that will stay until the end of your shift. It says "which station are you travelling from?" and after that you personally speak to the person but you have to keep to a tight script, have to take control of the call because if you lose control of the call then you can give information in the wrong order

Interview with Helen, 2004.

Losing control of the call meant the call times got longer, less calls were answered and targets not met. This process in turn can lead to a backlog of calls and more pressure for agents. This was a common story, across work places be they in the UK or India. Many used factory based imagery to express their experience:

You've still got the conveyor belt. You've incoming calls constantly incoming and you can't stop them. It's one after another

Interview with Jenni, 2006.

But, just as workers on traditional production lines have always found ways to subvert the system so too have call centre workers. Sabina who worked in a Newcastle call centre explained a strategy she and her colleagues regularly used:

Well you have 3 or 4 buttons on the phone and you've got your Auto N which will receive calls and you've got your unavailable button. If you press your unavailable button and then straight away press your Auto N button so you go to the back of the queue for the next call. If you keep doing that you'll go a few minutes without taking a call. If there's a queue of calls then obviously it's not going to work as everybody is going to be taking a call. You're just going to get another one basically. If there's no queue of calls and it is a little bit quiet which might be on a Sunday then you can always fiddle the system. I don't think there's a way they can detect that yet

Interview with Sabina, 2004.

Resistance of this sort was also a way to deal with the monotony of the situation. As was messing about in general:

It's so boring. Especially with nothing different to do it's just the same thing every day for 11 months. That's probably why a lot of people just leave. A lot of people do mess around at work and press F9 on your keyboard and it comes up and clears the whole screen and you're in the middle of a call and you have to remember what the call was but you've had so many calls you can't remember because you don't really listen. People do things like disconnect your headset so they (customers) can't hear you and you can't hear them and they think they've been cut off. Or they'll press your mute button which means the customer can't hear you and they think you've cut them off. People do mess around but it does make it a bit more fun. A bit more of a challenge anyway. That's the thing it's not a challenge at all. There's no challenging aspect to the job at all

Interview with Helen, 2004.

Monotony and lack of control within the work place also manifested itself in the form of targets and many of my participants talked about the effect that this pressure had upon them. For Carly, who had worked in a number of call centres it became too much when working for one of the high-street banks:

When I started off we didn't have sales targets then they introduced 3 sales per day. Then we got individual sales targets for each individual product they had so you had targets for bank accounts, savings accounts, loans, credit cards. I was quite happy to do this at the time, but then they decided to times the target by four. So what had been your monthly target then became your weekly target. I was on a call one day and had a team leader stand behind me saying "sell them a loan". I put the customer on hold and said to her he's ringing to say his wife has died and he needs to make an appointment at the branch and she said "he might need a loan for funeral expenses". So from that point on I said this is not for me

Interview with Carly, 2006.

For Carly, this incident was a step too far and she left the job, although she later returned to the call centre industry as a service advisor. Pressure on agents was also apparent from

the nature of the work itself, and I heard numerous stories about the emotional toll the work took upon call agents. One worker who had worked for a mobile phone company told me the following story which illustrates the emotional labour call centre work entails:

I had, somebody once really, really upset me one day, I've cried once because of a customer at T Mobile. The guy had phoned to say could he put his 30 days notice in for his wife because she wasn't going to live for more than a few weeks. It wasn't the fact that she was dying...it was the fact she was going to die and there was no hope for her left and was cancelling things and she hadn't even gone. I found that unbelievably hard to do, I couldn't handle the situation. That's the one and only time I got really upset and I had to come off the phones. I was off the phones for about half an hour

Interview with Helen, 2004.

The points made above are important and they mirror the findings of many of the studies of call centre work which were discussed in the earlier call centre theory chapter. They also beg the question. Why would anyone want to work in a call centre? This question can partly be answered by referring to the “cultures of work” proposition outlined at the beginning of the chapter and encapsulated by Linda's comment about the work being “easy money”. The next part of the answer emerged in the conversations and interviews I had with those in the industry. Alongside the narrative outlined above which is about the dynamics of control and resistance within the workplace, and the consequences for workers, another narrative also emerged. This narrative was, if anything, much stronger, and very different. It became clear that call centre work for most of them was a point in their “life plan” the reason they could put up with the work was by conceptualizing it as a stage, something temporary, a staging point on the way to the career and life they really wanted. It can be argued that for some this was more likely than for others, this is true;

however it can also be argued that for the vast majority such conceptualization worked as a strategy to make work tolerable. It also began to answer the question of why anyone would want to work within such an industry. I realised that things were much less bleak than I had initially thought and people were making the work, work for them. But this could not be fully explored or understood without understanding the wider lives and aspirations of my participants. Consequently, questions about participants' lives beyond work and the strategies they used to manage them became increasingly central to the research and are dealt with in the next chapter. Often, the aspirations they had for their future lives and careers were intertwined with these strategies; however, I have attempted to untangle these issues to some degree and they are dealt with in chapter seven which deals with trajectories.

CHAPTER SIX-INTERFACES: WORK MEETS LIFE AND LIFE MEETS

WORK

Interface n.1 **a point where two things meet and interact.**

Oxford English Dictionary (2002, paperback)

The notion of the interface as a point where two things meet and interact is well established. The term is most commonly found in the field of information technology, where it refers to the points where networks meet, and also the point where the user interacts with the technology. My initial interest in the idea of interfaces was technologically driven, with my interest drawn to how call centre agents interact with the technological hardware and software in their work places. I came to realize that this was not just one interface but the way into a system of many interfaces, and although they sometimes involved technology, the system of interfaces was primarily about social relationships.

Work-life interfaces

Within a call centre environment the interface between agent and software is a manifestation of the relationship between capital and labour. It is also the architecture for the interaction between customer/client and agent. These interfaces are very important as they offer a way to view the central power relationships within the call centre environment and process. However, this is nothing unusual in the literature surrounding the call centre industry, or indeed wider studies of the labour process.

The interaction between agent and technology, agent and customer and their bearing upon the efficiency of the operation in terms of the outcomes generated is of interest to network designers, human resource managers, call markers, customer service managers and social scientists alike. As such, these interfaces are fairly well documented although they are not usually referred to in such terms. However, what is less well documented is the interface between the world of work and workers wider “non-work” lives.

Studying this work-life interface allows individuals to take centre stage in the research process. By focusing on this interface there is an opportunity to locate the world of work in its wider contexts, as experienced by individuals. Workers are not just workers they are partners, mothers, fathers, sons, daughters, volunteers, students and a whole host of other roles. These roles co-exist and coalesce around the work- life interface. The idea of the work-wider life interface also seeks to deal with the structure/action dilemma that the social scientist routinely meets in just about any field of enquiry. If an individual and their actions are viewed within work as a whole, then social action and its significance is invariably swamped by the scale and power of the social structure it encounters. Conversely, if the individual and their actions are viewed within the realm of non-work they are again often overwhelmed by the structural realities of class, family, gender, to name but a few. But, if we view the work-non work interface as a space where the individual confronts and negotiates with the competing demands of each sphere, individual action has some chance to prevail, as each interface is to an extent shaped by the circumstances of each individual’s biography and action. Thus, interfaces are structured but are also spaces where restructuring and reordering are attempted. The exact

nature of the interface is open to some debate. An online dictionary definition gives numerous definitions amongst them a medical use of the term:

a surface forming a common boundary between adjacent regions or bodies

<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/interface>.

This suggests that the interface has no real substance or even space of its own. It is instead a point of exchange, a junction, and little else. As such, this means that an interface is essentially a point at, or rather a point between boundaries. The interface is a place where the boundary is permeable, a gate, or a porous site, a membrane where boundaries are crossed.

The interface I am attempting to outline is not just a junction it is something rather more than that. However, most of the definitions which are available for the term see interfaces as technical sites which, although part of wider systems, are essentially functional. The interface that I am trying to make sense of has all these elements but it is primarily social and it is also a place where power issues come to the fore. For example, a computing definition of the term defines interface as:

The connection and interaction between hardware, software and the user. Users 'talk' to the software. The software 'talks' to the hardware. Hardware 'talks to' other hardware. All this is interfacing. It has to be designed developed, tested and redesigned; and with each incarnation, a new specification is born and may become yet one more de facto or regulated standard

Computer Encyclopedia online: <http://www.answers.com/topic/interface>.

This definition differs from what I am trying to outline in that there is little sense of imbalance or inequality between the components mentioned, instead there is a sense that these components are tending towards equilibrium for the good of the greater system. The

interface I am exploring is a place of conflicting demands and it is within this space that this conflict is played out. As such, the military definition of an interface is helpful:

A boundary or point common to two or more similar or dissimilar command and control systems, sub-systems, or other entities against which or at which necessary information flow takes place

Military dictionary online found at:

<http://www.answers.com/topic/interface/military>.

This offers a better starting point as it recognizes that dissimilar systems and consequently systems with differing priorities also meet at interfaces. I would argue that if this is the case and dialogue is one of the things that happen at the interface, then this would suggest that the interface is not just a surface or a junction, but an arena within which conflict, negotiation and resolution occurs. As such, the interface that I am attempting to describe has a spatial element to it; it is a place in its own right. What is more ambiguous is the nature of the space itself. It can be argued that the work-life interface is a liminal space; the nature of it is largely determined by the areas and issues that surround it. So in the case of work-life interfaces the exact nature of the interface and the interaction that occurs within it reflects the hierarchies and structures which individuals inhabit and their place with them. How the interface is negotiated also changes its nature. So success or failure will mean that the arena for the next interaction is different.

This process with regard to the call centre industry is highly developed. As has been previously discussed, at the start of this study one of the research ideas was to examine whether the work place was colonizing areas beyond its usual boundaries. I found little

evidence of structured attempts to achieve this in either North East England or on the Indian subcontinent. This was largely due to the diversity of the industry's workforce and, in the UK, the diversity of working patterns, which made such attempts at organized leisure impractical. However, the way in which individuals regulate the extent to which elements of the world of work intrude, (or in many cases are admitted) to the other parts of their life seems to me to be a clear example of a process that is negotiated via the interface. In fact, the interface is a difficult concept to pin down and to do so within very rigid limits restricts the concept's usefulness as something that enhances our understanding of social action. This is due to the fact that a multiplicity of actions and a multiplicity of actors are involved with the interface. As such, interface is really better understood as a process rather than as a structure. If approached as such, the problem of trying to interpret the meaning and significance of informants' responses is not obscured by any attempt to view them through a constructed structure. Instead, the meaning of the interface as a process will hopefully become apparent through the issues raised by the informants themselves. Yet it is also important not to abandon the notion of structure altogether, indeed to do so would be erroneous. What became apparent early in the fieldwork was that the ability of workers to negotiate successfully within the interface was, to a great extent, dependent upon the social position they were in beyond it and the extent to which they could call on other resources. As such, it can be said that interface is a structured process, with point of entry having a strong effect on outcome.

Negotiating the interface - Life-planning

In nearly all of my interviews with call centre workers in both the North East of England, and on the Indian subcontinent the issue of work's "place" in life came up. Workers discussed how little or how much work dominated their lives and the ways in which they coped, survived and made the best of the situation. Often the way this was expressed in interviews was in relation to their domestic situations. Attempting to make work and the demands of family fit together was a recurring issue, for all of those interviewed. However, it was understandably in the interviews with women with young children where this issue featured most prominently, and for whom the issue was most acute. Carla, who has worked in a number of call centre operations, told me about how important integration of work and non work had been when she began working in the industry:

Initially it was full time. I had my two eldest children at the time; my little boy was only a few months old so they were both in nursery. The nursery fees were astronomical so I realised the nursery fees compared to my wages wasn't worth it so I switched to part-time and they were really good about me switching to part-time. I used to work Monday to Friday 4-8 pm. That meant I could pick my daughter up from nursery at the right time and get her home, get her settled and go straight to work. It was good in that respect and this went on until the Christmas and then we all moved up to Doxford Park

Interview with Carla, September 2006.

The crucial element in the interface process for women like Carla is flexibility. She needs a shift pattern which fits with her domestic situation and, in return for access to a relatively stable section of the labour force, the industry in the North East offers that. It has little choice as the turnover of labour in the industry is high.

In 2003, I spoke to Debra who was the Human Resources manager for “More Than” an insurance sales call centre operation at Doxford Park, Sunderland. Debra told me that staff turnover rates were high. They were currently running at about 17.5% per annum. In fact, compared with other operations which I subsequently visited, this was a relatively low figure. Consequently, they had looked at ways to retain workers, such as offering flexible shift patterns. Workers more or less had the opportunity to tailor their own working patterns. Retaining staff was, explained Debra, cheaper than training new staff, and she also felt that the type of worker they would attract if they were not flexible was a disadvantage. When I pressed her on this, Debra explained that students had become an increasing part of the labour force in recent years. However, they brought with them a number of problems, firstly their commitment was only short-term and absence rates were often high. Secondly, she felt that they had a problem with following the organizations basic rules and procedures, which she attributed to a lack of discipline within educational establishments. Regardless of whether this point is accepted, the fact was that this organization was anxious to accommodate the needs of its established workers. Debra let me see the monthly summary of the call centre’s labour-force which listed all the centre workers and their working hours. It is interesting to note that from a workforce equivalent to around 300 full time workers. 20 workers had applied for and been granted, changes to their shift patterns that month. Some reduced their hours, others increased their hours, and some worked evenings only whilst others worked a “standard” 9-5 day. This degree of flexibility on the part of an employer whilst not universal in the call centres of the North East was not by any means unique. It is a picture which contradicts much of the received wisdom which sees flexibility in the labour process as

an ever-increasing burden heaped upon workers with employers' demands becoming ever more rigid. Such a model, whilst inaccurate for the call centre industry in the North East, does apply to another former mainstay of part time employment the retail sector.

Whilst the interface can be negotiated with some success by women such as Carla in order to gain access to the workplace on terms which fit around the rest of their lives, this gain is often dependent upon factors within their wider life and also factors which are encountered within the workplace. For Rachel, an agent at an insurance call centre, flexible shift patterns were a factor but were irrelevant if the issue of childcare could not be resolved:

I just would not be able to work at all if it wasn't for my mother-in-law, as she's willing to take Esme. She only works part-time on a morning. So I can't work mornings or go to lectures which are scheduled on a morning. I can only work evenings really due to having lectures on an afternoon

Interview with Rachel, 2003.

Rachel's situation illustrates fairly well the complex interplay of many different factors and systems within the interface process. Her life as a full time student is an influence on her working patterns, which in turn influences the course options she can take and these rest upon her mother-in-laws availability to care for Rachel's daughter which is, in turn dependent upon *her* work- life interface. The net result is a structured process which is precarious to say the least, a house of cards that may fall at any minute. The reality, however, was less dramatic as Rachel had become used to the interface's changing nature as she knew that her university timetable would change regularly and a degree of restructuring might be necessary. Crucially, her mother in law was aware of this, as was

her team leader at work. As such, there was an understanding that changes might be necessary but a degree of flexibility from several quarters would allow issues to be resolved. However, if this awareness of factors in agent's lives beyond the workplace is not present, problems rapidly emerge. To give an example from India, Sindhu who worked for a large call centre based in the Noida district of the city. This centre was running a campaign providing technical support services for BT broadband customers based in the UK. Sindhu was married with two young sons. However, her shifts were in the evening and this allowed her to work, as her husband could be at home with the children. She told me that it was common practice for agents at HCL to be asked to do overtime at very little or in some instances no notice whatsoever. I asked her how this impacted upon her. She told me that it didn't as she was never asked to do this because her team leader knew her home situation. The need for this type of awareness of an agent's home situation by team leaders in order to facilitate a smoother interface process is shown by this statement from Carla. Carla told me about her husband's job, he has worked at the Nissan car plant in Washington ever since leaving school. As you can see, a similar process is at work but this time in the negative:

He's on the press shop not the production line. He's highly regarded as well. He's got a lot of respect and I think that keeps him there but he also enjoys his job. A lot of his friends do. Because it's predominantly male they have the old-fashioned view that the men who have kids don't have childcare duties. That's what Nissan needs to overcome. Whereas in call centres, one of the biggest things with me if I did have to take time off with the kids they'd say why can't your husband do it? And I'd say I'm sorry it's the way Nissan works they'll never do it.

Interview with Carla, 2006.

Interfacing with work, the role of team leaders

Within the call centre industry agents are managed in a relatively “hands on” manner by their team leaders. Team leaders are usually in charge of groups of fifteen to twenty workers and are effectively coaches seeking to maximize performance and identify problems with both agents and the call process. Their role encompasses both technological issues and the script itself. Team leaders are usually former agents who have been promoted. The relatively flat nature of call centre management also means that the chances of being promoted any higher up the operational structure are comparatively remote. In practical terms, most agents’ day to day interactions with the management of the organization they work for is via their team leader. The importance of having a good team leader was stressed by all the agents who were interviewed. Having a good team leader was not just important because of how they could influence what went on at work but, because as management’s representative in the interface process, they were able through their actions to affect life beyond work. For example, when I asked Carla about her team leaders, this was her reply:

They were all women at first. My team leader was changed from someone I got on with very well to someone I clashed with personality wise. I didn’t feel I could approach her and she wasn’t flexible with me. For instance if one of the kids was poorly and I couldn’t go into work I felt like I wasn’t allowed to take time off - just because she was being horrible with me

Interview with Carla, 2006.

So the change of team leader had major consequences, affecting Carla personally, at work, and in her wider life. However, team leaders change and teams are often reconfigured as practices and call campaigns change. The term “campaign” is used in the

call centre industry to refer to a team's priority task. For example, a team may be moved from selling car insurance to home insurance, it may switch from dealing with inbound customer service calls to outbound sales and in the case of third party non captive call centres, campaigns change according to the company's contracts. Consequently, a call agent's work mates and their team leader are likely to change in a relatively short space of time. This of course, has potentially positive outcomes, such as getting into a better team, moving onto a more agreeable campaign or getting a more accommodating team leader. Luckily for Carla positive changes came about fairly rapidly at the call centre she worked in:

I had her (the team leader) for a little while longer then the opportunity came for me to move onto a different team. My team leader was a man. He was Welsh and he was mint, absolutely fantastic. He was someone you could talk to; he had kids, so knew where I was coming from, totally different to the other. The people I was working with were different. It was a total change; it's what I needed at that time

Interview with Carla, 2006.

This point is highly important as it highlights the variability of work within call centre environments and shows that the work is not as it is often portrayed by the mass media and some academic commentators as constant, relentless and with little scope for individual action. Certain campaigns and processes may well be like that but, as the above illustrates, opportunities for change do exist. Furthermore, the point again highlights the importance of an agent's team and their team leader in the interface process.

In the course of my research, I interviewed several team leaders; the work life interface for them was very complex. As their position is relatively ambiguous, they are clearly not the same as agents, but nor are they management. It can be argued that they hold a similar position in the structure of the organization to foremen in more traditional industrial organizations. However, this comparison is a very cautious one owing to the fact that the role of foremen varied enormously according to different industries. They are certainly nowhere near as autonomous as the shipyard foremen described by Roberts (1993) nor do they have the power to hire and fire in the manner described by Hill (1973) in his study of London dockers. This is because the call centre labour process, despite its white-collar image and its extensive utilization of new technology, is a process which is scientifically managed in the manner of an industrial production line; as such the team leaders can be compared to foreman in settings which work along Taylorist principles. Interestingly, when I asked about whether they would want to become team leaders, agents responded by saying that they didn't feel the extra responsibility was worth it for the extra hassle and relatively small financial advantage that the role would give them. This sentiment is similar to that expressed by car workers in Beynon (1973), who, though often in conflict with their foremen, appreciated the difficult position in the hierarchy that the foremen occupied, as they were neither proper workers nor proper management:

the foreman's job is the worst job in the factory everybody's at them. I just wouldn't have that job no matter how much it paid. I just couldn't take it. They're the lance –corporals.

Beynon (1973:125).

“Between a rock and a hard place”: team leaders and their interfaces.

