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**A JOB WORTH DOING? REINTERPRETING
CONTROL, RESISTANCE AND EVERYDAY
FORMS OF COPING WITH CALL CENTRE
WORK IN GLASGOW**

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**A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the University of
Glasgow**

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Abstract

In recent decades Britain's economic landscape has shifted from a Fordist manufacturing economy, to a labour market based on intangible forms of service work. Despite initial optimism regarding this shift, many of the replacement service jobs which workers now rely upon reflect instable, intensive and low-paying work realities. This thesis explores how low-end service work is actually experienced, as seen through the eyes of call centre workers based in Glasgow. Glasgow represents a particularly interesting case in this respect, as service work is arguably ill-suited to the traditional skill sets and worker cultures within this old industrial labour market. Despite this apparent mismatch, the thesis contends that workers possess and perform a range of coping strategies and practices that help limit the negative experience of telephone call centre work. Via interviews with workers, and non-participant observation of the call centre labour process across three different call centre settings, the thesis argues that workers can and do foster 'lives worth living' through a seemingly mundane, coercive and low paying form of work.

The opening of the thesis positions the research in the expanding sub-discipline of labour geography. While traditional understandings of labour and capital have tended to ignore labour's ability to think and act, labour geography has emphasised the potential for workers to negotiate with capital through collective forms of (often union-based) 'resistance'. In addition to resisting capital, the research argues that workers also (and more commonly) demonstrate agency whilst *complying* with existing structural constraints. This argument is advanced with recourse to studies from the labour process theory (LPT) tradition, in addition to the work of James C. Scott and Cindi Katz.

Three main arguments are advanced throughout the thesis. Firstly, and despite the call centre typecast as that of an authoritarian and deskilled setting, it is argued that call centre capital remains responsive to the social and unpredictable nature of workers. In order to realise production, each centre is shown to draw upon the social division of labour in different ways, as well as relying upon 'soft' measures of control over and above forms of coercion. This is necessary in order to attain the consent of a productive call centre workforce. Secondly, and inside the labour process itself, call centre workers are shown to exhibit a range of passive and informal coping mechanisms – i.e. forms of agency – which help to improve the experience of call centre work. Crucially, these forms of coping do little to challenge managerial control in a direct sense: and this, in part, explains their

effectiveness as a means of getting by. The final point relates to worker rationales behind call centre employment. Here it is argued that the subjective socio-spatial backgrounds of workers impact motivation behind call centre employment. Furthermore, worker backgrounds are shown to ‘carry over’ inside the workplace, further impacting the experience of call centre work. Ultimately pre-existing non-work subjectivities (in particular class, gender, and nationality) are shown to influence the identities that workers forge through call centre employment. By way of conclusion, the thesis attempts to feed these theoretical findings – with particular reference to findings on worker agency – back into the labour geography project.

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Author's declaration

I declare that this thesis has been composed by myself, and that it has not been accepted in any previous application for a degree. I declare also that the work of which this thesis is a record has been done by me and that any personal data have been processed in accordance with the provisions of the Data Protection Act 1998. All quotations have been distinguished by quotation marks and the sources of information specifically acknowledged.

Thomas Hastings, September 2010

List of Abbreviations

ACD	Automatic Call Distribution (system)
CCA	Call and Contact Centre Association
CCMA	Call Centre Manager's Association
CRM	Customer Relationship Management (software)
CTI	Computer-Telephony Integration
ICT	Information and Communication Technologies
ILM	Internal Labour Market
IVR	Interactive Voice Response (system)
PD	Predictive Dialler (system)
SE	Scottish Enterprise

CHAPTER 1

LABOUR AGENCY AND MUNDANE WORK: THE CASE OF CALL CENTRES

1.1 Introduction

‘I don’t see ‘ow it’s goin’ to be altered,’ remarked Harlow. ‘There must be masters, and someone ‘as to take charge of the work and do the thinkin’.’ (Tressell 2005: 155).

This thesis investigates the experience of working life in Britain’s post-industrial service economy. Like all advanced capitalist economies, in recent decades Britain’s economic landscape has shifted from one primarily based on manufacturing production work, to one dominated by intangible forms of service work. This transition was initially perceived by many as a positive step towards liberating workers from the drudgery of hard industrial labour within factories, mines and mills (MacKinnon and Cumbers 2007: 171; Bell 1973), although the reality has proved somewhat different. Rather than resembling skilled and rewarding forms of white collar work, many of the jobs in the contemporary service economy involve deskilled and intensive conditions, amid controls that often mirror the former factory roles they have replaced. At the same time, low-end service work often involves lower pay than was previously the case in manufacturing, and longer hours tied to unstable contracts. The main purpose of this thesis is to explore how workers cope and respond to these labour market conditions, by focusing on the working lives of telephone call centre workers in Glasgow.