Team leaders are expected to motivate their teams in order to get them to perform. Failure of individual workers is also viewed as a failure of the team leader. The team leader is not just delivering orders and overseeing in the manner of Beynon’s Ford foreman, they are also playing a coaching role. This is I would contend is the big difference, team members will not accept advice from, or be coached by, those that they do not respect. As such, the team leader is in a very difficult position. Their tenure in their position is not assured either. Some of my informants felt that many team leaders at her workplace put up with their difficult position as they hoped to get promoted, further up the management ladder:

My team leader, that is, my old team leader he’s only been there for a year and a half and he’s like look I can do it you can do it but I don’t want to be promoted anyway so that’s not a problem but I think people who want it to be a long term thing can really push for it. There a few...but not a great deal. Some of the team leaders just stay as team leaders and they can be demoted as well I’ve seen it happen. My very first team leader he was demoted and put back on the phones

Interview with Sabina, 2004.

The chances of being promoted beyond team leader though are remote; to minimize costs call centre hierarchies are deliberately very “flat”. Team leaders, therefore, have all the pressures that agents have and more, which makes their interfaces more difficult to disentangle. This is due to the complex nature of their relationship with their team members. What became evident very quickly in the interviews I did with team leaders was that they identified a great deal more with the agents, who they viewed as “their team”. Their interviews dwelt a good deal more on conflict and disputes with

management than problems with team members. Indeed often those disputes arose as they took up the issues and problems raised by team members, ironically in a manner more in keeping with a shop steward in an industrial setting rather than a foreman. Jenni had worked at Littlewoods in Sunderland, and, whilst there took the opportunity to take on an acting team leader role, something for which she received no extra pay. She saw this as an opportunity to gain experience, and she also stressed the importance being accepted by the team members for any potential team leader:

Then (I was there 6 months) they had us doing this acting team leader thing, but you don't get paid for it, but basically you're doing it all, it was on a weekend, evening, twilight shift there were maybe 30-40 members of staff on the floor and me. I wasn't management but to them I was and to the customers I was. It was valuable experience

Interview with Jenni, 2004.

Jenni had left full-time employment in order to look after her two young children. Littlewoods was where she re-entered the labour market. She was able to do this as Littlewoods allowed her to work evening shifts. This meant that her husband could take over childcare in the evenings as he was working on the dayshift at the Nissan car plant at Washington. As the children got older, they were both now at school and childcare was consequently less demanding, the possibility of working more hours arose, and Jenni began to re-asses her position at Littlewoods. The changes which were occurring in her life outside of the workplace were having a major bearing on her decisions about her position with the workplace. Having been promoted to team leader at Littlewoods, Jenni felt it was time to move on. Jenni moved to another team leader job at the newly

established Barclays call centre on Doxford International Business Park. I asked her what it was like to be involved at the start up of a new operation:

Yes it was really good. I was there when we took the first call. There were about less than a dozen advisors scattered around. It was “who is going to take this call?” and this poor person’s taking the call with all these managers standing around! It was exciting. You weren’t involved in decisions like the plan of the building or layout of furniture as that was already done, it wasn’t in, but it was already done. I think later on they started to look at the managers, no disrespect to them but they were bank managers and had no experience in call centres and they knew they hadn’t

Interview with Jenni, 2004.

Consequently, the team leaders were in a strong position to influence how things were done at Barclays. I asked Jenni whether those senior to her were happy to take her advice and make use of her experience. Interestingly, one of the examples she gave me refers to the need for flexible working hours essential to attracting and maintaining the type of worker the wished to recruit:

There was an incident which I did sort where I was pleased that they listened. They had contact centres here and in Coventry and they had a traffic department that does all the scheduling and the shifts and for some reason they took it upon themselves to say that all the earlys in Sunderland were going to work 7-3 and all the lates were going to work 3-11, because Coventry must have had their schedule up and running forever and this must have been the bits where they were struggling. I looked at the shifts and I noticed that everybody was doing exactly the same. Not everybody can do that. There was a time that if you were struggling you could swap shifts but now you couldn’t because everyone was on the same shift so you couldn’t swap it. So I raised it as an issue and explained about it they couldn’t see at first there was going to be a problem but they changed it and did it so a bunch of you would start at 12 then 1, 2, 3 rather than everyone start at 3. So yes they did fix it and I felt at least they were prepared to listen

Interview with Jenni, 2004.

It was not only workers such as Jenni who would have been put off by this kind of inflexibility. She also pointed out that many of the workers they had recruited were young single people, often students who were unwilling to compromise their social lives by starting at 7 am on a regular basis. Jenni felt that the problem arose as the management had so little experience of running a call centre. This was in some ways advantageous as it allowed team leaders to influence how things were done, however it also caused them problems. Deficiencies on the technical side meant that the call logging system did not accurately record the unavailability of agents when they were engaged on calls. Without this information it is not possible to ascertain how many agents are required to meet the volume of call traffic. This in turn impacted on the team's morale and the job and results of the team leader. The root cause of the problem appears to be that the management considered they were running a high street bank in a different setting, which of course they were, but not taking on board some of the generic issues which would arise within any call centre environment. Jannette also worked at Barclays during this period, she points out that initially the job was very undemanding, but things changed after a while:

At the time we were "Barclays Call" and we were working purely scripted calls, working purely with customers, we were doing telephone banking, we were limited completely in the services we offered. Everything an advisor did they had to follow a script. Customers must have thought they were talking to a robot. From a team leaders point of view it was very, very easy to mark calls, and call monitor but in terms of peoples' personality I could leave it thank you very much

Interview with Jannette, 2004.

The trouble outlined above arose when many of the services traditionally provided within high street banks were transferred to Doxford. The general enquiry calls to branches had

never been logged, so no one thought to monitor them when the same calls were diverted to the Doxford call centre. This had serious consequences for the operation:

they had no way of knowing how many customers tried to call and couldn't get through. So we had this massive hit of calls and it was like the CSS (Call Service System) didn't handle this amount of calls, but now the CSS the calls had been presented, the phones were engaged, the calls had always been there they just had never been dealt with. People got fed up and hung up

Interview with Jannette, 2004.

So, as the true level of calls became apparent, it became obvious that the centre did not have enough agents for the volume of calls. Team leaders such as Jannette and Jenni were at the sharp end, dealing with the immediate problems, but as Jannette explained they were also involved in rethinking the call process:

anybody who could take a call took the call, us, we were running round like absolute idiots. There was no call monitoring going on, there was none of the sort of things that you would normally have happen because all we did was run around answering hands up, people putting their hands up saying I haven't a clue what this customer is talking about. You go and try as two heads are better than one that was the kind of theory we worked on. At times as team leaders we went on the phones as well because the call volume was just so massive. That was a massive learning curve; it taught them that the tools they had to support us basically weren't supporting us. All of those programmes were re-written. When we first took on the centralized branches we didn't have telephone numbers, we didn't have for any of the places that we needed things off, all of that was done manually

Interview with Jannette, 2004.

This example shows the importance of the team leader role within these operations, it also shows that the role, whilst relatively poorly paid and undeniably closer in position to the call agents, cannot be dismissed as unimportant or irrelevant to the process. The managers at Barclays did not know how to run a call centre and it seems swiftly decided

that the best thing they could do was listen to experienced team leaders such as Jenni and Jannette. Jannette had also been at the opposite end of the process though when she had worked as a team leader at London Electric's call centre (now EDF energy) which is also located at Doxford. Returning from maternity leave she found major change had taken place. The company had closed its London call centre and transferred the work to Doxford, erroneously believing that the North East operation would be able to cope:

when I came back I don't know what had gone on in the three months I'd been away but it was like working for a different company. You weren't allowed to say boo to an advisor. You had advisors wandering around the floor. It was all the stress because they'd miscalculated they'd pulled the plug on the staff in London and they'd closed that down but they'd totally miscalculated how many staff we needed to deal with the calls. We didn't have the staff deal with what was coming through. We didn't have the experience of staff. You can deal with a call twice as quickly if you know what you're talking about. They were bringing people down from the admin section and putting them on the phones. People off in tears every 5 minutes - you were spending lots of time with hankies trying to settle people down!! It was dreadful. You had to keep the advisors sweet as you were terrified of losing them. It was just - I had really high standards, yes I was very...well I wasn't that strict but they knew what I expected of them they knew if they didn't meet that expectation there was a consequence. When I came back there were no standards, it was just horrible

Interview with Jannette, 2004.

This passage is particularly interesting as it contains two passages which encompass two very different aspects of the team leader role, illustrating both the importance and ambiguity of the position. Firstly, she speaks about not being able to "say boo to an advisor" illustrating the surveillance/disciplinary aspect to the job but, conversely she also speaks about "spending lots of time with hankies trying to settle people down" illustrating the coaching/advocacy aspect of the role. What does appear clear is that team leaders are themselves interfaces between call centre agents and call centre managers. I

would contend that this is only possible as, without exception, they have all at some point been agents themselves and come from similar social circumstances as their team members. This was also the case for the workers I interviewed on the Indian subcontinent. Sandeep who is now managing a call centre operation in Mumbai, began his career as a call agent, being promoted to team leader after six months. He also recognized the importance of management having good relationships with team leaders as he saw them as the barometers of the workforce and the organization. This I found interesting as traditionally, hierarchies in Indian workplaces are highly structured, with the expectation that those higher up the hierarchy know best. The importance of the team leader role in mediating between call agents and their managers, and their ability to make a difference to the quality of the work experience for agents was also evident.

Raj, a call agent working in technical support for a software company based in Bangalore, recounted a dispute with a team leader he fell out with:

I had an issue with one of my team leaders. She called me in for no reason. One of the guys had done a mistake and she thought it was me. She called me in and said “you know what; I think I can fire you. You don’t work properly we’re going to kick you out”. I was like “what do you mean. I work well but not when I’m threatened.” I don’t like someone to come and threaten me saying I’ve done something wrong and they’re going to throw me out. Maybe I have but there is a way to tell me. I’m not a slave here. That happened and she got very high and said to my manager “this guy is very rude” and my manager called me up and we had a one-on-one talk. He said I think you’ve been pretty rude and that puts a black mark on any promotion. I explained what was happening and when you say you have a proper work culture and everyone is equal why do people want to force the rules and show their authority? Why do you want to do that when even on your ID card it doesn’t have your designation on that? He was pretty OK and said he was sorry. Everybody called my team leader and said I think you need to apologize

Interview with Raj, November 2006.

Raj shortly moved to another team, and all was well. What is interesting is that his point was taken seriously by the senior manager. The team leader was not thought of as infallible. However, in some of the other comments made by Indian workers the cultural context did appear to have a bearing on their relationships with team leaders which I had not encountered in my discussions with workers in the North East. This was particularly the case when the issue of promotion came up. Avi, an agent now working for a major international bank's captive call centre operation in Bangalore, told me how in his previous company, chances of promotion were seen as being closely connected to your relationship with the team leader:

It was my first job and my team leader was very experienced. I never went onto the higher level. They always told us how they promote you on how close you are to the manager but I never went into that situation. I was proud. I never experienced that. They say the closer you are to the managers the better chance you have of getting promoted but I didn't do that. It was OK I had a good relationship with my manager

Interview with Avi, November 2006.

However, I should also point out that due to the differing circumstances and local contexts, the issue of how to secure promotion was not an area I explored with the North East workers in any real depth as few aspired to it or saw their long-term futures as being in the industry. Responses from the Indian cohort on other issues, such as how team leaders were important in building a good atmosphere in the workplace were very similar to the responses gained in the North East. For example, when I asked Avi in Bangalore what he considered to be the best thing about working in a call centre he replied:

It's fun Jon, it's fun. I have fun at work. I am always laughing when taking the calls

Interview with Avi, November 2006.

I asked whether this was down to his team and his team leader, he said that it was adding:

They are always cracking jokes. I try to stick to those people

Interview with Avi, November 2006

So it would seem that the team leader role is pivotal in call centre situations in both the UK and in India. What is perhaps more of a puzzle is why they should want to undertake such a demanding role. To explain this, I now wish to explore in some depth the broader backgrounds and situations of the industry's workers.

The work-life interface is a complex interplay of an individual's personal situation, their expectations and the contexts within which they are situated. The fact that team leaders all began as call agents means that the question. "Why would anyone want to be a team leader?" inevitably leads us to the preceding question of "why would anyone want to work as a call centre agent?" The answer is relatively simple; the answer is "circumstance." What is a lot more complicated, but also a lot more interesting is the explanation of those circumstances.

CHAPTER SEVEN- TRAJECTORIES

During the course of my interactions and interviews with those involved in the call centre industry in the North East, it quickly became apparent to me that there were different motivations for individuals working within the industry. Often, these were shaped by the interface between work and life. Due to the semi-structured interview technique I had chosen as my main research tool, I was able to develop this theme within subsequent interviews. One of the key issues that surrounded the industry was the high turnover of staff; this was largely assumed by most commentators to be indicative of poor levels of pay and a highly monitored and deeply unsatisfying labour process. What this explanation did not consider was agency, the fact that workers might be leaving for positive reasons, such as entering full-time education, getting better jobs etc. So around the issue of “time in the job” I fairly quickly identified three broad groups working within the industry. These were the “stayers”, those “passing through” and the “serial agents.”

Stayers, passing through and serial agents

Those I termed “stayers” had been in the industry for two or more years and who saw their future as being within the industry. They may have changed jobs and or employers during this time, but this was because it benefited their position within the industry. Some stayers had no desire for promotion of any kind whilst others viewed the call centre industry as the place where they would develop a career. Those who can be described as “passing through” overwhelmingly saw call centre work as a means to an end, it was a way to earn money whilst studying, or a way to rejoin the labour market after a period of

absence. Without exception, they viewed their employment within the industry as temporary, many expressing the view that this was the only way in which they were able to tolerate the work. I also spoke to a number of respondents who were at the end point of their call centre careers, i.e. they had already “passed through” the industry and were embarking upon new careers.

The “serial agents” are a phenomenon which has parallels throughout history within a number of industries. These workers had changed employers within the industry on a fairly regular basis, typically spending less than a year with each employer. This was not due to any long term career but in order to get better pay and conditions, and also to work in a different environment. Their behaviour was possible due to a relative shortage of trained workers and the high turnover of agent labour within the industry. The basic training for call agents i.e. the telephony and customer care skills, take a relatively long and costly period of time, they then need to be trained regarding the specific task they are about to undertake or the relevant product that they will be dealing with. So if an agent moves to another call centre operation, they will only need to be trained in the specifics of the task, not the basic skills. Several of my interviewees were serial agents but also fell into the “passing through” category, and were very definitely aiming for careers outside of the call centre industry.

I now wish to say a little more about these groups and attempt to explain the reasons for the behaviour patterns of each of them. Firstly, the stayers; these were comparatively scarce in the North East, they certainly existed but this was not the “normal” pattern for the industry in the region. This also contradicts the idea that call centre jobs have

replaced traditional jobs in post industrial areas such as the North East. Yes, there are new jobs, but it is very rare to find that workers who were formally employed in traditional industrial jobs working in call centres. For example, Chris who worked for Lloyds TSB on Wearside at first glance appeared to be the exception to this. Chris was in his early fifties this was in itself unusual as most of the men I encountered in the industry both in the North East and in India were under the age of thirty. Chris had spent the majority of his working life in the construction industry, working as a pipe layer. However, several years previously, Chris had been involved in an industrial accident which left him with a severe back injury. Chris was unable to return to his previous job and had ended up training to become a call centre agent, and then began working for Lloyds/TSB. I asked Chris how he had coped with the transition from one type of work to another. He said he'd managed to adapt fairly easily due to the fact he liked talking and had always had the ability to mix and get on well with different people regardless of their backgrounds. This was borne out by the fact that Chris had spent time as an acting team leader, although this was not a role he wished to take on full-time. I asked him why this was the case. He told me that he felt this would cause a conflict of interest with his work as a representative for UNIFI, the financial sector trade union (which has subsequently become part of the much larger AMICUS union). Chris had been successful in promoting the union in the Wearside call centre and had subsequently become a representative for the Tyne-Tees region. However, despite all this and having made the transition between two very different worlds of work Chris was not a stayer he was looking to leave the industry. Chris was undertaking a course with the aim of becoming a life-coach. I asked him why? His answer was that his time within the call centre industry had helped him to

develop his skills with people, and he wanted to take this a stage further. Leaving was not so much about pay and conditions; it was instead, for Chris a matter of self-development. The majority of the call agents I spoke to on the Indian subcontinent do fall into the category of stayers. This is due though to the fact that many of them had been in the industry for two years plus, and did not have any immediate plans to leave the industry. However, most of them did not see themselves staying in the industry on an indefinite basis, this was due to two main factors; firstly, the lack of opportunities for promotion in the industry, (this was something that applied equally to the North East group, though fewer actually expressed any desire for promotion in that group). The second major factor for workers in India wishing to leave the industry is the issue of working hours. The unwelcome reality of “glocalisation” means that workers in Indian call centres which are serving the UK or US markets effectively work permanent nightshifts.

This leads to the cultural problems outlined in some depth earlier, but also means that workers often feel isolated from their families and their wider peer group. Raj, a call centre agent in Bangalore told me about the problems that working for a company which handled US calls caused him:

I start at 7 pm and finish at 2.30 am or 3.30 am. 3.30 is my work time but if I get my work done I can finish earlier. But waking my parents is a nightmare so I tend to leave about 3.30 or 4 so it's about half an hour before they get up. One more problem is my sister works days and when I get in I doze off, and by the time I go to work she comes home. I only see her at weekends. I have to ring her to speak to her!

Interview with Raj, November 2006.

There is also the physical strain which is often a consequence of long term night working. Raj told me that because of this, his friends often moved onto other call centre operations, or left the industry altogether:

People move to a different industry because of it. Maybe when they are younger but when people are in their early thirties they start to get health problems and if they're married they have a different set of problems in terms of shifts

Interview with Raj, November 2006.

What this illustrates is how the work-life interface in the Indian context, differs for those in the subcontinent as opposed to their opposite numbers in the North East. The issues, such as shifts and relationships, and the actors such as family and friends are the same, but the way in which they fit into the interface process is modified greatly by the cultural and local contexts. I asked Raj how he coped with the shift work, what did he do to relax?

I party a lot. I hang out with all my friends, all my colleagues. That's the thing of working in a call centre industry you don't always have the same holidays but I do there. But with Thanksgiving in the US we have a holiday. But people working for other companies need to work. You tend to lose out on your friends. You just meet them once in a while

Interview with Raj, November 2006.

I was struck by the fact that as he was working for a US company he got US holidays, as it showed how globalization impacted upon the cultural context, in subtle ways meaning that the norms of the world of work influenced Raj's world of leisure. In this world, something like "thanksgiving" is an alien concept and as such it is rather conspicuous. However, the cultural context of the subcontinent also understands the importance of ritual and festival for all peoples. For others though, night-working had become a major

strain, something that could no longer be dealt with by some partying to wind down. This was becoming the case for Avi:

I don't feel comfortable now. Two weeks ago I was at my doctor fortunately he was free. He is our family doctor. He has always known me. He said it's not good to work nightshift for 2 ½ years. He gave me some medicine but the main problem is lack of food. When you are young there are no problems. But long term....I need to look for a day job

Interview with Avi, November 2006.

This was a story I heard quite often in India; the view that staying in the industry would have no long term future and was potentially injurious to health. The health issue was also the main focus of the Indian call centre workers trade union campaigns, which I will return to later.

Rejection and aspiration: strategies for coping

The idea of staying in the call centre industry on a long term basis was for most of the North East workers something they didn't consider; lack of promotion opportunities was one of the reasons why. I discussed this with Shona a call centre consultant who also runs her own training operation at Bracken Hill Business park also on the A19 corridor near Peterlee in East Durham, she agreed that a lack of opportunities for advancement were a key factor in the industry's high staff turnover rates, and this needed to be addressed. But it is difficult to see how this can be accomplished as the whole operating ethos of the call centre model has been built around the idea of maintaining efficiency by keeping costs down and the use of "flat structures" are central to this aim.

Nicola worked in call centres for around three years and was promoted to one of the few non team leader positions available. Her employers Lloyds/TSB were desperate to hold onto her but to no avail, she was just “passing through.” Nicola is in many ways typical of this group. She had begun working for Lloyds/TSB in 2001, when she was studying for A-levels, and continued whilst she was an undergraduate student. Nicola was studying Business and Law with a view to becoming a solicitor. She was very capable and told me that her managers at Lloyds/TSB had encouraged her to apply for the company’s graduate training scheme. However, for Nicola the job was just a way of earning an income whilst she was studying. What was not typical about Nicola was that she did not remain a call agent, as many of those Passing Through the industry tend to do, but after a while she moved teams and was then promoted to a position roughly equivalent to a team leader that of “call marker.” I asked her how and why this move had come about:

I'd been doing, I think I'd been there about a year-and-a-half, perhaps just under a year-and-a-half. I'd been a bit bored with my role. I knew it all inside out by this time. Inasmuch as there were changes, they weren't sufficient changes and substantial enough to really get your teeth in so I was trying to look around for different jobs to do

Interview with Nicola, 2004.

In fact, Nicola was such a good agent that she had for some months been fulfilling a coaching role on a number of teams:

Often I did side-by-side control where you actually plug in with the agent and you can hear the calls and you are sat beside them to see that they are doing what they should be doing. This is what you do but perhaps you should be doing this. It was just helping amongst teams and helping team leaders out because they have to do this.

Interview with Nicola, 2004.

The call marking team which Nicola joined was responsible for monitoring and marking the agent's calls. Within a centre such as Lloyds TSB, monitoring is not just about the performance of agents, it is also about verifying that the rules for selling financial products, laid down by the FSA (Financial services Authority) are being complied with. Bearing this in mind, I was surprised that markers did not undergo a lengthy period of training. Nicola explained what happened, and the basics of the role:

It (training) was basically as you went really. It wasn't sort of sit down in a room and have two or three days of doing it. You just had to get on and do it really. We probably should have had more training because it wasn't as easy to pick up as people think it is. There is a lot of attention to detail and working with systems we have as well and learning the audit trail. You have to know, every screen has a code. There's no screen without a code. So you can see exactly where they've been from what they say in the conversation to what screen appears you can tell whether they've actually been in the screen, have they done what they've been asked to do. It's actually spying but they didn't realize it

Interview with Nicola, 2004.

I wondered how this role affected relationships with her former agent colleagues. Nicola told me that markers were isolated from agents as they worked in a different part of the building; also, issues about calls were passed to agents via team leaders. The marking team was also working on calls which took place in other centres. Nicola marked calls, from the company's centre in Swansea, and, later, at their newly opened centre in Mumbai. At the time I interviewed her, Nicola had just left Lloyds TSB after three years in order to concentrate on her studies full-time. I asked her what had been the best thing about the job. Her answer was that she valued its flexibility:

We were just generally working normal nine to five hours but they were very flexible on call marking and you didn't have to be employed for a certain time, which was very great for me because I could change it whenever I needed to for Uni. You know I could leave two hours early one night and make the time up another night and that was great. It made a great difference to your morale, to work under those conditions

Interview with Nicola, 2004.

Flexibility is not normally associated with the call centre industry or, it would probably be more accurate to say that the idea of flexibility is not associated with the workplace or labour process within call centres. The dominant view is that it is workers that are required to be flexible, bending to whatever demands are made of them by employers within highly monitored work places. This was what I thought I would encounter when my research began, however what I found was something very different.

What struck me was how most of the workers I spoke to were not prepared to put up with poor treatment, or inflexible work practices; they had in general three responses to them when they arose. The first response was just to ignore the rules and do what they wished to do instead. Rachel regularly ignored the rules regarding breaks in her call centre at Doxford Park:

On a Saturday I do a six hour shift, and I get a twenty minute break, two hours after I start. Well to me that's just not enough, it does comply with the health and safety regulations, but I feel the need for a cigarette about two hours after that. So I go and have a cigarette but I write it down on my sheet "toilet" and the young ones are just appalled, they tell me I could get into trouble for this, it's serious, something could happen because of it! And I'm like, well even if they do find out that I'm not in the toilet, well the worst they can do is give us a warning

Interview with Rachel, 2003.

What allowed Rachel to get away with this was her awareness that as an experienced and successful call agent, the company needed her more than she needed the company. The comparative scarcity of trained agents meant that even if she was disciplined and/or dismissed it would not be long before she found another position elsewhere. It is this scarcity of trained workers, which is exacerbated by the fact that so many workers “pass through” the industry and take their skills with them, which makes it possible for the third type of call centre worker to exist.

“Serial agents” were evident in both the North East of England, and on the subcontinent. The basic pattern was to enter the industry, and then move within it, not in order to seek promotion or advancement, but to achieve better pay and conditions, to get a change of process and or scenery and often because new arrangements fitted in better with considerations beyond the work place such as travelling time, partners shifts and working patterns. In short, work-life interface issues were important. Usually, spells with employers lasted between six and eighteen months. Carly is an excellent example of a Serial Agent. Between February 2001 and the time I spoke to her in early September 2006 she had worked for no less than five different call centre employers in the North East. Carly had begun by working for Barclays at Doxford Park, a role she was initially very happy with, but the goal posts soon shifted:

I worked there on a part time basis but the job role changed immensely while I was there. When I started off we didn't have sales targets then they introduced 3 sales per day. Then we got individual sales targets for each individual product they had so you had targets for bank accounts, savings accounts, loans, credit cards. Which I was quite happy to do at the time, but then they decided to times the target by four

Interview with Carly, September 2006.

Carly explained that this, in itself, was not really the problem, but the loss of bonus payment and the culture of the “hard sell” that came with the change was:

What had been your monthly target then became your weekly target. I had a team leader stand behind me before saying sell them a loan. I put him on hold and said to her he’s ringing to say his wife has died and he needs to make an appointment at the branch and she said “he might need funeral expenses”. So from that point on I said this is not for me.

Interview with Carly, September 2006.

Carly left Barclays, and had also dropped out of her university course. She went to work at T-Mobile, also at Doxford Park, on a full time basis. This was intended to be a “stop-gap” for a year before starting another university course. Carly told me she had enjoyed working at T-Mobile so much so that she stayed for almost two years, not the year she had originally intended. However, towards the end of the year she was moved to another team, something that encouraged her to move on:

We were moved. As I said when I worked for T-Mobile I sat right at the front of the contact centre, right next to the rest area always in the heart of everything then the team that we went onto were moved downstairs which was like a dungeon, dingy and dark. It wasn’t the same people. The people on the new team were nice but it just wasn’t the same atmosphere as it was upstairs

Interview with Carly, September 2006.

Carly had arranged to start a teacher training course at Kingston University in Outer London, however this ran into problems. Carly returned to call centre work again but not to T-Mobile:

I decided to go back to university but I was going to move away to Kingston but then the accommodation fell through and I looked into getting private accommodation but it was very, very expensive so I couldn't go. So I started working at the Inland Revenue at Peterlee at Bracken Hill. That's completely different. I don't even consider that that is like a contact centre

Interview with Carly, September 2006.

The Inland Revenue call centre Carly worked in was dealing with tax credit enquiries. It is important to note how it is not just financial services or customer services departments for mobile phone companies which use call centres. The public sector in the UK is making increasing use of call centres, for example in the North East both South Tyneside and City of Sunderland both have call centre operations which deal with public enquiries regarding council tax, housing benefit, refuge collection and other general queries. The move towards ever greater efficiency and the partial privatization of central government departments via so called "next step agencies" has led to the adoption of call centre based operations. Aside from Inland Revenue, The Passport Office, DVLA, and The Child Benefit agency all come to mind as examples. However, many of these agencies offer relatively challenging work but do not always bestow the once sought after benefits which civil servants formerly enjoyed in terms of job security, promotion prospects or pensions, this is due to their peripheral status as agencies. However, the type of work which they engage in can also lead to rapid staff turnover. Brian Sheffield (2005) in his study of the CSA (Child Support Agency) found that staff who spent their days attempting to deal with parents who were owed payments from absent spouses and absent spouses who were disputing their liability led to rapid staff turnover within the agency:

The problem of high levels of staff turnover and a movement of trained staff to private sector posts was exacerbated by the poaching of CSA staff, even during lunch hours, by other organisations often located in the business parks for posts requiring good telephony skills ...high staff turnover was regarded as a problem and the phrase, “rats leaving a sinking ship” was used in this context. Factors that might influence the rational choice of emigration to private sector include the offer of relatively increased incomes, better career opportunities, higher levels of job satisfaction and the avoidance of the negative effects arising from low morale within the CSA

B Sheffield Unpublished PhD thesis (2005:253).

The above passage shows how the demand for experienced call centre workers can be utilized to their own benefit by workers, and how the existence of serial agents makes perfect sense. It is a strategy which seeks to maximize the return from call centre work and also to make it more tolerable. Carly found the Inland Revenue demanded similar skills to her previous employers but there was a different emphasis regarding the structure of conversation and on getting matters resolved as quickly as possible:

You've got to get it right first-time because it's single mothers and it's their income. There wasn't a huge volume of calls. There were a lot of calls coming through because obviously there were the complaints over the tax credits in the last couple of years. You did find you were on a call with people for 10-15 minutes. Whereas in other contact centres they expect you to have the person on and off the call in five minutes. It was a very structured conversation that they expected you to have. You had to signpost the call. Signposting is where you have to say I'm just looking at that now if you just bear with me for a moment; I'm just bringing that screen up and things like that. They expected it to be structured but it was difficult to be structured because of the questions you might be asked. So really the emphasis there was on first call resolution

Interview with Carly, September 2006.

I found this interesting as Carly appeared to view this work as much more serious than the work she had done previously. Carly left the Inland Revenue after twelve months. Again, the move to another call centre coincided with a change in her circumstances

beyond the work place. Carly had begun a university course, split up with her partner, moved out of their shared flat and back in with her mother. This again highlights the work-life interface process. Carly then worked at Littlewoods in Sunderland as part of a team selling warranties for electrical items; however at the time I spoke to her she had just left that position after only eight weeks. She had moved to another call centre and was working on an outbound insurance sales team. I asked her about how she approached changing jobs. Her answer conveys a great degree of self assurance:

Apart from Barclays and T-Mobile, when I've applied for a job at a call centre I've not been worried about whether or not I got the job because I've got a clear track record so I wasn't worried about whether I got the job or not. I was really more worried about when I'd be starting and when I'd have to put my notice in at my previous job

Interview with Carly, September 2006.

This answer is also significant as it undermines the myth that employment is so scarce in post-industrial areas that workers will put up with any conditions. It also undermines the idea that call centre agents are passive and offer little in the way of resistance be it on an individual or collective basis. This idea was portrayed in one recent television advert, where call centre staff were depicted as battery hens wearing headsets.

Despite her experience and ability to move jobs easily, Carly did not view the call centre industry in any of the forms which she had experienced it as something she wished to remain in. Her ambition was to become a secondary school teacher. I asked her whether she felt that any of the skills she had learnt whilst working in call centres would be of use to her in the future:

The experience you have with working/dealing with a lot of people all the time I think is probably going to be valuable in the future. I don't know really. When I started working at call centres I didn't think about it being something that would help me in the future and I don't think that working in a call centre, if that's all you've ever done I don't know if you could ever move away from that without any other qualifications or without voluntary work or something else. I don't know whether call centre work itself is valuable experience unless you want to work in another call centre

Interview with Carly, September 2006.

Carly's response here begs the question, where does call centre work lead to? A question which employers need to address, because, at present the answer appears to be that it leads to more call centre work at a similar level. This is one of the reasons why turnover of staff remains high, with even Serial Agents such as Carly passing through the industry.

The work-life interface process is also highly important. Call centre work appeals to certain groups, as the nature of the work fits in with their lifestyle or, more accurately in most cases, their current lifestyle. Only a couple of the workers who I spoke to were the sole income earners in their households, most of them were second income earners who had entered call centre work as a way back into the labour market after a break for whatever reason. Several were working on a part-time basis to supplement their incomes whilst studying. Many were under the age of 25 and living in their parental homes and making negligible contributions to the household income. Call centre work was a staging post, a temporary state and part of a wider process of transition.

Lives in transition

As has already been outlined, many of the people in the call centre industry that I was lucky enough to talk to fell into the category of “passing through” the industry. Indeed by the time I interviewed some of them they had already passed through the industry and made the transition to another job, which was usually a different kind of work. Passing through, for most of them it was not something which just happened, none had passively drifted into the work; it had been a strategic decision. Working in a call centre was part of a process of self development, something which would assist them in getting from one point on their career trajectory to another. The amount, and the way in which working as a call agent contributed to this, varied. For some, it was very direct. Sabina who worked at National Rail Enquiries, herself a student in higher education who worked part-time as a call agent, told me about the make-up of the workforce there:

It’s a mixture really. There are a lot of people who’ve just left school or just doing it as a pastime to fill in the gap until they do whatever they want. There are a lot of people from the west end of Newcastle a lot of ethnic, a lot of Asians work in the call centre. There are a lot of people from the west end of Newcastle. A lot of them are doing because it’s flexible hours they can do it to fill in the time so they don’t have to train to do another job. A lot of people who want to get into taxi work

Interview with Sabina, 2004.

Here, the theme of passing through is evident, but unlike students such as Sabina for whom higher education was the key transition factor, and call centre work a supporting factor providing her with some financial help whilst studying. Something else is also going on. Sabina went on to tell me that the job appealed to many young men from the

Asian community as it provided a way to earn enough money for them to become self-employed as taxi drivers:

There's a lot of money in taxis. They keep saying we can earn a grand a week. That's obviously quicker money than working in a call centre. They can just save the money until they can sort that out. Save for their own taxi. A lot of people do that

Interview with Sabina, 2004.

So, rather than playing a supporting role, call centre work for these young people was a direct way of earning enough to attain the capital they needed to become self-employed. Interestingly, the flexible shift patterns which were available also allowed them to maintain their friendships with those who had already become taxi drivers. As Sabina explained:

It's the flexible hours because a lot of them just...I know it's going to sound horrible but a lot of them do just doss around all day and then they come awake at night as a lot of their friends are taxi drivers so they might as well work in the evening. Well that's what it appears to me anyway. That's my opinion. There's one guy and he works full time for an insurance company and that's like a nine to five job and he's doing this part time as well in the evening because he has to support his whole family. He's only twenty one and because his dad's out of work now he's trying to save up for a car and get a taxi. Everyone's going to into taxiing at work just because it's a quick way of making money

Interview with Sabina, 2004.

Even with the example of Sabina's friend, what is going on here is that the work is very clearly the means to an immediate end, be it accumulating enough money to buy a taxi or to supplement the family income. They do not intend to stay in the job long-term and, what is more, by having very clear goals they are unlikely to do so.

I spoke to a number of call agents who were in the same position as Sabina i.e. studying for undergraduate degrees. The British Government's abandonment of the student grants system in the 1990's has meant that the reality of so-called "full-time" study has now come to include a large amount of part-time work. Also, this is no longer confined to holiday periods as had been the case a generation ago. Part-time work alongside study is now a constant presence. Students in higher education also made up a significant part of the work force at Sabina's workplace:

There are quite a lot of people at uni. There's myself and there's a girl who I sit with she's at Sunderland University but she only lives about five minutes away from the call centre and there's a medical student who works there. He's been working there for 3 years. He was in Derby for six months and then he went to Newcastle University and transferred there. He's been there three years now, all through his Newcastle University years as well. I don't know how! It's just to help him out with money

Interview with Sabina, 2004.

Whilst some students such as Sabina were living at home and work was essentially a way for her to have a source of disposable income, for others no longer living in the parental home, this work was about making sure the rent was paid. Nicola left home to live with her partner just prior to starting her law course. I asked her why she had chosen to work for Lloyd's/TSB?

Well, my partner, he'd actually been working for them for about seven months and I needed a job and I didn't know what I wanted to work at but thought that working for a bank would be a good idea, cos I wouldn't have, you know something to add to my CV. I just went for the normal interview... I wasn't that impressed with them. You were supposedly working for a bank and it didn't seem to be very challenging

Interview with Nicola, 2004.

Nicola found the work agreeable enough, and became a “call marker” monitoring agent’s performance; she was also asked to work full-time and approached about whether, on the completion of her degree, she would be interested in joining the company’s graduate training scheme. She wasn’t. Nicola told me that this was partly to do with her aspiration, she wanted to be a solicitor, and also she felt that three years was long enough in the industry:

I think it’s the job itself, rather than the company. The company, itself, is not that bad when you think about everything we get. We get benefit packages; you can buy a week’s extra holiday if you want it. Medical and they run a computer scheme where you pay £10 a month for a PC

Interview with Nicola, 2004.

For Nicola, as with many other student workers I spoke to call centre work was alright, as they knew that they would not be doing it for the rest of their working lives. This work was, for them, part of the process of transition, not a destination. Many of the workers I spoke to in India felt the same, although the major difference between them and their UK counterparts was that they had already completed higher education courses, and in terms of initial pay for a new graduate call centre work offered excellent wages when compared to other “starter” jobs. As such, call centres were much more viable as a career destination. However, I found something very similar to what Mirchandani (2004) encountered. The same lack of desire to remain working in the industry is evident in Mirchandani’s (2004) research with workers in New Delhi. She reports:

Despite having undergone a long process to obtain their jobs, call centre workers are unconvinced by the arguments about the quality of call centre jobs. Most of those interviewed for the present project noted that they do not anticipate

remaining in the call centre sector but had taken their jobs due to a lack of other job opportunities.

Mirchandani (2004:368).

One of Mirchandani's respondents commented:

I don't have any future plans with this call centre. Not more than a year because there's no future. You can't sustain taking calls throughout your life. It's just not possible. And this is no career. It's just a short-term kind of job

Mirchandani (2004:368).

On this basis, call centre work itself can be argued to be a transitional stage for many Indian graduates who will either seek promotion within the organizations they work for, or leave in order to seek career progression. Something which needs to be taken into account is the type of work which call centre agents do. Those who have additional skills, apart from the generic language and core IT skills, are of course in a rather different position as their specialist knowledge allows them to progress into other areas, or it gives them the option of moving out of the industry and returning later.

Prithvi, from Bangalore is someone who has been involved with the call centre industry and off shored "back office" work in a number of different guises in recent years. Prithvi has a degree in Computer Science, but comes from a family with a strong business background. His grandfather had originally come to Bangalore in the late nineteen forties and worked in the film industry. However, whilst working on location he developed an eye for property, and began buying and selling land. Prithvi's father had taken over the business and, although involved in many ventures including general export was still involved in the development of real estate around Bangalore. For example, during my

time in the city, Prithvi pointed out a vacant plot of land which his father had bought in the mid eighties, it was about to be developed as a shopping mall. This of course proved to be very lucrative as such a development that would have been difficult to envisage in Bangalore only twenty years ago. Prithvi had worked in a number of jobs, one of which was as a traveling representative for Shell oil, promoting the company's products. This was more difficult than it sounds as Prithvi explained to me, that from the mid sixties until the early nineties Castrol had had a monopoly of motor oil sales in India. Castrol had dyed their oil red and the myth had grown up that the redder the oil was the better it was. So Prithvi's work involved a good deal of myth-busting and re-education. However, Prithvi tired of the travelling that the job involved and looked for something closer to home. He got involved in outsourced industry by working as a technical support manager for a medical transcription services operation. This involved ensuring that voice files arrived via the internet in Bangalore and completed transcripts were sent back to customers in the US by their deadlines. I asked him how big the operation had been:

we had 60 people working. 30/30 – 2 shifts. It was a boom time for medical transcription. It was in 2000. On a morning we used to get the files out by about 5 o'clock. We had proof readers, doctors, who would check the medical terms, grammar then we used to upload it back to them

Interview with Prithvi, November 2006.

However, after the September the 11th 2001 terrorist attacks, the bottom had dropped out of the US Medical transcription market amid concerns about the security of sending such data abroad. This again illustrates the interaction of the global and local contexts and the often volatile relationship between the two. Prithvi however moved on to work for a US company called C Q solutions which were operating in Bangalore. Prithvi explained:

After Shell I joined CQ Solutions, it's a US company. They do technical support for Sony products. I worked there as a quality analyst and worked as a team leader then they promoted me to a team supervisor. I was handling two teams. I worked for two years there, and mostly it was nightshift. Two years of nightshift and team supervisor. We had three team leaders. I used to handle all the correspondence for that, unresolved issues, I used to sort those

Interview with Prithvi, November 2006.

I asked him how he had found this Prithvi stressed that, for him, the job was easy as the team leaders were dealing with the frontline agents most of the time. His job was to resolve technical issues which no one else could, and act as a general trouble-shooter.

So why had he left after two years? Prithvi's answer was a familiar one:

it was the nightshift and, we had to work Sundays. People are sacrificing so much out of their personal lives, social lives – everything for this. Not only because of money, they are supporting the whole world! It was 6 pm to 6 am every day and they only gave you 20 days off. It was too much so I wanted to do something on my own, start my own business

Interview with Privithvi, November 2006.

Although he had a number of options open to him due to his family's business connections, Prithvi decided to stay in and around the call centre industry. He used his contacts in the industry and set up "Celestial Consultants" a call centre recruitment company. Prithvi explained that the reason why there was a need for such an enterprise was the issue of staff turnover, something that characterises the industry in the UK but is also common in India. I asked Prithvi why he thought this occurred in Bangalore:

They are like me – I wanted to start up my own business. They are some people who don't want a call centre job they may want to get into IT. Some people get married, especially girls. Once they are married they are housewives and search for day jobs. There are so many reasons

Interview with Prithvi, November 2006.

We also discussed what the requirements of the companies who he was recruiting on behalf of were like. The basic qualification Prithvi explained was “10 + 2” and 6 months work experience:

10+2 is 12th grade so that's initial degree. If he's 12th grade then he must have some work experience in some other field. Those are the requirements. They must be able to work nightshifts and all those things

Interview with Prithvi, November 2006.

Due to the problems of turnover and the cost of training incurred by companies when taking on new staff, they were quite particular about who they employed. Prithvi explained to me that of all those who contacted his agency only about one-in-four would be suitable for forwarding to the companies he was recruiting for. Of these, probably only about 10% would end up being employed. This meant that of the 130 or so initial applicants who approached Celestial Consultants each month only about three or four would end up employed in the call centre industry. Prithvi was not just dealing with those looking to make a start in the industry but, also, those looking to get a better job with the industry, in a similar fashion to the serial agents of the North East:

I have plenty people who come to me who want to transfer as they didn't like the process it was too difficult for them. Or maybe it's only nightshift and they come back and tell me what are you going to do – search for a job for me on dayshift. So I try to match at their convenience.

Interview with Prithvi, November 2006.

Prithvi was also in demand from his former employers and stressed to me that he could return to his former employers if he ever felt the need to. This example is particularly interesting as the theme of transformation is extremely strong. Prithvi has transformed his working life and is actively involved in the process of transformation of others through the recruitment process. It also shows how the wider transformation of working practices and places is bound up with the changing lives of those within it.

Flexible workers? Flexible workplaces?

For the North East workers, the flexibility of the work in terms of shift patterns had great appeal, whilst for the Indian workers the great incentive was the pay as call centre work paid them around three times the amount they could expect from more traditional graduate starter jobs. This allowed them in most cases to contribute something to the household income and retain a sizeable disposable income. The issue of flexibility has been, in part, driven by the need to retain workers by employers anxious to keep their centres working efficiently, and the demand for trained workers from competitors. However, it can be argued that flexibility is also a consequence of the call centre as a way of working. Some of these issues have been picked up by the industry in the UK who are now exploring the possibilities of doing away with call centre settings altogether by allowing workers to work from home. This has advantages to both employers and agents, and is already technically possible. However, there are reservations regarding security, monitoring and coaching. But of course cost is also a key concern. An article in Call Centre Focus (CCF) in January 2008 that:

The person sitting in the office will cost around £10,000, but the actual set up of a home worker is £2,500. There is also the productivity and flexibility that you get with a home worker and you can't put a price on that. It's about having the right type of person to work from home

CCF, January 2008

This idea also means that the work-life interface process could become even more complex than it already is. On the Indian subcontinent though, the cultural context is such that part-time work is still extremely rare. However, those to whom I mentioned the issue to saw no reason why this should not develop in the future. But it must be said that the nature of the labour force in English speaking call centres that are serving overseas markets, is predominantly young, single and able to work full-time. However, this will not be sustainable in the long term as it must be remembered that call centre work is also expanding quickly in order to serve the Indian domestic market which is becoming increasingly important. Whilst captive centres serving overseas markets such as HSBC, and Barclays will probably keep the young graduate based labour force they currently have, it is probable that the call centre labour force will change, along with the market as it diversifies. Call centre work be it in the UK, India or anywhere else, is itself in transition.

An industry in transition

The theme of change and transition appeared wherever I looked at the call centre industry. In both the North East and in India the industry had risen from virtually nothing over the previous decade, it had developed and changed and crucially, was still developing both in terms of technology and working practices. This can be seen as both

the industry's major virtue and also its major vice. A virtue, in that it is dynamic and fast moving, a vice in that it lacks continuity and offers its workers little in the way of security. This is something that could be said of many industries, however, the call centre industry's place within the global and technological contexts and its relationships with these contexts would appear to make it particularly susceptible to sudden and widespread change. It can be argued that call centres themselves are transitional. As we have already discussed they have been used as a way to change the way interactions and transactions are managed i.e. many exchanges of goods and services which would formerly have taken place on a face-to-face basis and, more often than not, across a shop counter are now carried out at a distance via the call centre. Interestingly, this has not been driven by customers, but by business as it allows lower costs for them, i.e. overheads are lower. Staff also control the interactive process to a far greater extent. Interestingly transactions with call centres from a consumer point of view appear to be almost universally disliked. Customers object to paying for the calls in the first place, and administering and sorting the enquiry themselves via interactive menus which invite them to "press 1 for X" and "press 2 for Y". One of the most common problems I had whilst attempting to explain my research to friends and family was that as soon as they heard the term "call centre" they stopped listening to what I was saying and begin to tell me about unsatisfactory encounters with call centres. It is difficult to think of anyone who responded positively, although occasionally, people commented in a rather surprised manner that they had had a good interaction with a call centre. Unfortunately, with off shoring becoming more widespread in recent years, many of the comments had very unpleasant racist overtones. One young woman working for HCL in Delhi asked me quite directly:

Why do some people in the UK hate us so much?

It was difficult to know how to answer this. In the end, I attempted to explain the abusive reaction of customers towards agents like her as being due to frustration on their part. However, I am very doubtful whether frustrated customers calling the centres in the North East would react by abusing agents on the basis of their regional background. The power issue which is tied up with the interactions at the client/agent interface is important and merits some general exploration. What operates at present in most processes is an interaction which is managed by the needs of that process; this in turn subordinates both the role of the agent and the client. This is frustrating for both parties and is often negative, most people though realise, that to successfully achieve what they want they are required to “play the game” and “jump through hoops” and that this will be far more productive than simply making demands.

It can be argued that this is due to the nature of the interaction being based on “voice” rather than a “face-to-face” encounter and customers are yet to adapt to a different set of rules. However, it can also be argued that it depends on the nature of those rules. It is possible to speculate about this issue, but what is clear, is that both agents and customers are able to subvert the process if they so wish. All the agents I spoke to had developed ways of being able to either make themselves unavailable for calls or to “lose” calls which they did not want, usually due to the difficult hostile nature of a customer. For example, one way to do this was to transfer the call to another department or team. In one centre, which I shall not name for obvious reasons, this practice of transferring problem clients to each other had virtually become a sport. A more subtle and officially sanctioned

way of dealing with customers with grievances was through the channel of “escalated” calls. Carly worked on escalated calls at a call centre for a mobile phone service provider and explained the process to me:

Escalated calls are when someone asks to speak to a manager, a lot of the time it wasn't a manager they spoke to it was an advisor they spoke to. If they said to you “are you a manager” you had to say “no I'm not” but when they've been speaking to such and such on my team they generally assume that you are a manager. You don't actually tell them that you aren't

Interview with Carly, 2006.

I commented to Carly that this was an interesting, if slightly dubious, practice. It also illustrates rather well how the usual rules of interaction can be subverted in the voice process. Getting retail workers in a traditional “over the counter” interaction to impersonate managers is probably not totally unheard of, but must at best, be extremely rare! Perhaps more importantly though, do such tactics work? I put this question to Carly; I must say I was not surprised by her reply:

They do, I think a lot of the time it's just a relief for them to hear a voice on the other end of the phone

Interview with Carly, September 2006.

This refers back to the question of control; interaction with a call centre is often frustrating as the customer is at the mercy of the process and sometimes the agent too.

I would argue that this is not just a question of customers being reluctant to deal with different forms of interaction but a question of the quality of that interaction and whether they have the confidence to deal with the process. The question of “customer care” is constantly discussed within industry journals such as “Call Centre Focus” (CCF), usually

focusing on technology and agent behaviour, but does not recognise that the underlying process itself is more often than not one that many customers feel uneasy with. However, these processes can also be subverted and modified sometimes by collusion between agents and customers. For example, I recently rang a call centre for an insurance quotation. I had noticed that the company offered an additional 15% discount for customers who bought online and avoided the call centre altogether. This, of course, makes sense for the insurance broker as it makes the customer do all the work of inputting the information which is usually done by the agent who, of course, is being paid to do it. I was reluctant to spend time typing in information when the likely outcome may well have been a higher quotation than the renewal price I had already been quoted. So I decided to ring the call centre, get a quotation, and then if it was competitive to enter the information online and buy at the discounted price. During the course of my conversation with the call agent I got them to confirm that the online price would be cheaper, they asked why and I explained my plan. They were at first a bit unhappy about this:

So I'm going to go all through this quote with you then you're going to go and buy on the website?

I said yes, of course I would if it meant getting another 15% off of the price, wouldn't they? The agent conceded that I had a point, and quoted me a competitive price. She then asked me to hold for a moment, and returned a few moments later to tell me that she had explained my plan to her team leader and would give me a further 15% discount on the price to match the website price. This suited me as it meant that I didn't have to spend time entering information, it suited the agent as it meant one more sale for her target and it suited the team leader as it was another sale towards the team's target. This story

illustrates two points. Firstly, how by bending and subverting the rules which govern customer-agent interaction both parties ended up with a more satisfactory outcome. Secondly, how the rapid rise of broadband internet access in the UK over the past decade has led to the growth of services which are available via it. It can be argued that this will increasingly replace call centre services in the coming decade just as call centre operations replaced many face-to-face operations from the early 1990's onwards.

However, one must also be careful of falling into a technologically determinist trap as the contexts of locality, history and the global will continue to shape the future direction of the industry. Whilst call centres will change (although it is very unlikely they will ever disappear), inbound specialist technical support services, and public sector institutions dealing with complex, changing and often locally specific information will, in all likelihood, persist. But it is highly likely that mass market call centres which provide general information and products such as financial services may fade from the prominent position they have occupied in recent years.

Trajectories of place

The world of work and the localities, within which it is located, have an intimate relationship. Within which each informs the other, and this has long been the case. However, with the rise of an increasingly important global context far flung locations can also have an influence on work and communities. JK, a relationship manager for a third party call centre which operates from Mumbai, told me how the UK market for outbound outsourced calls was becoming increasingly untenable for her organisation. This was not due to any factors in Mumbai, but due to the increasing uptake of the TPS (Telephone

Preference Service) by households in the UK. This service allows households to register their telephone number as “off limits” to “cold” outbound calls. As such, the pool for calls is diminished, making contracts harder to fulfil and less attractive economically. Prithvi (see above) had explained how the, once thriving Medical Transcription industry in Bangalore which served the US market had disappeared almost overnight due to the events of September 11th 2001, and subsequent US concerns about the security of digital information. This is not just the case in India, the relationship between work and locality, and how change in one sector can affect others sometimes with dramatic consequences, is well illustrated by David Smith in his (2005) book “On the margins of inclusion”. Smith demonstrates the effects of change in the London labour market over the past thirty years. He does this by concentrating on the effect that this has had on a particular place; the St Hellier estate located on the outer fringes of Greater London. Smith demonstrates how the community was founded around assumptions about the availability, continuing supply of, and particular type of work. Those assumptions have all been superseded over the past thirty years and this, in turn, has made the estate a very different place to live:

In 1981 the manufacturing sector accounted for 36% of total employment in the Borough of Merton compared to 19% for Greater London and 28% nationally. Merton de-industrialised earlier and faster than the rest of the nation and by 1989 had lost over a third of its manufacturing employment. By 1989 manufacturing accounted for 25% of employment still slightly higher than the national figure of 23% and significantly higher than the 13% for greater London

Smith (2005:69).

That places and the ways in which people work change is no surprise. However, what is worth exploring are the consequences of those changes and how those involved react to them. Smith shows how the loss of the type of work, which the St Hellier estate had

always taken for granted, led to its fragmentation as a community, with some of its residents becoming more affluent and leaving, whilst others were left behind to cope with an uncertain future.

Many writers would, at that point, stop; however, what is refreshing about Smith's approach is that he seeks out people in the community and tells their stories. These stories are about how they have adapted in an attempt to cope with the new realities of uncertainty. Despite adversity, people found ways to survive, his illustrations of the informal economy on the estate show this particularly well. For example, one of his respondents told him about how she obtained short term work:

It's easy to get really just by asking about. If you've got a lot of friends either working cash-in hand jobs or know a wide circle of people then you'll always find something. It helps if you've got friends that are working depending on what kind of jobs they're doing, like if you're a bloke and a lot of your friends are builders, say, then you're going to find it easier than if they are civil servants or teachers

Smith (2005:163).

The point that this makes is that people and social networks are resilient and actively respond to the structural changes around them as best they can, they are not just passive subjects to whom things happen. The way in which places have changed in the UK has been dramatic in terms of the type of work many are now engaged in and it has had consequences for places. This is very evident within the North East, but as already discussed, much of the "residual culture" has persisted. It can be argued that what is going on in India is rather different. The call centre industry and the whole BPO sector, whilst having a very high profile particularly in the west is a very small part of the Indian

economy as a whole. The industry body NASSCOM estimate that it accounts for around 2% of the economy.

In many ways commentators should be looking at the growth of “traditional” manufacturing industries, this growth is enormous. For example, the expansion of the automobile industry in areas such as Maharashtra is highly significant with enormous investment from the likes of Volkswagen and Mercedes and the already huge presence of indigenous manufacturers such as TATA and Bajaj industries. So why does the call centre/BPO (Business process outsourcing) industry in India command such attention? I would contend that it has drawn attention from the mass media in India and social and economic commentators both there and abroad because of what it can be viewed as symbolising as much as what it actually is. Wrapped up with the industry are concerns about the future of the economy, the future of work, anxieties about the future of family structures, concerns too about the effect of this model of working culturally. This point was expressed very simply to me by Karthik Sekhar from Bangalore who used the term “East India Company mark two.” This simple description says a great deal and I think reflects how the call centre/ BPO boom, is much more than a small part of India’s rapid emergence as an economic powerhouse. It has been a catalyst around which the questions and anxieties about what the consequences of the new economic structures may be. As such, it can be argued that the call centre /BPO debate in India is tied up with questions about the country’s relationship with the wider world and broader questions about how the country sees itself. In this sense it is about a process of national transition. The call centre/BPO industry in India is also changing and diversifying too. Captive international centres remain, as does the third party provision of services to the UK and the US by the

well-established indigenous providers such as Wipro, Mphasis, and HCL but the most rapid area of expansion is the domestic call centre market which, with India's population, is potentially enormous. Whilst I was visiting Pune, I was lucky enough to visit a call centre serving the domestic market. Tata-Sky is a recently established satellite TV network for the subcontinent. Satellite TV is highly popular in India and its already huge audience is potentially much bigger. In effect, what was being offered was an Indian version of Sky TV with the availability of both basic packages and premium film and sports channels on a similar model to the way Sky functions in the European market. I spoke to Rahul the Operations Director for the centre. Rahul explained that the operation was a joint venture between India's huge conglomerate Tata industries and Rupert Murdoch's Sky TV, itself an offshoot of News International. Joint ventures are the norm in India as the government insists upon them when ventures exceed a certain size. In this case Rahul explained it was to do with media regulation, Sky as a foreign broadcaster could not operate, but could if in partnership with an Indian enterprise. The call centre was located in a modern business park in Pune. Pune in the highlands of Maharashtra, has developed quickly, it is close to Mumbai, but has a better climate due to its altitude. One hundred and fifty years ago these qualities had made it a major garrison town of the British Raj in Western India. Today Pune has become a major IT hub; this is partly due to the large pool of skilled labour which is available here due to the city being a major centre for higher education. However, its proximity to Mumbai, its better climate and the availability of land for business expansion and housing have made it an attractive location. Rahul had recently relocated to the city from Mumbai. It was also evident that many of the companies trading on the business park had thought about how to attract

workers to their operations. Adjacent to the park were blocks of flats for workers, a school and a shopping mall. A far cry from the gruelling rail commutes which most workers in Mumbai face.

Rahul's background had been in IT and, prior to moving to Pune, he had worked for BT Cellnet in Mumbai, where he had been responsible for the call centre's technical infrastructure. The Tata-Sky operation had begun in mid 2006, and the centre at the time of my visit had about 250 agents. However, this was expected to expand to 500 agents within the next twelve months. The centre's teams dealt with initial customer enquiries and sales, technical help and advice, and general customer service. Language was also a major issue at Tata-Sky as it is for virtually all Indian domestic operations. India has many different languages, which are spoken according to region, Hindi and English serve as the country's "common languages". So for an operation such as Tata- Sky to gain maximum coverage, it needs to ensure that, that within its workforce all languages can be catered for. The alternative is to have regional centres but this of course means higher costs. Rahul explained to me, that in a place like Pune finding agents with the English language skills required was not difficult, but sometimes finding those who spoke some of the regional languages was. It would appear that this will be an ongoing issue for India's domestic call centre industry. As well as discussing the Tata-Sky operation, Rahul told me how he thought the call centre/BPO industries were likely to develop in the future. His view was that the influx of off shored work in the past decade had been valuable as it had lead to new working practices but it was now coming to an end. This, he felt, was a good thing as it meant that some of the lower end of the market operations,

which had appeared to cash in on the boom in outsourced work, would disappear and this would enhance the industry's reputation.

He also felt that India's call centres needed to concentrate on high value work for overseas markets, that which is sometimes known as KPO (Knowledge Process Outsourcing). KPO is about providing specialist professional knowledge, so instead of selling basic financial products, the emphasis is on providing specialist financial services such as accountancy. Other examples might include legal outsourcing or specialised technical help. The point he made was that these services could also maintain professional structures of advancement and promotion for those working within them, whereas the flat structures of the general call centre model could not. The major growth in the industry would not come from abroad and Rahul felt the general overseas market was one which had diminishing returns, i.e. work could be off shored to cheaper locations. Instead, the future in his view was the domestic market and the phenomenal growth which was going on. Rahul illustrated this by explaining to me the scale of the expansion which had gone on in telecoms in India since 1992. Rahul argued that, paradoxically India's late entry into the field of modern telecommunications has been to its advantage. As late as 1997 there was only one telephone per 1000 head of population. However, the deregulation of telecoms has meant that much of the market went from nothing straight to digital communications, effectively "leap-frogging" the analogue stage of communication technology. The result of which is a telecoms infrastructure which is "state of the art" and, as it is going where nothing existed before, in many cases there are few issues about integration with previous systems. The rapid expansion of mobile phone use in India is a great example of this, Rahul told me that it was estimated by NASSCOM

that there were around 5 million cell phones being sold in India per month during 2006, and that by 2009 the country would have 350 million cell phone users. This is a very fast transition as if we consider the 1997 figure it will mean that telephone access will have gone from one in a thousand to effectively one in three in the space of twelve years. The potential market also remains vast as the population of India is in excess of one billion.

What is important about Rahul's analysis was that he did not see much future for the type of outsourced off shored routine customer service/sales work which has been such a success and in such demand over the past decade or so. Instead, he saw the industry changing rapidly along with the rest of the economy, becoming more specialised for overseas markets in order to exploit particular "niches" and servicing an increasing domestic economy rather than providing services for offshore markets. This may or may not be true but, what it certainly illustrates is the speed, scale and the possibilities that the rapidly changing economic landscape in India also presents.

Of course, with economic change comes social change too. The anxieties about, the impact of new industries and their working practices have already been discussed in some depth. What is evident is the changing nature of white collar work. In the call centres of North East England there is no doubt that the process of "proletarianisation" that Braverman (1974) described as being the future for white collar labour can be clearly seen to have occurred. In many ways they offer a case study of the decline in status that white collar work has undergone over the past century. If we consider the North East, it becomes clear that a white collar proletariat developed in the region long before the advent of the call centre industry, particularly with the relocation of government

departments to the region during and immediately after the Second World War, and their subsequent development due to the establishment and expansion of the welfare state. This meant that the demand for large amounts of white collar, but not particularly highly skilled labour was high. The Department of Work and Pensions site at Long Benton, Child Benefit at Washington and National Savings at Durham all serve as example of this trend. So non professional white-collar work was well established in the region many years before the call centre industry appeared. It is also important to realise that this has further implication for how workers approach types of work. For instance, I was initially surprised to find how unionised the call centres of the North East were, trade unions had a presence in virtually all of the workplaces I visited. Many workers belonged to them too. What can this be attributed to? There are several possible explanations. Firstly; white collar unionism in Britain and the North East is well established. The civil service locations I mentioned above were always highly unionised and remain so. There is no disjuncture between doing a “white-collar” job and being a union member. Some of those I spoke to who worked part time hours were not union members as they felt that they would not be around long enough to benefit from membership, but they saw relevance and benefit of membership:

I’m not in the union at the moment but if I was here full-time I definitely would be, yeah

Interview with Jo, October 2004.

Chris who worked for Lloyds/TSB had become involved with the union, Chris had previously been in the construction industry until he had left due to an industrial accident, and I asked him whether he had brought his activism with him from there?

No, I was never really bothered with the union then; it's something I got into when I started working in call centres

Interview with Chris, 2004.

The type of unionism which the participants told me about was one that followed a model of casework and advocacy. Several had asked the union to support them in disputes about working patterns and conditions and felt that this was a helpful extra lever to apply to reluctant management. It was also a way to cover your back:

You have to be in the union really as all the selling we do is subject to the FSA code of conduct, if you mess up the company can be fined, it happened while I was there. They tried to blame the agents and sack them although they were only doing what they were told. If you're in the union you at least have someone to stick up for you

Interview with Janette, 2004

The situation in India is complicated by numerous additional factors. Firstly, white collar work in the post-independence era was dominated by the state, with "government jobs" being the norm for many of the educated Indians whose children and grandchildren are now working in the call centre/BPO sector. These jobs were highly structured, had clear career paths, were highly secure "jobs for life", pensionable and also, had a certain status. With the retreat of the state sector and the economic reforms of the 1990's the availability of these type of jobs and their attendant pay and conditions has greatly diminished. What does remain is the status to a great extent, so working in the call centre/ BPO industries although a lot less secure is still a good job, both in terms of pay and status. It must also be remembered that only those with a degree level education are able to command jobs in call centres serving the UK and US markets. This is usually due not to the specifics of the

person's qualifications, but due to the standard of the English language skills which are required in order to obtain this level of academic qualification. Consequently those working in the industry largely regard their work and themselves as "professional." This issue of self-perception is a major issue for those attempting to organise trade union representation in the sector.

Noronha and D'Cruz (2006) argue that Indian call centre employers have largely been successful in persuading call agents that they have no need of trade unions via a range of inclusivist, and exclusivist, strategies. For example, agents are trained to take on the values of the organisation and commit to them via an approach which attempts to portray the employee-employer relationship as a joint venture which is ultimately "customer focussed". In addition to this inclusivist approach which focuses on winning worker's "hearts and minds" they also note that exclusivist approaches which involve casualising employment, outsourcing of work and often a point blank refusal to engage with unions or collective representations of any kind. They also found that many workers regarded unions as:

alien and unnecessary entities: at the very outset most of the agents ruled out the possibility of forming a union. Many did not know what the term union meant and how unions functioned. When explained to them they found the idea strange and alien

Noronha and D'Cruz (2006:5).

This can be explained in part by the way in which trade unionism has developed in the subcontinent. Trade unions in India are located in particular areas of the country and the economy. It is known that only a small percentage of the labour force is unionised.

According to the 2001 Census of India, the workforce consisted of 402 million people out of which only 7% (28.14 million) were in the “organised” sector. Out of this 7%, 69% (18 million) were in the public sector and the remaining 31% (8.4 million) were in the private sector. The Indian trade union congress is strongest in the “Left Front” controlled regions of West Bengal and Kerala. Their membership is drawn from skilled blue collar workers. As such unionism in India is concentrated into particular industries and regions. “White collar” unionism, whilst common in the public sector has yet to reach and make any significant impact upon the private sector. Noronha and D’Cruz (2006) found that the call centre agents they encountered found the idea of trade unionism alien due to their class backgrounds and their preconceptions about the nature and purpose of union activity:

The call centre agents tried to differentiate themselves from their government counterparts who they derided as having no work and being good for nothing. Unions were only for the working class whilst they were professionals

Noronha and D’Cruz (2006:7).

Noronha and D’Cruz found that the idea of professionalism, and being professional was extremely strong amongst the call centre workers they encountered and this was a major obstacle to any form of union organisation:

All in all they considered their jobs to be of high status and themselves to be professionals who did not require to be unionised

Noronha and D’Cruz (2006:7).

Yet despite these attitudes, there has been a successful attempt at organising a trade union for call centre workers and IT professionals. The UNITES trade union was formed in

October 2005 in Mumbai. It is based in Bangalore and has been backed by UNI (Union Network International) which is based in Geneva. UNITES, in late 2006 had about 5,000 members and around 600-700 activists. This is, at present, a small number of people in what is still a small area of the Indian economy. What is noteworthy about UNITES is its approach, and the way in which it has attempted to promote itself. Rather than just dealing with grievances, the union had promoted itself by highlighting health and safety issues. During October 2006 the union ran a health awareness campaign entitled “Stop the BOSS”. BOSS in this instance is an acronym for “Burn-out stress syndrome” a major part of the campaign involved distributing health information and “anti stress kits.” These include a stress ball, herbal tea, information on stress and its symptoms and yoga based relaxation exercises. The union had also been involved in several high profile incidents, for example, helping the family of an employee killed in a car crash whilst being driven home from a Delhi call centre by a company driver, to win compensation. The union’s general secretary explained how this was a deliberate strategy, one which would raise awareness of the unions presence with both employers and employees. Issues such as call centre workers health, as mentioned above, have already been highlighted by the media in India, UNITES championing the issue makes it harder for the same media to dismiss the union:

people I’ve mentioned, they might have the feeling that we are not doing whatever, but what they don’t understand is that we have to have guard our hearts sometimes. There are reasons why we are having a media campaign and ensuring the publicity. We look to be sure, because these companies have political agendas, they have support from multi-nationals and a whole lot of things and I can’t expose all my members to this sort of thing

Interview with Karthik, November 2006.

This point sums up the challenge UNITES faces very well, it needs to engage with employers and champion workers rights, but it can only do so if it can build a large enough membership base. This battle involves persuading workers of their relevance and to do so they must change their perception of what a union is and what it might be. This means engaging with the potential members and becoming the type of organization they want to join. It is, to say the least, a challenge. I asked Karthik where he thought the organization might be in five years time, his response was characteristically optimistic:

What we have done is planned out our year on recruit. Today we have about 15,000 contacts and about 7-8,000 have picked up the forms and about roughly about 2,000 people have come to us about something. This has all happened from ground zero. That is a good thing. Our target next year is to have at least 15,000 members so we are financially sound by the second or third year. Our target is by the end of 2 years is to have at least about 10% of the population if IT workers

Interview with Karthik, November 2006.

It is difficult to assess whether this will succeed or not. However, what it does show is how the economic transition of places such as Mumbai and Bangalore is raising questions about the shape of the wider social structures and institutions which function within those places.

CHAPTER EIGHT- LOCALITIES AND CALL CENTRE WORK

Why locality?

capitalism may be an international system and its chief economic institution –the firm-is increasingly multinational and increasingly freed from time/space constraints. Labour, however is not, nor are people’s daily individual and communal lives

Dickens *et al.* (1985:21).

This point shows why locality is important. Locality can be understood as the practices and customs of life which are rooted in a particular area. Locality is not just spatial, it is also cultural. To investigate it, and appreciate it, requires the appreciation of and engagement with what can best be described as the “biography” of a place. This chapter outlines and explores the importance of localities and how they shape the lives of those who live within them. This chapter attempts to compose “biographies of place” for the three major localities within which the research took place. This approach is ethnographic in the broadest sense. Information about the areas was sought from secondary sources in order to allow the broad contours of the field to be seen and a general orientation gained. This was done prior to any fieldwork being carried out. Being in the field itself raised further questions and within many of the one to one interviews, issues about the local environment were unpacked and emerged as highly significant. Therefore, localities framed the interviews at a practical level and also formed the contextual backdrop against which working lives were played out. As such, they are very important.

What is locality?

Locality is a combination of geography, industry, culture, and institutions that seek to manage these aspects within an area. Locality is often discussed in terms of identity, an area's sense of self if you will, and its relationship with the wider world. Localities are important due to the fact that:

localities are the prime site in which social practices are made and sustained, social practices which constitute social systems.

(Urry, 1982:39).

The North East of England is usually seen as a region with a particularly strong and distinctive identity. It can be argued that this is due to several reasons such as the regions industrial past, its geographical integrity and its relative isolation from other centres of population within the UK. The city of Mumbai also has a strong image and has been the established commercial capital of India for centuries; it is also the subcontinent's media capital and home to India's film industry. The city of Bangalore is different again. Within the subcontinent, it is seen as the hi-tech city, as a symbol and example of India's condition, where rapid growth is both welcomed and viewed with suspicion as the new threatens to overwhelm the established and traditional. It is a city of transition, a "boom town".

The idea of a local context as it applies to this piece of research can be said to refer to the socio-economic structure and political structure of a region or area. The extent to which these structures are particular to that region or area and differ from the structural norms of other areas are what generate notions of "distinctiveness" and provide a comparative element to the research.

There is debate about whether studying locality is essentially about studying a set of processes that generate local contexts or whether localities are effectively units for case studies, Gregson (1987) debates this point at some length. These structures are important as they are the formed by and in turn inform the context within which the call centre industry and its workers operate. Consequently, it is important to recognize that within locality there are:

processes that have led to the uneven development and local differentiation of social and economic change.

(Goodwin, 1986:2)

The following discussion will examine some of these local characteristics, via the biographies of the places in question.

Biography 1: The North East of England

At first glance, the establishment and continuing development of the call centre industry in the North East of England could be attributed to the fact that it is a post-industrial region. Often call centre work is rather simplistically stereotyped as unskilled and it is argued that companies locate in areas such as the North East as they offer a readily available pool of cheap labour. While it is true that call centre clusters can be found in areas where widespread de-industrialization has occurred in the last three decades, for example Clydeside, the North West and South Wales, similar clusters can also be found in the South East, along the M4 corridor and in East Anglia, areas which were never that heavily industrialized in the first place. Nor are the call centres of the North East or any other de-industrialized area for that matter staffed by former miners, steel men or

shipyard workers. What is significant is that post-industrial areas have a number of characteristics which make them attractive to call centre operators, such as available space at affordable rents and assistance from regional and local structures of governance. The attraction of the area is something that is packaged, promoted and marketed. The city of Sunderland summarizes its virtues as a business location thus:

Sunderland is a large and thriving city with a great deal to offer forward-thinking companies, such as:

- uncongested roads, with direct access to the A1M and A19
- a high standard of broadband connectivity
- a choice of well-located sites with serviced plots available
- high quality, low-cost business accommodation
- a package of business support that others will find hard to match
- a local workforce that is renowned for its loyalty and adaptability

<http://www.investinsunderland.co.uk/inward.asp> (City of Sunderland Business website)

So the idea of a locality's suitability for business is something that is produced and packaged, there is an active process that local institutions of governance in partnership with local businesses engage in. This is nothing new; the North East's physical and economic structure was not produced by a nineteenth century "laissez faire" carboniferous capitalism. During that period, structures of local mercantilism and governance such as the "Tyne Improvement Commission" and the "River Wear Commissioners" were essential as they created the conditions whereby private capital could flourish. As such, it cannot be said that the call centre industry just arrived; to a large extent, it was brought to the North East.

Attempting to attract new forms of industry to the North East is a long story and largely coincided with the gradual decline of carboniferous capitalism from its high point (which is generally accepted to be 1913 when coal production in the Durham coalfield reached its peak). The region's experience in the depression years of the 1930's added a new spur to the need to find substitute industries for the region. The region recovered during the Second World War as demand for coal, steel and ships for the war effort revived industries which had previously relied on large export markets.

However, in the post war years, even with the revitalisation of the areas traditional industries, there were new efforts to diversify the region's economic structure. As was noted earlier, this met with considerable success in the 1950's, attracting electronics manufacturers such as Plessey and Phillips, and also textiles and garment finishing, for example Courtholds and Dewhirsts. This process of diversification was supported by both national and local government, who worked with companies such as English Estates to establish new industrial and overspill residential areas such as Washington and Cramlington and, to further develop those that had been previously established such as Team Valley in Gateshead. This process gained momentum in the early 1960's with the Hailsham Report (HMSO 1963). This reviewed what the impact of the decline of the coal industry in the North East would have, as UK energy policy turned away from the policy of maximizing domestic coal production that had prevailed in the industry ever since the outbreak of World War Two. The impetus for this process became rather more urgent in the 1980's as the final rundown of coal and shipbuilding occurred.

Consequently, local government and government agencies in the North East have been players in the region's economic policy to a far greater extent than they are in other areas of the country. For example, the role which Sunderland city council has played in establishing new business parks and then attracting companies to them. One of their successes has been "Doxford International". Doxford is a business park located on the South West outskirts of the City of Sunderland; it is located next to one of the region's main arterial roads, the A19. Interestingly, for an area synonymous with the post-industrial development of the region, it is named after a famous Wearside shipbuilding dynasty. Doxford's led the field in the development of ship's diesel engines in the early 20th century. This can be seen as an example of how the North East's past endures in its present. The pattern of development over recent years has been greatly influenced by the region's road system and the availability of land adjacent to it. This availability of spaces for development is a consequence of the region's original pattern of development. In the nineteenth century, industry developed around the riversides and the seashore, as it was the sea, which provided the means of transport for the regions goods to the markets of the world. Residential areas developed accordingly in proximity to those industrial areas. This is no longer the case, and road communications are far more significant. As a consequence of this, newer industries have tended to develop on inland greenfield sites rather than on former industrial land, which is neither in the right strategic location or able to be easily expanded as such sites are often bounded by physical barriers such as the rivers or shoreline, and residential areas. Proximity to the A1 or A19 is what the region's employer's desire.

It should also be stressed that although the region still has a relatively large amount of manufacturing industry, “Regional Trends” (2006) tells us that manufacturing in the region accounted for 19 per cent of GVA (gross value added) in 2004, compared to 14 per cent for the UK as a whole, and transportation of raw materials and manufactured goods means that the regions roads are vital strategic economic assets. The movement of goods is not a key consideration for the location of parks like Doxford, but the movement of people is. Its location means that it can be accessed easily from the A19, which is, connected with all of the region’s major routes. This means that businesses that locate here can draw workers from all parts of the region with relative ease, especially if they drive. There is however a constraining factor in the shape of a lack of parking, several call centre managers and local business people told me that it was the biggest issue facing Doxford. This is because current regulations link parking spaces for business to square feet of office space occupied. Those who rent more office space get more parking spaces; which is a major disincentive for the efficient use of space.

This model of road orientated business parks which are evident all over the region can be argued to be a major factor in shaping the local context with regard to housing. The housing market in the North East has boomed in recent years but prices are still a long way below the national average. Regional Trends (2006) reports that:

The average price for dwellings in the North East was £132,000 in 2005, which remains the lowest in England and Wales. This is £60,000 below the national average. The region had the highest percentage increase of 8.1 per cent compared with the previous year

ONS Regional Trends (2006).

Whilst the region has low house prices in comparison to the national average, the rate of increase has been little short of phenomenal in recent years. This becomes evident when we consider that the average price in the North East in 2003 was £103,388 (source as above) a rise in the order of 30% occurred in the space of two years. In fact, this growth was in decline as the Land Registry figures used by regional trends also reports that the 2003 figure represented a 25.8% increase over the equivalent 2002 figures. Whilst a post carboniferous capitalism industrial structure began to emerge in the latter half of the twentieth century, patterns of housing and settlement have tended to follow patterns established a century earlier. So, when public housing was developed on a large scale in the region in the immediate post war era, it served the needs of populations who were still largely working in traditional industries. Furthermore, these populations traveled to work within their immediate areas. Variations to this pattern began to emerge with the development of new areas such as Washington and Cramlington in the 1960's and 70's. These are recognizably overspill developments but they too were designed with the vision that those who lived there would also work there. They were not developed to be dormitory suburbs.

In the past three decades, the North East has not only become de-industrialized but it has also become an area within which much longer commutes to work have become a good deal more common than they were in the past. This has occurred due to a number of factors perhaps the most salient being that many towns and villages now have no other purpose and have re-invented themselves as dormitory suburbs. This is particularly evident in the former pit villages of the Durham coalfield. They offer well built housing, and well established local services to the North East commuter who wishes to escape the

satellite suburbs of the Tyne and Wear conurbation. The growth of the housing market coupled to an increasing willingness of workers to commute has allowed places such as Consett, whose economy was devastated after the closure of its steel plant in 1980, to reinvent themselves. The plant had employed in excess of 6,000 workers at its peak and at closure still had 3,700 workers. Closure not only meant a loss of jobs, but, effectively, the loss of the town's rationale. Yet today, the town thrives and is a desirable place to live, with good links to the urban centres but also close proximity to the North Pennines, an area of outstanding natural beauty. Interestingly the road network that allows the North East to function as a commuter region was built with the recognition that the region was going to undergo major structural changes. However, the changes envisaged around the time of the Hailsham Report (1963) did not include the development of commuting. Instead, the road network was seen as vital as new manufacturing and the need to transport goods by road, superseded the regions traditional industries and the railway system that had gone hand in hand with them. This can be explained by returning to the idea of economic "weightlessness" discussed in the globalization chapter. The region's economy today, whilst it has "weightless" elements such as call services and IT, also has a sizeable amount of manufacturing. Efficient transportation systems for these goods render them "lighter" by reducing costs and keeping them competitive. For example, the Nissan car plant at Washington is highly productive, but can only be so because of its location adjacent to the A19 without this it's "just in time" production methods would not be possible and its products would be substantially "heavier." Labour power must also be considered part of the productive process. The availability of a road network that makes commuting possible effectively ensures that labour is available throughout the region. As

such, the road network may not be transporting the amount of finished manufactured goods that the planners of the nineteen sixties envisaged, but the way it allows the movement of labour power around the region allows the regional economy and its products to remain much “lighter”.

Doxford International, a business park situated on the outskirts of Sunderland is regarded as highly successful. Since the early 1990’s it has grown and attracted many new operations. There are now around 8,000 people employed at the site (City of Sunderland Website found at <http://www.investinsunderland.co.uk/land.asp>). Call centres have been very prominent in the park’s development, with names such as London Electric (now trading as EDF), Barclays, More Than, and T-Mobile all operating from the site. Some have moved on to offshore locations, and Doxford has also seen the arrival of other operations such as Nike,(which operates its HQ from the site) and software companies such as Leighton. But it is fair to say that call centre operations make up the majority of the businesses on the site. Whilst I would take issue with the idea that call centres locate in the North East at sites like Doxford as the region offers cheap labour, it is true that average earnings in the region are lower than the national average. Regional Trends reported a regional household average income of £455 per week in 2005 as compared to the national average of £596 (ONS Regional Trends 2006). However, living costs are correspondingly lower too, with average weekly outgoings per household in the region at £352.30 as opposed to the national average which was considerably higher at £432 (source as above). Allied with lower housing costs, the wages that are available to call centre workers in the North East will go a good deal further than in many other areas of the country. But it can also be pointed out that the region’s average house price is around

nine times a full time call centre agent's wage. The housing issue is somewhat mitigated by another local characteristic, which is the high stock of social housing. In 2002-2003 when housing tenure was examined 28% of households in the North East were living in social housing as opposed to 19% nationally. This had declined from 32% in 1995-96. So the trend toward owner occupation, whilst evident, is not nearly as dramatic as it is in other parts of the country ("The Region in figures", ONS 2004). As such, while buying a house may be problematic for call centre agents in the North East, in general finding somewhere to live is not a major issue. It would be possible to continue pointing out particular elements that make up the local context, but particularity and uniqueness are central to the local context, and as such can be better highlighted by comparison.

Biography 2: Mumbai

The city of Mumbai is a very different proposition to the North East conurbation. It is densely populated and the population is growing at a phenomenal rate. This is largely due to Mumbai's emergence as a major player within the regional and global financial markets. The city has always been economically important, starting out as a Portuguese trading post which was then developed into a major centre of trade and colonial administration by the British from the seventeenth century until Indian independence in 1947. The city's fortunes changed for the better in the 1990's in the wake of the liberalization of Indian economic life, a process that began under the premiership of Rajeev Gandhi. The city has boomed and attracted not only new industries but also many new people. According to the 2001 census of India, the population of the greater Mumbai conurbation was 18.7 million, making it the second largest population for an urban

agglomeration on the planet. The population of the city proper was reported as 11.9 million. This was up from 9.9 million in 1991. The population continues to grow, with migrants from all over India coming to the city this is a fact that cannot be avoided in Mumbai, it is visible everywhere, the city pavements are occupied by the temporary encampments of the immigrants. It is also a major topic of conversation for those native to the city. During my visit to Mumbai in November 2006, the subject came up with many people who were from all walks of life. For many, the immigrants appeared to provide effective scapegoats on which to cast, (whether rightly or wrongly) all the problems of the city upon. Indeed, this has become a key political issue in the city and was central to the success of the Maharashtrian nationalist party known as the Shiv Sena in Mumbai in the nineteen nineties. The Shiv Sena's political fortunes have declined in recent times with the city government returning to its traditional ruling party, Congress. However, harsh attitudes to the immigrants remain. Whilst I was in Mumbai, a major news story concerned a terrible incident where a car driven by a teenager from a rich family was driving home with friends after a night out at a hotel disco. The driver was drunk and lost control of the car. The car mounted the kerb and ended up on the pavement. Tragically, this pavement was home to a group of labourers from the Northern state of Uttar Pradesh. The car struck the labourers' temporary shelters killing five of them. This provoked much debate in the media about the behaviour of middle-class teenagers. However, what shocked me was the comment that a taxi driver made to me about the incident. In his opinion it was the fault of the labourers; if they hadn't been sleeping on the pavement such a thing would not have happened. I was tempted to ask the man where he thought they should have been living, but I thought better of it. What this

story serves to illustrate is firstly, that there is a downside to the economic boom which the city is experiencing and, secondly, that Mumbai's central problem is that of physical space. This is something that no amount of wealth will change.

This problem has two aspects to it firstly, the city's affluence which continues to attract immigrants from other parts of the country and secondly, the existing structure and practices of the city. I talked to a number of my contacts about Mumbai's continuing growth. Sandeep, the managing director of a city call centre, told me that Mumbai attracts all sorts of people from all over the country. Some are well qualified and find work in the city's finance houses and the IT industry. Those with language skills are in demand from the call centre industry, which uses those skills to run off shore operations, usually for the UK or the US. Those who are computer literate are able to gain employment in the domestic call centres, which are appearing in ever increasing-numbers. Unskilled workers are able to find work on construction projects, for example the unfortunate labourers mentioned above had been working on a road construction scheme. Also, workers are needed to service the increasing affluent working class who spend an increasing amount of their time at work or commuting to and from it. "Anyone can find work in Mumbai". This was something I heard from many of the city's residents, along with "no-one goes hungry in this city". Sometimes these statements were announced with a certain pride, but on other occasions, they were presented as part of discussions about the city's problems. Geography is the major element shaping the local context of the city. The city was originally a string of small, hilly islands. Over the centuries the islands were leveled in order to form the peninsula that the southern part of the city now stands upon. So at

first glance it appears that there are just too many people for the space available. This impression is reinforced when the following is considered that:

the greater Bombay region has an annual deficit of forty-five thousand houses a year. The amount of new construction every year comes up to less than half the number needed. Thus these forty-five thousand households every year add to the ranks of the slums. This slum population doubles every decade

S Mehta (2004:126).

Again, this is not the whole story; there is space in the city, but making it available for development or occupation is a highly sensitive and problematic political issue. This is the second aspect referred to above, the structure and practices of the city. Mumbai is not only a developing city; it is also a post-industrial city too. Mumbai's first wave of industrial development has passed, in much the same way that carboniferous capitalism is part of the past in the North East of England. Mumbai is a major centre of textile trading, but the city's textile producing industry has all but disappeared. The reason that this is highly significant today is because the remains of the textile mills occupy prime development sites in the heart of the city, as Kalpana Sharma explains:

The city developed as an industrial centre that was crucial to India's economy when the British made available land in central Mumbai, at hugely concessional rates, to entrepreneurs willing to set up textile mills. Thus grew the textile heartland or Girangoan, as it is still known. Within the compounds of these mills as well as around them, were hundreds of buildings with one-room tenements where the workers lived. The whole area was until recently an almost exclusively working class enclave

Sharma K (2005) Article at "India together" found at:

<http://www.indiatogether.org/2005/feb/ksh-shanghai.htm>.

These areas were extensive, and they dominated Mumbai's industry until relatively recently, as Sharma further explains:

Mumbai's textile industry dates back to 1854 when the first mills were established. At one stage, in 1961 these mills employed almost two and a half lakh workers (250,000). Today there are 58 mills employing fewer than 20,000 people

Sharma K (2005) Article at "India together found at:

<http://www.indiatogether.org/2005/feb/ksh-shanghai.htm>

So, by the 1990's, the remnants of the textile industry occupied a great deal of scarce land in the city, but served no other useful purpose. However, a solution that will satisfy the workers who are owed redundancy payments, the mill owners who wish to liquidate their assets and the city authorities who wish to re-develop the mill areas has proved elusive. In 1991, the Maharashtra government attempted to find a solution in the form of an amendment to section 58 of the city's development control rules. This allowed the mill owners to sell or re-develop one third of the land they owned on the proviso that another third was given to the municipal corporation to develop public facilities and the remaining third would be designated for public housing. This formula did not prove popular with the mill owners and little happened. Workers were still awaiting redundancy payments and the redevelopment envisaged failed to appear. Kalpana Sharma explains what happened next in 2001:

the government passed an amendment to the development control rules. Instead of all the land occupied by the mills being divided up, the new rule laid down that only land that was vacant, that is with no built up structure, would be so divided. In other words, the mill owners got to keep most of the land on which their closed mills stood and the city and the workers got less than six percent between them

Sharma K (2005) Article at “India together” found at:

<http://www.indiatogether.org/2005/feb/ksh-shanghai.htm>.

Suketu Mehta (2004) points out how land, and control over it, bestows power in Mumbai. In a conversation with an architect friend, he asks why the Eastern waterfront of Mumbai which is owned by the Bombay Port Trust has not been developed. He is told that the Port Trust realize the potential of the land and consequently its value, so they will hold out for the very best price. Mehta argues that these problems stem from a lack of vision, both from the city and state authorities, anxious to placate vested interests and potential voters, and also from the city’s residents who are still coming to terms with the rapid change which has occurred, in recent years. He traces the city authorities’ failure of vision to a point in the late 1960’s when New Bombay was being developed. New Bombay lies inland, to the East across the bay from the peninsula upon which Mumbai stands. He explains that:

the state government backed out of a commitment to move its offices from the Nariman point reclamation site, on the southern tip of the island, to New Bombay. Private business followed suit....

If this had not happened argues Mehta:

all the offices they put up at Nariman point would have come up in New Bombay, and that momentum and that energy would have driven the new city into being. It would have reoriented the commuting axis of Bombay for the better

Mehta S (2004:131).

Although this point is questionable, i.e. can one decision really be the key? What it does highlight, is the problem of trying to plan and redevelop a city the size of Mumbai, within a highly sophisticated democratic framework. Compromise is inevitable, and change complicates matters further:

The city cannot govern itself. It cannot change swiftly enough. The city was built on cloth; time moved on and it has to be rebuilt on something else: information. The city's older folk had difficulty reconciling themselves to the idea of a whole city, five million jobs, built on top of something so abstract as information: not even pieces of paper that you can hold but evanescent flashes of light on a screen...The city has to change it can no longer manufacture products with its hands. It now has to sell brainpower: ideas, data, and dreams. And to achieve the latter its physical structure has to change

Mehta S (2004:135-6).

This passage, despite its flight into the logic of informationalism sums up the problem, which the call centre industry and its workers in Mumbai face. There is no shortage of skilled labour, or the technological infrastructure which the industry needs. The problems are more mundane; firstly, a lack of space. When I visited GSA Infotech in Mumbai, its premises in Borivali, part of the city's northern suburbs could only hold 200 agents. At times of higher demand it was renting space for its agents at GTL's much larger call centre. The problem was that GTL is located in New Bombay and much harder to access. Getting to work is a major issue in Mumbai. Typically workers commute from the suburbs in the north to their offices in the south of the city. Driving is not an option; it takes too long and parking is almost non-existent in downtown Mumbai. So, virtually everyone use the city's commuter trains. Built by the British in the nineteen twenties the Central Railway and the Western railway are the city's main arteries. The trains are always crowded, and rail travel is highly dangerous. The Times of India in 2004 reported

that in 2002-2003 5,513 people lost their lives on Mumbai's railway network (28/01/04). I was warned that, if I insisted on using the trains, I should only do so in off peak hours and only travel in the "first class" compartments. These are not luxurious in any way but three times the price of standard class so therefore emptier. However, I survived several trips on the "locals" (much to the surprise of some of the hotel staff). There are moves to improve transport in the city with the construction of a modern metro system, but these are currently only at the planning stages.

GSA had sought to mitigate the problems of traveling to work for its workforce by developing its call centre in the suburbs and also, by providing transport to and from home for its workers or, at least, from the station to the office. Sandeep explained that as many of his workers were young women, their parents did not consider it appropriate, or safe, for them to be traveling long distances to work, even if they were driven door to door. So finding workers prepared to travel to GTL in New Bombay/Mumbai was difficult largely because of the journey time required before and after the shift. Sandeep also told me that maintaining transport for his workers was a constant headache as unreliable drivers and traffic gridlock had the potential to cause chaos for the operation, with workers waiting to go off shift whilst the next shift was yet to arrive. I also asked Sandeep about where his workers lived and he told me that most of them lived at home with their parents, and that this is the norm with middle-class Indian's until they marry. Others, who come from outside of the city, usually young men, tend to rent flats in groups as this spreads the costs. I asked whether housing would be a problem for his workers in the future? Sandeep thought it would, although call centre agents are well paid, the prospects of promotion are slim and the cost of property and rents is rising faster

than wages. However, he added, this was a problem for everybody and that the call centre workers were in a much better position than many in the city. Housing and particularly the issue of renting property in the city is complicated even further by the city's rent control system, which is known simply as the "Rent Act". This piece of legislation, enacted in 1948, to protect the city's tenants from excessive rent increases, froze the rents on all building leased at the time at their 1940 levels. The courts also gained the power to fix standard rents for other buildings. Crucially, as Mehta further explains:

The Act also provided for the transfer of the right to lease the property at the fixed rents to the legal heirs of the tenant. As long as the tenant kept paying the rent he could not be evicted; he would not need to renew his lease.

Mehta S (2004:124)

The Rent Act was originally intended as a temporary five-year measure, but it has been extended on numerous occasions as the tenants have now become a powerful political lobby. This has led to properties remaining empty as owners do not wish to lose control of them to tenants. It also ensures that there is little or no incentive for the private sector to build houses which will be available to rent. It also means that owners deliberately neglect the fabric of buildings as they see such little return from the fixed rents. Mehta argues that what this amounts to is a "newcomers' tax". It penalizes first time renters seeking their own home or those moving into the city, precisely the type of people who are working in the call centres. But as he remarks, this tax :

doesn't keep the newcomers out; it merely condemns them to live squalidly

(Metha, S., 2004:124).

It is difficult to sum up the local context within which the call centre industry and its workers are operating within Mumbai, given the magnitude and the diversity of the city. However, it is a context where economic growth and burgeoning population is rapidly outstripping the physical infrastructure of the city. This problem is not unique to Mumbai and it can be argued that any economy growing at approximately 11% per year is bound to produce some fairly dramatic fallout whatever the location.

Biography 3: Bangalore

The city of Bangalore in the southern Indian state of Karnataka is also at the point where the city's physical infrastructure is struggling to cope with the city's dramatic economic success. Population growth in Bangalore in the past 15 years has been extraordinary. According to the census of India, in 1991 the city's population was 2.6 million; by 2001 it had increased to 4.5 million, and in 2006 stood at 6.5 million. The city has now overtaken Calcutta to become India's third largest. Bangalore's incredible development is due to two factors, firstly, the availability of highly skilled technical labour and good IT infrastructure. The second is geographical; Bangalore is located on the Deccan plateau and, unlike Mumbai, does not have the same physical limitations. As such, it has been free to expand outwards. Indeed, the city's location is one of the aspects that have led to its growth, at 920 metres above sea level; the city is famous for its climate, which remains relatively constant and free of extremes by Indian standards. Temperatures range from 16 C to 34 C across the year. This, as well as the cities abundance of greenery and importantly the lack of dust in the atmosphere, has contributed to the success of the city as a centre for IT manufacture and development. The success of the city as India's

“Silicon Valley” and the attraction of multinational enterprises that have made the city a major destination for off shored enterprises is also built upon the cities “pre-digital” development. The city was developed as a centre for the Indian aeronautics industry from the 1950’s onwards and received a great deal of government backing. The city is home to HAL (Hindustan Aeronautics Limited) which manufactures warplanes. It is also the headquarters for the Indian Air Force. The city is also a major developmental centre for India’s defence industries and is the headquarters of the Indian space programme, a programme that is now capable of launching its own satellites. Bangalore has also benefited from being a major centre of higher education; it is home to the Indian Institute for Sciences, which was established by the TATA family, India’s most prominent industrial dynasty at the turn of the twentieth century. As such, the city has never had to look far to find highly skilled technical expertise. In this way the local context in Bangalore is somewhat different to both Mumbai and the North East in that it does not (yet) have post-industrial issues to deal with. Its current wave of industrial development has built upon pre-existing industries and, furthermore, those industries are still there too. Whilst we in the west tend to assume that hi-tech industries and “traditional heavy industry” cannot co-exist, and that the former follows the latter, this is not the case in Bangalore. It may well be India’s equivalent of Silicon Valley, but this Silicon Valley also has steel making and the manufacture of railway locomotives and rolling stock happening in the same locality. So it would appear that Bangalore, without any kind of post-industrial legacy to contend with or any natural spatial limits to grow in the same manner as Mumbai has very few problems. However, this is far from the case. The city’s expansion has been so rapid that it has overwhelmed the infrastructure available.

Development of the city's civic amenities has not taken place at anything like the rate that business growth has occurred.

For example, at the time of my visit in 2006 Bangalore International airport was still under construction. What served as the city's airport and handled both international and domestic flights was in fact, HAL's test strip which was being leased to the city authorities. The new airport finally opened in 2008. Traffic has become a major issue in the city and there is no large-scale public transport available in the city. The Bangalore metro project was seen as the solution to the city's traffic problem but was still a long way from completion in 2006. In 2004, Businessweek magazine reported that these "problems of growth" were reaching a point where it was adversely affecting the city's workers:

The crowded roads mean tech workers arrive at work spent and frustrated, and they're less productive. Industry insiders say some companies have begun to build more man –days into project budgets because of the commuter crawl. Others are looking elsewhere. Wipro Ltd and rival Infosys technologies ltd, two of the city's largest employers are setting up operations in Madras and even in communist run Calcutta, both of which are keen to welcome Bangalore's deserters

Businessweek 1/11/2004 found at:

http://www.businessweek.com/magazine/content/04_44/b3906080.htm

Although this problem is occurring in Bangalore, it is by no means unique to the city. It is possible to view how the technology based companies of the IT and call centre industries have moved from city to city in India over the past decade, moving on to the next, usually smaller area with a high concentration of skills when the existing infrastructure can no longer cope.

I was told by Karthik Sekhar of the UNITES union that Bangalore was now losing out to newer destinations such as Hyderabad. Karthik told me that one of the problems at the root of this process is the fact that new business has been attracted by low, or in some cases nil, tax rates. As such, the civic authorities of the cities concerned end up with massive demands being placed on their cities' infrastructure but do not have the revenue to make improvements. To raise taxes means that business will migrate to other cities. I pointed out that this happens anyway; Karthik agreed but argued that the situation was further complicated by the Indian political system and its way of doing things. This subject came up with different people in different cities and on a number of occasions, but what people said about politics and the political system was essentially the same. The first aspect they talked about was the issue, particularly at state government level, of "town verses country". Although cities are important in India the majority of the population, votes, and legislative seats are located in the countryside. Rural India is changing but it is very different to the urban centres and makes different political demands. For example, in Bangalore I heard it said that the Karnataka state government, which is currently controlled by the Congress party, draws most of its vote from rural areas. Therefore the problems of the city and the business community, which tends to vote for the centre right BJP, are placed on the back burner. The other concern commonly voiced to me about the political process, particularly from those in the business community, was the length of time political negotiations took in order to get anything done at all. A businessman I was chatting to over breakfast one morning remarked:

There is where the Chinese have the advantage, if they need to build a new highway they just do it, whoever is in the way has to move, they have no choice. Whereas here, it can take years to get the landowners onside and what have you.

So, in his opinion, Indian democracy was a hindrance to the country's economic development. Leaving that aside, it is clear to anyone how Bangalore is struggling to deal with the problems of growth. In the city centre, car-parking space is at a premium with office blocks renting space on their forecourts for car-parking and, more importantly, motorcycle parking. These spaces need protection from non-payers and other interlopers, as well as someone to collect the rents. This has resulted in the sudden, very rapid, expansion of private security firms. Security guards are everywhere and very numerous. Several of my contacts in Bangalore were very affluent, having good jobs and their own homes and their own cars. However they seldom used their cars within the city due to the congestion, preferring instead to commute by scooter or lightweight motorcycle. Two-wheelers are much more suited to this as they can filter through traffic, are easier to park, and more economical to run. Typically, when they first came to meet me they arrived in their car; however, once they knew I was happy to ride pillion they arrived on their bike. This is interesting as motorcycles are being used as the transport of choice by car owners, whereas they are more usually understood in contexts such as India today (not to mention Britain in the recent past) as vehicles used by those unable to afford cars, but who will upgrade once they become affluent enough. This again is an example of how behaviour and practices might well be understood in a particular way. However, if the phenomena of Bangalore's motorcycle traffic were approached without the local context being taken into account some very different conclusions may well be reached.

Another major issue in Bangalore is that of housing. The issue is largely one of shortage and of course costs, with land prices in the city rocketing. It means that although

Bangalore offers good opportunities and high wages, these opportunities are counter-balanced by the cost of living in the city, cheaper homes are available in the suburbs, but the trade off is then having to commute, using the city's fragile transport network. Regarding housing, things are further complicated by the nature of the city itself. In India, Bangalore is known as the "garden city" This is partly due to the city's climate, but it is also due to the city's layout. Unlike most large cities, Bangalore has large areas of green space in the city centre; there are several large parks, the city horse racing track and the Bangalore Golf club, which were all established by the British Raj in the 1880's. The city also remains the garrison town it has been for the past two centuries, and there is more open space in the shape of military parade grounds. The centre of the city has always been a residential area; the majority of dwellings were until, relatively recently, colonial era bungalows. The bungalows have rapidly disappeared and are being replaced by office blocks and shopping malls. Central Bangalore is increasingly commercial as the residential areas are transformed and those that remain are redeveloped into highly exclusive residences. Thus the local context within which those who work for the software manufacturers such as Sun and Hewlett Packard, or in the call centres of Wipro or HSBC, gives a common grounding which neither the industries, nor their workers, can avoid.

Similarities and differences between call centre work in the North East of England and India - regional contexts and histories.

It can be argued that localities are unique; they are produced by a confluence of factors which occur in ways which are specific to particular places. The question that this raises

is that posed by Gregson (1987): whether locality is tied to specific places which are, in effect, case studies, or whether the idea of locality can be part of a framework of analysis? I would argue that the latter is the case, whilst the factors that make up a place's local context may vary, all of the places discussed above can be better understood once the local context has been explored. What has perhaps changed since Gregson's study in the 1980's is the rise of the global. As was discussed earlier, whilst the national level has diminished in significance, the local has risen to prominence along with the global. So globalization, especially in the economic sphere is better understood as "glocalization". This analysis implicitly endorses this point, it has discussed a global context and a local context but there is minimal discussion of a national context. Indeed it is doubtful whether this would bring any more insight about the areas concerned as none of them can be regarded as typically British or typically Indian. Arguably, there are few areas in any country that can be regarded as typical in any sense. This could strengthen the argument that each locality should be seen as a case in itself. However, this differentiation could also be argued to be part and parcel of the glocalization process. That is not to say that "national" policies do not have any impact upon localities, rather their effects are dependent upon, and mediated through the local context and as such, unpicking them from a locality is problematic. Therefore, the local is best understood as both a process which generates the distinctiveness of a locality, and the product of this process which in turn informs that process.

The call centre industry in the locations that have been explored in this chapter is a new development only in the terms of the form of the work it provides. By this, I mean that it is a method of doing business, a process that allows interactions to take place over the

telephone, and because of this the parties can be in distant locations. However, it is the mode of operation that is new, not the transactions that the interactions are processing. Things that are bought and sold over the telephone were once, and in most places still are bought and sold over the counter in traditional retail settings. At the other end of the spectrum, Littlewoods in Sunderland now runs its mail order goods business on a voice interaction basis, whereas in the past the interactions between the firm and the customer took place by post. In its current operation, voice has replaced paper; the interaction in this case has become more intimate, as opposed to more remote, which is the case when call centre operations replace high street stores. In early 2010, Littlewoods announced the closure of its Sunderland call centre operation with the loss of 900 jobs, the reason was a dramatic increase in online shopping. The voice driven process that has become so dominant in recent years will, itself, soon fade from view as online transactions for goods and services become more commonplace. JK, a relationship manager for an outsourced call centre operation, told me that the spread of broadband and peoples increasing confidence about using the internet for retail and customer service type enquiries, is rapidly decreasing the size of the market available to operations like the one she is involved in. However, the process will persist for other kinds of transactions which were traditionally done by knocking on front doors, the process of speculative selling or cold calling. Call centre operations are of course a very efficient way to do this. But they are now becoming more difficult to manage; this is due to legislation rather than anything intrinsic to the process. JK told me that the available market for “cold-calling” type operations in the UK has now been reduced by around 25%. This is due to people signing up with the Telephone Preference Service, (TPS) this is an “opt out” scheme which

informs call centre operations that they cannot cold call the numbers of those registered with the scheme. In her opinion, the call centre boom was already over as far as operations from India serving the UK were concerned, however the Indian domestic market offered immense opportunities.

When similarities and differences between the experiences of call centre work in the North East of England and India are examined, the differences do not reside within the labour process or indeed the basic “modus operandi” of call centre work. They are broadly similar and use the same structures such as teams with team leaders. The same flat hierarchies are evident in both the North East and India too. The differences are not due to the nature of the work, they are instead due to differences in the lives of those involved in the industry. These differences are shaped by local contexts. These differences are then imported into the call centre working environment. This works on a number of levels and can manifest itself in different ways, some of which are more tangible than others. The demographic of call centre staff in the North East of England in comparison to that of any of the locations in India I explored, was different with the North East. It had a higher proportion of workers over the age of 25, these workers were more likely to be female too. This can be explained by a number of contextual factors, in the North East of England call centre work is only moderately paid, it is also viewed as a source of income often to support a wider life project such as completing a University course, or indeed providing a second household income in general. In India call centre work is very well paid, and only graduates have the skills required for the off shore English language market. However workers are paid around four times as much as they would be paid in a comparable starter job. The work force in the North East required the

flexibility of part time work in order to fit their work and non work lives together. This was not possible within the Indian model where part time work is virtually unheard of. The local context and the labour force it supplied in India did not make the development of part-time work a necessity. This also leads to an idea outlined earlier, that particular local contexts give rise to distinctive cultures of work. It was evident that workers in the North East identified themselves as workers with something in common with those who had been factory/industrial workers in the past and as such adopted strategies to subvert the control exerted by management, such as taking unauthorized breaks etc. The working culture of the call centre operations in India is rather different due to the workers class and educational backgrounds. Workers in India are much more likely to identify themselves as professionals, as Noronha and D'Cruz (2006) have pointed out. This culture of work in India also means that developing trade unions such as UNITES have had to market themselves as being relevant to professionals. This is essential as the traditional model of an Indian trade union, is based upon manual work and far left politics. Consequently UNITES has to present itself as relevant to workers who would not usually join trade unions. The reality of nightshift working in order to service English language markets in the US and the UK, due to the local time zones within India also meant that the experience of call centre work on the subcontinent in the places I studied would not have been compatible with the lives of many of the workers I encountered in the North East. Additionally, the health consequences of this working pattern were a concern for Indian workers to a much greater extent than their counterparts in the UK. Local labour markets also make a great deal of difference. In all of the local contexts studied, the wider local labour market was a factor in call centre work. All of the

localities had sought to attract call centre operations via regional developmental and governmental policies, such as tax incentives for companies to locate in those areas. The availability of other work also made a difference to how attractive the work was. In India the wage rates in comparison to other graduate jobs were extremely attractive. In the North East the availability of part time work was a factor with workers seeing a call centre as preferable to the retail sector. This was due to retail's diminishing flexibility with late opening, Sunday and bank holiday trading increasingly becoming the norm.

This chapter has explored the significance of localities as both backdrops to working lives, but it has also sought to stress how locality is made up of a number of processes. These processes coalesce to produce something which is active and changing, it is not just passive. The services that are now mediated through the call centre industry are not new; they are forms of commerce which all existed prior to the communications technology which the call centre process is based upon. The technology of the call centre means that the industry has very few technological constraints and could locate almost anywhere, however it does not do so, or rather it is yet to. Attracting and retaining call centres and call centre work is an ongoing and evolving process with complex dynamics operating at the local level. It has been argued that the best way to access and explore these dynamics is by compiling biographies of place for the relevant localities. The biographies presented here are highly significant as the lives lived within them cannot be fully appreciated without them. I would argue that localities not only form the backdrop to working lives but are instrumental in producing distinctive cultures of work and shaping the social relations of the work place.

CHAPTER NINE-DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS - GLOBAL, LOCAL WORK, LIFE, INTERFACES

This final chapter will reflect upon the findings which have been presented in the previous empirical chapters. Its central concern will be to examine how the findings inform the key concerns which were outlined in the introduction to the thesis.

This thesis began by highlighting the concept and place of change and its relationship with work within the social sciences. It outlined how the relationship between work and society are intertwined and often difficult to separate. As such, this symbiotic relationship is often seen as being at the centre of, and also the motor of social change. The basic assumption being, that if work changes, then so does society.

The call centre industry, those who work within it and the places they operate within, have provided a case study in order to examine the proposition. As I outlined earlier in the methodological discussion, the intention from the start was to assume as little as possible and adopt an approach whereby engagement with the subject would generate theory. Consequently, many questions concerning the contexts within which the industry operates, and the human relationships which interface with those contexts were neither explicit nor fixed during the early stages of the research. Fieldwork at that point, involved discovering what the questions were as much as answering them. However, the initial question regarding how forms of work have been seen as indicators of social change and examining the validity of this idea has remained a central concern throughout the research process. I now propose to revisit and attempt to assess this idea.

So, can it be said that this way of working constitutes something new? Is this industry indicative of the widespread changes that have come about as a result of processes like de-industrialisation and globalisation? The answer to this is not simple; yes, the industry can be explained in terms of globalisation, the rise of IT as an industry, and as a wider part of a global infrastructure, but this is only part of the story. Many other factors are just as significant, such as localities and the processes which constitute them. This is a process that works apart from, and in concert with globalisation. Also, change has not been wholesale; many things have remained the same. Work and importantly the lives of those engaged in it in the localities studied have adapted to these new conditions. But working cultures and individual lives still bear a strong resemblance to that which went before. Therefore, any answer about the meaning of these changes needs to encompass the interaction of the global, the local, work and life, it also needs to understand it as a complex interaction. I will now return to the four broad areas which were outlined at the end of the introduction to the thesis and review them in the light of the empirical findings.

They are:

- a. The significant space for agency within the labour process both in the work process itself and in the interface between work and non-work.
- b. Work life interfaces and agency in shaping them.
- c. Trajectories and careers, including agency in shaping work life over time.
- d. How regional contexts shape working life and the possibility of agency.

As is evident these themes do not have clear boundaries and there is a degree of overlap. Each area will be addressed in turn. There will then be a concluding section which will offer a final conclusion and reflect on the contribution of the thesis in general.

The significant space for agency within the labour process both in the work process itself and in the interface between work and non-work.

It can be argued that there is always space for agency within the labour process and that this is often influenced by factors which exist within the sphere of non work.

But the answers put forward to the question of whether there is space for agency and the emphasis placed upon it are often derived from the theoretical stand point of the commentator. By which I mean where they position themselves on the continuum of structure and action. Structural theorists will minimise the role of action, whilst those who wish to stress the primacy of social action will often take the structural backdrop upon which action occurs for granted. Approaching call centre work, it was difficult not to be influenced by a popular narrative which portrayed call centres as high tech “dark satanic mills” with disempowered employees forced to follow scripts and kept in line by a combination of technological/managerial discipline and surveillance. As has already been outlined and discussed this view of the call centre labour process was accepted with very few questions by some theorists, such as Fernie and Metcalfe (1998). This was because to portray the call centre and the labour process within it in this manner served to bolster their broader theoretical argument regarding “Panopticism”.

However this pessimistic view of call centres and the labour process within them was not confined to theorists and commentators. When I began my empirical research and started talking to call centre employees and managers, they often expressed similar opinions about other call centres which they had no experience of. Their workplace was the exception; the phrase most commonly used was;

“well at X I’ve heard you have to put your hand up if you want to go to the toilet”

This is interesting, as it shows how important perceptions of the industry and the labour process at work within it are. Also how easy it could be to see the industry in a way whereby the evidence could be found to reflect the prejudices of the observer.

My initial research idea focussed on the labour process and how the labour process within the industry seemed to involve members in compulsory “fun” with the organisation of team building events outside of the workplace, and consequently colonising the leisure time of the worker. In other words how the labour process and the discipline associated with it were no longer contained within the confines of the workplace. However I found very little evidence to support this idea, either within my enquiries within the North East of England or in India. In the North East due to the imbalance between call centre capacity and the supply of suitable labour with appropriate skills, managers were at pains to accommodate the needs of workers by offering flexible shifts and working patterns to suit individuals. In other word this was rather different from both the popular image and from my initial expectations. What really came across from my discussions with human resource managers at a large Wearside call centre at the start of the research process was how much demand there was for reliable trained call agents. It was clearly not the case that anyone could do the job. Even those deemed suitable required a period of training

lasting several weeks which represented a substantial investment on the organisations part.

The demands of the labour process within the call centre, i.e. the need for reliable trained agents actually meant that the enforcement of highly formalised and rigid discipline regime within the workplace was just not practical. Firstly, making the workplace less attractive to agents was counterproductive as it meant workers would go elsewhere. Secondly, team building based around the type of “compulsory fun” which I had expected to encounter was highly impractical as workers worked a variety of shift patterns, and had differing domestic circumstances and commitments. This was evident in my interview with Rachel who told me how she could not attend team events as they were incompatible with her childcare arrangements. However, what she also made clear was that opportunities to socialise with work colleagues were fairly plentiful, but they were organised by agents collectively, they were not organized by management, nor was non participation in social activities beyond the workplace seen as problematic or as a reason why a worker might be penalised. What my conversations with Jannette revealed was that there had been a very active social committee which organized events made up of agents, team leaders, and managers in the early days after the establishment of the call centre which she worked in as a team leader. In addition to the changing shift patterns which Rachel identified as making team socialising impractical, Jannette identified another trend which was also at work, that of a changing demographic, as newer younger workers joined the team, their idea of a good night out was different to their more senior colleagues. However what was interesting was how it was evident that Jannette looked back fondly to the time where there had been more social activity with work colleagues.

She did not in any way see this as an extension of the labour process colonising her non work life.

In India the situation was rather different due to working cultures and the demographic of the labour force. There was more emphasis on teams performing and producing results, but this was something that occurred within the call centre, with incentives, but also a more formalised hierarchy. Getting teams to socialise outside of the work place I found in my investigations was not a common tactic. Why this should be the case is a good question. I would argue that the answer is twofold; firstly the culture of work in India is hierarchical and consequently colleagues of differing seniority socialising outside of the workplace would not be normal practice. Secondly, there is much less need for the promotion of team building through social events. This is because the demographic of call centre agents is much more homogenous than it is in the UK with the majority of staff working in English language call centres being University graduates in their first job post graduation. The rates of pay in call centre work in comparison to traditional graduate jobs are much higher, consequently they have a very high disposable income which allows them to enjoy a very active social life. This social activity is likely to be along with work colleagues due to costs and shift patterns.

However my research in India also highlighted the concerns of call centre workers and those involved with the industry that the “party culture” associated with call centre workers had a detrimental effect on the health of young workers. Several, such as Raj who I spoke to in Bangalore also felt that partying and drinking had become a way to cope with the demands of the workplace. Also, that this, along with almost constant nightshift working was beginning after two years to have a major impact upon his health.

So in both the North East of England and in India I found very little evidence to suggest that the call centre labour process was expanding the boundaries of the work in to the sphere of non work and colonising the leisure time of workers. Consequently it can be said that the call centre labour process does not diminish the potential for agency of those engaged in it outside of the workplace.

However, what was apparent in my discussions with call centre workers was the impact that the call centre labour process had upon them within the workplace. Workers felt that the process itself of call handling was as Jenni put it a “conveyer belt” she was one of several to use factory work as an analogy for the call centre labour process, lending further credence to Taylor and Bain’s (2001) notion of an “assembly line in the head”. What comes across from the interviews with agents about the work is a rather curious mixture of pressure and monotony. As Sabina explained, the script in her inbound call centre was very tight, and her instinct was to try to circumvent it wherever possible. However, if she did so it meant that she handled less calls as they took longer and this impacted on her performance and sales targets. It was possible to break the script and the monotony, but the consequence of doing this increased the pressure on her in other ways. Surveillance was not a major concern for workers, they were aware that their interactions with customers were recorded and monitored. In fact none mentioned it as being a source of stress or worry. What did quickly become evident was how workers had developed strategies to subvert the technological systems within the work place. These ranged from “loosing” calls from awkward customers, by re-routing them to other departments or colleagues within the team, (this was done as it was legitimate to reroute calls but ending them without resolving them was not). Clearing colleagues screens as Sabina explained

in order to make them lose the script, was done purely for amusement and to relieve monotony. Other tactics were far less subtle; Rachel's example of leaving to go for a smoke along with other colleagues demonstrates how the consent of workers is essential within the labour process. All of these incidents show how workers assert their agency within the labour process.

The call centre labour process is demanding in many ways, but what became clear in my encounters with call centre workers was that it was not the demands of the labour process per se that they found stressful. Workers in the UK such as Helen and Carly found the demand of the sales targets they were expected to reach and the insensitive methods they were expected to use to meet them distressing. But these pressures were not inherent in the labour process. Interestingly, both individuals dealt with the problems by leaving the workplace and going to work in other call centres, in other words by asserting their own agency. In India the story was a different one. Again, the labour process was not seen as the most problematic aspect of the job, it was instead the hours of work which effectively meant agents working permanent nightshifts if their centre served the UK or US markets. It can be argued then that the call centre labour process whilst at first glance appearing very demanding with little space for agency does in fact offer a considerable amount of capacity for agency. This was due largely to the market conditions which prevailed during the fieldwork period which meant that trained and experienced call centre workers were almost always in demand and could easily find work elsewhere if conditions in their work place were not to their liking. It can also be argued that the call centre labour process itself, whilst in many ways demanding and relying on well drilled and scripted interactions to work efficiently cannot possibly work without trained workers. It is the

fact that not just anyone can do the work, which allows space for agency within the call centre labour process.

Work life interfaces and agency in shaping them.

During the course of my field work I was surprised how little the issue of changing the labour process or the work place in general came up for discussion. Instead those I spoke to preferred to talk about how they hoped to move on from call centre work to something else. They preferred to transcend rather than transform the work and its labour process.

A question which occurred to me very early in my research in the light of the generally negative portrayal of call centres in the media was a simple, but I think crucial one. Why would anyone want to work in a call centre? What I discovered was that there was no simple answer to this question. Sometimes the explanation for why an individual had ended up in call centre work was located in the call centre working environment itself. The comment which was made to me by Linda, who was training to become a call centre agent that working in a call centre was “easy money”, was something I had not expected. I hadn’t expected the answer as I did not share the same work experiences as Linda and her friends. Call centre work to her was “easy money” as it was a job that was done, sitting down in a comfortable environment and involved very little physical effort and as such, was a complete contrast to her previous job as a packer in a local crisp factory. The explanation for why Linda and her friends found call centre work an attractive option lies partially within the call centre working environment, but the key part of the explanation,

about why they found such conditions attractive lies beyond the call centre. It is located in their work histories which are part of their wider personal biographies.

In fact, many of the answers which I got when I posed the question of why individuals worked in call centres; the workplace itself was incidental or secondary in the explanation. What rose to the fore were issues about personal biography and personal situation beyond the work place in the non work sphere.

The idea of interface which is developed and outlined within this thesis was necessary because it became clear that the world of work and non work could not be neatly divided, lives are more complicated and a good deal messier than that. What was clear was that individuals working lives were shaped by factors outside of the work place as much as by factors within it. These factors included their domestic situations, the demand placed upon them by the working lives of others and also the strong contextual influences of cultures of work within the localities in which they lived and worked.

There are two important ideas at the heart of the notion of interface; firstly the interface is a space within which individuals negotiate and attempt to accommodate the competing demands of the work and non work world; secondly the process of negotiation that goes on within the interface is a structured process. This means that the chances of individuals being able to assert their agency via the interface is largely conditional upon the positions they hold within the work and non work areas.

For several of the workers I interviewed, the work life interface was linked closely to their domestic arrangements. For example Rachel balanced working in a call centre with her degree course and caring for her young daughter. This is a complicated set of demands to begin with however, matters are further complicated when other individuals

enter the picture as their interfaces also need to be considered too. Rachel relied on her mother in law to help her with childcare in order to let her work and study; however her mother in law also worked and her shift pattern also became a factor. Consequently negotiating the work life interface often involves and impacts upon the interfaces of others.

The ability to realise that workers had these non work demands to negotiate was a key skill for call centre managers and team leaders. This became evident in my early conversations with those who worked in Human resources for a North East call centre. The scarcity of trained reliable agents and the costs of training new workers from scratch meant that they were keen to accommodate the needs of their established workers if they possibly could, this meant the agents had a high degree of agency negotiating their work life interface as it meant that they could within reason choose their own shift patterns.

This pattern was not universal within the call centres I encountered in the North East and in India. But, the underlying tension between attempting to retain established staff and accommodating their needs or replacing them with new staff and the costs associated with this was evident across the board.

The key players in the process of negotiation within the work place were the team leaders. As outlined above, these workers are expected to manage and motivate teams of call agents. They are also the main conduits for individual workers concerns to be passed on to managers, and vice versa. Team leaders were not particularly well paid for their efforts but took on a great deal more responsibility. They could also have a very big effect upon the individuals in the teams they took responsibility for. Carla explained to me how the actions of one of her team leaders caused her considerable problems and

personal stress as they had refused to consider her childcare needs; this meant of course that her life beyond work was also affected. For Raj, in Bangalore a clash of personalities with a team leader lead to a stressful situation as he felt the team leader was looking for an excuse to discipline or sack him. He was lucky and managed to successfully challenge this behaviour and was moved to another team. In India the team leader was viewed as a key gatekeeper whose approval or disapproval could have a very big effect on an agent's chance of promotion.

The role of the team leader is different to that of the factory foreman due to the coaching role it involves, this aspect of the role can only be fulfilled with a team that consents to be coached, i.e. the teams respect is required not just its compliance. To gain this, the team leaders I spoke to appeared to align themselves with their team to a much greater extent than to the management. Team leaders of course have their own work life interfaces to manage, but they are an important part of the interfaces of their team members. Arguably in order to work successfully in this role it is essential that they engage with the demands of their teams non work lives in order to get the best performance from their team members. Conversely, a positive relationship with the team leader is essential for workers to assert agency via the work-life interface.

This section posed the question, "Why would anyone want to work in a call centre?" The answer is largely, because it fits in with wider non work aspects of their lives. As to why anyone might want to be a team leader? That question is a little more difficult to answer. The answer to the first question can be greatly enhanced and the second usefully explored by considering the trajectories of those involved in the industry.

Trajectories and careers, including agency in shaping work life over time.

As I have remarked elsewhere in this thesis during the course of my fieldwork one subject area which I had not really expected to encounter arose regularly in my discussions with call centre workers. The issue was that of the future. The issue tended to come up when I asked why they were working in the industry. For many of them, in fact the majority of those I spoke to saw working in the call centre industry as being temporary. This was because they viewed it as a staging point in their career trajectory, something they were doing to earn some money whilst they prepared to move on to better things. Call centre work then was a means to an end, and not an end in itself. This attitude is important as it shows how call centre work can be part of a strategy for asserting agency and moving on to a career with increased agency and rewards. It is all the more striking when the popular image of call centre work projects an image of individuals caught in a highly controlled “dead end” job. The future and the idea of moving on from call centre work was also important in another way, as it was part of workers’ strategies for coping with the day to day realities of call centre work. Many of the individuals I spoke to explained that they could cope with the work as they knew that they (or were at least extremely confident) that they would not be doing that work forever. Call centre work then, was viable as long as it was a temporary stage.

Interestingly, the industry despite the considerable efforts it has made to address the very high levels of attrition (staff turnover) pays very little attention to where staff go to. It assumes that attrition occurs due to the labour process and concentrates on finding a way to improve it. Exit from the industry is seen as something that occurs only for negative

reasons. This is of course not the case, people move on for positive reasons too for example to go to better jobs or to begin education courses. They do not just leave because they cannot stand call centre work.

It is tempting to look for a demographic explanation, it can be argued that call centres often employ young people in the 18-25 age bracket and as such they are more likely to be on ascendant and fast moving career trajectories. However I found very little evidence to suggest that workers aspirations to move on became diminished with age. For example Chris was in his late fifties and had got into call centre work after an industrial injury meant he could no longer work in construction. However he was at the start of a training course and planning to become a life coach.

Call centre work then was not for the majority of workers I met a defining experience, it was instead something that they did in order to help them move on toward their desired goal.

This led to the development of the typology outlined in chapter seven of *Stayers, Passing Through and Serial Agents*. Each describes a behaviour pattern. *Stayers* were those who had been in the industry for two or more years and who saw their future as being within the industry. They were very rare in the UK research. Although *Stayers* were more common in the Indian research due to the fact that many of them had worked in the industry for two years or more. But most did not aspire to work in the industry on a long term basis. Those who can be described as *Passing Through* overwhelmingly saw call centre work as a means to an end, it was a way to earn money whilst studying for many, a way to rejoin the labour market after a period of absence, or a way to accumulate skills and resources before moving on. Without exception, they viewed their

employment within the industry as temporary. This was by far the largest group involved in the research in both the North East and India. This in itself is noteworthy as it shows the extent to which aspiration was evident amongst the call centre workers I spoke to. Finally the Serial Agents, these workers had changed employers within the industry on a fairly regular basis, typically spending less than a year with each employer. This was not due to any long term career but in order to get better pay and conditions, and also to work in a different environment. Their behaviour during the time of my fieldwork was possible due to a relative shortage of trained workers and the high turnover of labour within the industry. Some of those who were Passing Through also fitted the Serial Agent model of behaviour. For example Carly who is discussed in detail in chapter seven had worked in the industry, then left to take up full time education, returned to the industry and was in the process to return to education again on a full time basis.

The lack of Stayers in the North East of England is worth commenting on, as it undermines the idea that the UK Call Centre industry locates in areas such as the North East due to the availability of “cheap labour” and that workers will be desperate to retain their employment regardless of the conditions. If this was the case then the Serial Agent pattern of work would clearly not have been viable either.

Another point which it is important to make is that team leaders were just as likely to be Passing Through as call agents were; seniority did not tie them closer to the industry. I found in some my encounters with team leaders, a sense that they knew how to make the operation work and in many cases knew better than the management above them. For example, both Jenni and Janette as Team leaders at Barclay’s spoke about how they and other team leaders had had to “sort out the mess” caused by inappropriate reorganisation.

This can be seen as part of the enduring “industrial structure of feeling” which Byrne (2002, 3) outlines i.e. a sense that senior workers know their worth and hold the knowledge that makes the operation function. What is different though, is that there is no aspiration to take control of the process and the operation. In other words, they are interested in developing their lives and identities by transcending their workplace, rather than through a process that transforms that workplace.

For most of the workers I encountered, those who were Passing Through, call centre work was a temporary but necessary phase in the development of identity. It provided, a way to begin in, or return to the world of work. A space within which to consider what or where future options might be and a place to gain self confidence and skills and the financial platform required to make the next phase of their life plan possible. The following quote is a good example. Jannette was about to start a four year teacher training course, I asked her how she thought this would differ to her work as a call centre team leader?

It’s a huge change. Not as much as you might think. I’ve always worked with people. A lot of the team leader role is about training and developing people. A lot of it is about having the gumption to stand up in front of people and lead by example as it were, being self confident, so all of those things were already there. It’s something people have said to me for years. I love working with kids, because I’ve worked part time, so I was working 9-1 everyday, so I’d been going into school and helping out. So I’d been doing that sort of stuff anyway. I think that at this time in my life, the easy option is to go back into another call centre and use the skills I’ve got and probably earn a lot more than initially I will as a teacher. Really that’s the easy option but if I don’t do it now then I never will

Interview with Jannette, 2004.

There are two very important points which arise from this quotation. Firstly, call centre work can offer possibilities for acquiring new skills and enhancing pre-existing ones. However, this is not uniform throughout the sector. For example, financial services, sales and customer service will in all probability offer more opportunities for the use of personal initiative than a centre providing directory enquiries or basic travel information. So the potential for developing transferable skills is contingent upon the specific workplace, it is not an inherent characteristic of the labour process itself. However this may not be required, Sabina reported how many young men at the call centre she worked in did so in order to raise enough money to set themselves up as minicab drivers. But again the agency of individual very clearly comes to the fore.

Secondly, and much more importantly, is the agency of individuals and how the possibilities of moving on are contingent upon their own efforts and initiatives. These are often of course dependent upon much wider factors, such as domestic responsibilities. Continuing with Janette as an example, she was a divorced single parent, buying her own home and had been working and studying part time. Embarking on a new career path was a very big step for her but one she felt was essential “if I don’t do it now I never will.” Personal will and self belief were part of the strategy of getting on for Janette and for many of the other workers I spoke to. However, there was also an important underlying assumption within the course of the life plans that they envisaged. That was, that they could always return to call centre work if for any reason their new career plans did not work out. This I feel is important as it worked as a guarantee, or a fallback position, the insurance if you like that made a future of possibilities viable. It is arguable given the nature of the industry whether this was ever the strongest of propositions, however the

scarcity of trained workers, the amount of new operations starting up and the general expansion of the industry's capacity in the regions studied in the time period 2003-2007 meant that it was to a large extent a reality.

How regional contexts shape working life and the possibility of agency

In chapter eight I argued that local contexts are highly important because the lives lived within them cannot be fully appreciated without an appreciation of them. It also follows that the actions taken by individuals to assert their agency and the opportunities for them to do so are shaped by the localities in which they live.

It is important to stress the point made by Dickens et al (1985) that whilst capital is increasingly multinational and free from time/space constraints, labour is not. Peoples' lives both work and non work are lived *somewhere*. The important point for this research is what difference do these "somewheres" make to the lives of individuals and what is the impact of place upon their possibilities for agency?

Another way to pose the question is to ask, how is the life of a call centre worker in the North East of England today different to the life of an Indian graduate working the call centre industry in Bangalore? These questions by their very nature demand an investigation of the places, the localities within which those lives are lived.

To begin with, let's consider the North East of England. Forty years ago, in the latter stages of the 1960's, the area was still highly industrialised and, as Byrne (2005, 1) has pointed out with specific reference to South Shields (but I would argue his analysis is applicable more widely throughout the region), it could still be recognised as the type of

place that it was a century previously. The North East of England as a place to live and work then has been radically reconfigured over the past four decades, but in many ways it is still recognisable in the terms of what it was forty years ago. Virtually all of the landscape and infrastructure of the carboniferous capitalism that had been the region's economic basis for more than a century has disappeared, but the housing estates and civic infrastructure which had been extensively re-developed in the post 1945 era remain.

These changes cannot be explained by globalisation and economic forces alone. Rather, as was related in my earlier discussion of the North East's local context, much of the industrial change in the region can be explained by a resurgence of global economic forces in the region, which had been mitigated for half a century, by national level economic initiatives prompted by the Second World War. It is also important to note that the physical landscape of the region in terms of housing was also a product of the same era. But this was part of a social and political vision made real by national and local government rather than any economic imperative. The place and the lives of who live in the region are as much a product of the social settlement of 1945 as they are of anything else due to its enduring legacy in terms of health, housing, education and universal benefits. There are also personal and cultural legacies. The legacy of the industrial past is present in the bodies and memories of many of the regions residents and this is related to the regions younger residents via contact with the older generation and also through the persistence of the "industrial structure of feeling" Byrne (2002, 3). The regions' landscapes, and lifescapes have been reconfigured, but they have by no means been changed beyond all recognition. The point is that large scale structural change does not just happen as a by product of global forces. Such forces do of course play a part. But

change is the product of particular visions, enterprises and political endeavours which are enacted at local, regional, national and global levels.

An analysis of the same type can also be applied to some of the areas of the Indian Subcontinent where the call centre industry has become established. If we think about the same forty year period, the Indian economy has changed dramatically, seemingly beyond recognition. But, if we consider the local level, the changes can look a lot less startling. Forty years ago, Mumbai was India's financial capital, a large commercial city, it still is. But it has grown dramatically to become not just nationally important, but to become a global centre of trade. So, again it can be argued that Mumbai is similar but different to what it was forty years ago. A change of degree rather than of type can be argued to have occurred. A similar case may be made for the city of Bangalore which forty years ago was an important centre of technological knowledge and developing rapidly. The same is true today; the major differences are the forces driving that development. In the late nineteen sixties Bangalore was part of a planned national economy seeking to develop an indigenous electronics and aeronautics industry, today it is the global IT industry which has become the city's primary economic driver. However, Bangalore was at the centre of India's technological development four decades ago and remains so. In other words it has changed in the last forty years but remains the sort of place it once was.

While all this may offer an explanation of the recent past in particular places, what use is it on a more general level. Can it tell us anything about other places? Can it offer any guide to what is happening now or to what may happen in the future? I would argue that it can. Once attention is paid to what is going on at the sub-global level, i.e. the national, regional, local and lived experience of individuals in particular places are readmitted as

important factors in shaping the structures of work and life in general, it is possible to give much richer and more highly detailed analyses than the techno-determinism of “informationalism” can possibly provide. This presents a major challenge to simplistic versions of globalization which fail to recognise the importance of locality.

The importance of “glocalisation” and the influence of contexts specific to the places where the call centre industry operates have been outlined throughout this thesis. The relevance of these contexts to the behaviour, expectations and aspirations of those who work in the industry has also been established. The relationship between the global and the local is highly significant and increasingly conducted without reference to the national level, or so we have been led to believe. However, the global context has the potential to impact upon multiple localities. Whereas localities cannot impact upon the global to anywhere like the same extent. It should also be noted that this study was undertaken during a long period of global economic stability and relative prosperity. All of the localities studied saw their call centre industries expand and demand for experienced labour generally exceeded supply. The North East of England did see the off shoring of some work, but this was arguably offset by growth in the sector and the establishment of more “captive” operations which were public sector and local government operations. The power of the global is undeniable, but its impact manifests itself in ways which can only be fully understood by engagement with local contexts.

The shaping of the local by these forces and its response is the day to day environment within which working and non working lives are lived, planned and constructed. The factors enhancing or constraining the agency of individuals vary according to those localities. For example, for the workers in the North East of England during the time of

my fieldwork, scarcity of experienced workers meant that work could always be found at another centre within the region. This meant that they did not have to put up with conditions which they did not like with the workplace, and more importantly call centre work remained a viable fall back option for individuals if new ventures into education or alternative careers did not go as planned. Consequently the possibilities for agency were greatly enhanced by the local context. The local contexts in India were of course different. In Mumbai call centre staff were earning high disposable incomes unprecedented for their age group. But the value of these wages and the ability to live independently were tempered by the shortage of housing in the city. In Bangalore the locality presents similar challenges to workers with shortages of housing and an inadequate transport infrastructure. This in turn influences their decisions about their working lives. It can also be argued that localities also produce different cultures of work. For example in the North East call centre work was more gendered than in any of the Indian locations I researched. In India there was a much more even balance of men and women. The North East did not of course have the issue of permanent nightshift working to deal with. In India there were moral pressures placed upon workers, night shift working was not seen as respectable for young women, indeed in some state such as Uttar Pradesh until recently such work was prohibited by law. There were also concerns about the work hard, play hard lifestyle which call centre wages allowed workers to indulge in. However this too varied across localities with Bangalore having a more liberal approach, and the city, traditionally tolerant of alcohol has developed a major night-time economy to absorb the new sources of disposable income. It is clear that localities play an

important role in shaping the workplaces, labour markets and the individual lives that are lived within them.

Closing comments

This thesis has explored questions about globalization, its impact upon localities and the lives of individuals. It has also attempted to rescue the narratives of individuals, which are at risk of being swamped by the power of these structural discourses. It has shown how agency is still possible, and how individuals assert it within circumstances which are different to those experienced by previous generations.

The call centre industry has served as a case study to examine these issues. Within it multiple levels of casing of the type outlined by Ragin (1992) are evident. The localities studied are a level of casing within which another level of casing that of the individual is explored. Casing allows the variations within the case to be examined.

The impact of the call centre model of working upon individuals has been addressed, there is much continuity with that which went before, despite the novelty of the technological infrastructure which workers encounter on a day to day basis. The social relations which had been established around industries which preceded the call centre industry also persist and form another layer of casing worthy of exploration. It has been noted that political forces, choices and interests are also important in shaping the industry at both the broad and specific levels.

It can be argued within the broad context of globalization; specific places far from becoming less important are of increasing importance to the social scientist. As it is only

by understanding what goes on in these specific places that any real sense of what globalization truly may be can be arrived at. To allow this to happen, places need to be understood as being the products of a complex conjunction of the contexts which inform, them and the agency of organisations and individuals which inhabit them. This requires the social scientist to recognise that these places need to be understood as things in themselves. They may have similarities with other places and have been shaped by similar forces, but this does not mean that they are the same as those places. The increasingly “disembedded” nature of social life which Giddens (1990) and Beck (1992) outlined theoretically, can only be properly investigated, debated and assessed if it is done so on an empirical basis. In order to know what the global might be it is necessary to engage with the everyday lived experience of it in particular places; an ethnographic approach is required. This brings us back to the methodological arguments of Burawoy and O’Riain which were outlined earlier in this thesis. Burawoy argues that this is essential if the “objectification” of global forces whereby they appear “inevitable and natural” is to be avoided:

We have adopted three strategies to counter objectification. The first is to consider global forces as constituted at a distance. The focus of the ethnography is then on the way global domination is resisted, avoided and negotiated. The second strategy is to see global forces as themselves as a product of contingent social processes. Here forces become the topic of investigation; they are examined as the product of flows of people, things and ideas that is the global connections between sites. The third strategy, the most radical, sees global forces and global connections as constituted imaginatively, inspiring social movements to seize control over their immediate but also their more distant worlds, challenging the mythology of an inexorable, runaway world

Burawoy *et al.* (2000:29).

This passage has much to commend it as it seeks to avoid the global becoming something which is beyond the processes that constitute it. However the project which Burawoy is involved with is primarily about re-imagining the global and, of course, an ethnographic approach is one way to do this.

The approach of this thesis has drawn upon the ideas of Burawoy. I would argue that the ethnographic approach is not just important because it offers a way to engage with existing theory, to modify it and to explore new areas. But because it recognises that the people who work in the global call centre industry have important stories to tell. Their experiences, aspirations and lives within and beyond, their immediate workplaces must be heard if we are to claim validity for our explanations of their work, its place in, and its relationship with, wider society. It also says something about the relationship between researchers and their subjects. One of social sciences' initial premises was that it could provide a guide to the future by discerning signals from the past and the present, but that this required a great degree of expert interpretation. During the course of my research, I discussed my findings briefly with an acquaintance who dismissed whatever my participants had told me as "false consciousness" when it did not fit with his poorly informed view of the industry. I found this arrogant and offensive. The researcher has a right to a view and to interpret what they are told. Interpretation is at the heart of this research, indeed what occurred involved what Giddens (1990) termed the "double hermeneutic" i.e. the interpretation by the researcher of that which had already been interpreted by the participant.

Nevertheless, the views of individuals must always be considered seriously and never dismissed in such a casual manner. If we wish to know what the future might hold, then it would seem to me to make perfect sense to ask our participants what they think will happen to them in the future .I feel that what I have discussed as life plans are highly dynamic processes formulated by individuals within a given set of circumstances. Therefore, why not a qualitative approach which attempts to understand contexts via ethnographic means, and explores the reflexive strategies operating within the individual lives of those who live them?

What have I learnt by listening to and thinking about these stories told to me by people involved in the industry at different levels and in different places? Several things; firstly, the sociology of work, is still important and worthy of our attention and shall remain a central concern for anyone attempting to make sense of the social world. Secondly, the linkage between change in the workplace and wider social change is not mechanistic or simple; it is complex and often contingent upon much wider social processes. Work is not life, but it is an incredibly important component of life and cannot be dismissed. It remains a key factor in the development and maintenance of identity. Thirdly, individual agency, by which individuals change their socio economic position and shape their own destiny is just as possible now as it was previously, i.e. it is contingent, but not dependent upon their starting point in the social hierarchy and the interfaces they inhabit, construct and negotiate, in other words Marx's statement that:

Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past

Marx (1963:2).

This statement remains as true today for call centre workers as it was for the factory workers of the 19th century, and remains the bedrock of the work-life interface. However, we might extend its scope to reach beyond the workplace. Men and women make their own lives, but not in circumstances of their own making, is perhaps the central message of this thesis. They have always done so and will continue to do so in concert and in spite of the shifting contextual relationships which surround and inform their lives. As to whether they still have the potential to “make history” in the sense Marx meant is still an open question, but the bold proclamations regarding the “end of history” which were made at the end of the Soviet Era are looking increasingly tenuous in the light of the past decade’s events.

The call centre might, at first glance, seem to symbolise a new way of working with implications for wider society. But the relations of production in the call centre industry and other areas of work which have been characterised by the use of New Technology are essentially the same as they have always been within the workplace settings of industrial societies. Work has changed, the systems, settings and means by which it is carried out are not as they once were. However, these changes, whilst they are more than just superficial, are not enough to affect the fundamental relationship between capital and labour and the shape of wider society. The apparently “weightless” economy still relies on commodities being created, exchanged and transported, they have just been rendered

“lighter” by the development of new systems, the basic productive processes may well be more efficient, but they remain essentially the same.

What has changed and presents challenge for researcher at both the theoretical and empirical levels is that the lives of individuals need to be thought of as dynamic, they move. As such, the researcher in order to gain a meaningful understanding needs to consider the temporal dimension of individuals’ lives and how this interfaces with the contexts of locality and the workplace. Mapping these dimensions is a challenge, it may well be the case that methods such as correspondence analysis could offer a potential way forward. However in order to access and collect the data for such an analysis, I would contend that what Burawoy (1998) terms the “reflexive science” of the extended case method is required. This he argues:

takes context and situation as its points of departure. It thrives on context and seeks to reduce the effects or power-domination, silencing, objectification and normalization. Reflexive science realizes itself with the elimination of power effects, with the emancipation of the life world. Even as that utopian point may be receding, the extended case measures the distance to be travelled. In highlighting the ethnographic worlds of the local, it challenges the postulated omnipotence of the global, whether it be international capital, neoliberal politics, space of flows, or mass culture. Reflexive science valorises context, challenges reification and thereby establishes the limits of positive methods.

Burawoy (1998: 30)

This thesis has attempted to make a contribution to the project outlined by Burawoy. It has done so by challenging the dominant structural narratives of the global and informational. It recognises their impact and their power, but it highlights what they often overlook, namely the enduring potential for human agency within the context of such structural narratives. This research has also stressed the importance of work, but of understanding it as part of a wider social life. Work is incredibly important as it provides

the economic basis for most other aspects of life. However as I have demonstrated wider aspects of the lives of individuals have a major impact upon their choice of work. Work fits around life and vice versa. This research has offered a different perspective by highlighting the lives of individuals working in a global industry. These lives need to be understood as dynamic projects with belong to individuals, they are not just the accumulated consequences of broader structural forces.

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