The central contention of this thesis is that workers possess agency – broadly defined as an ability to think and act – which is vital in responding to coercive controls and mundane work conditions. Traditional understandings of labour agency have tended to equate this capacity to act with transformational acts of *resistance* against capital and existing power relations. This thesis argues that such understandings ignore the more typical means in which workers cope with day-to-day work conditions. Instead of resisting capital, the argument advanced is that workers more commonly deploy a range of subtle and less confrontational strategies for getting by and coping with existing structural constraints. The purpose of this thesis is to explore and develop a more nuanced understanding of worker agency, based on an analysis of Glasgow call centre work.

There are several reasons why call centres have been chosen as an appropriate research site for exploring worker agency. As a form of work, the call centre ‘industry’ has expanded rapidly over the last twenty years, incorporating around 790,000 call centre workers throughout the UK in 2004 (CM Insight et al. 2004). Whilst providing a much needed form of employment, the technologies inside call centres have acted to produce highly controlled, intensive, and routine work environments, with knock-on effects of stress, pressure, and exhaustion common amongst staff (Taylor and Bain 1999; Deery et al. 2002). Combined with low rates of pay, critics have been quick to criticise this modern form of work, which has drawn parallels to ‘electronic sweatshops’ and white collar ‘battery farms’ (Garson 1988; Taylor and Bain 1999; Fernie and Metcalf 1998). Spatially, the location of call centres has tended to reflect capital’s pursuit of lower costs, as low wage old industrial areas (such as Glasgow) have received the highest concentrations of this new form of service work (Bishop et al. 2003). This pattern represents something of a paradox, as workers from these areas in particular are traditionally used to more masculine forms of production work - which is culturally out of tune with the emotional requirements of telephone service work. It is for this reason that Glasgow has been chosen as an apt location for exploring the lived experience and agencies of call centre workers over and above other locations. The research aims to uncover how workers construct ‘lives worth living’ through a seemingly routine, mundane, and coercive form of employment.

This chapter provides an introduction to the thesis as a whole, which begins with an introduction to the overall aims and research questions that drove the research. The subsequent section then outlines the overall structure of the thesis and what is to follow, by providing a review of each of the main chapters.

1.2 Aims and Research Questions

The thesis is located within a body of work that has emerged over the past decade and a half under the rubric of ‘labour geography’. Under this banner, Andrew Herod (2001a) in particular has re-theorised the role of workers in shaping the geographies of capitalism, by arguing that economic landscapes are forged from the (frequently conflicting) *interaction* of capital and different groups of workers. Labour geographers have tended to illustrate this point with recourse to the role collective institutions (especially unions) play in forcing capital to adhere to the needs and interests of particular worker groups. Typically, studies have shown how unions – operating at a variety of scales – have altered the location

choices of firms, and secured better terms and conditions for their workers across a host of industries (Herod 2001a; Holmes 2004).

Whilst these studies offer important insights into the ways in which people can (and do) alter the economic landscape, it is fair to say that the majority of people are not engaged in such struggles. To this end, in an era where union membership is on the decline globally, organised collective action provides only a partial picture of labour agency. In a formal sense it is typical for workers to consent to the rules of capital. With this in mind, this thesis shifts the analytical foci away from collective and space-shaping acts of resistance (i.e. those which form the mainstay of labour geography), and focuses instead upon the routine struggles that workers face inside the workplace. The research is driven by three broad aims.

Firstly, the thesis aims to contribute to labour geography by recovering a sense of worker agency outside simplistic notions of '*resistance*'. The argument advanced is that labour geography requires a more expansive grasp of worker agency, which incorporates the multiple ways in which individuals not only resist, but also *comply* with existing structural constraints. The research aims to explore the myriad of subtle initiatives that workers use for 'getting by' *inside* the workplace; which rarely threaten or challenge managerial control in a profound sense. Secondly, the research aims to explain how workers structure their lives more broadly through routine forms of service work which are available locally (i.e. within the structural constraints of a local labour market). Glasgow is a city with a strong working class tradition, heavily influenced by previous forms of work and labour market governance: and in particular the provision of state welfare and social housing. This institutional past contrasts greatly with the present forms of labour market governance, which draws heavily upon a neoliberal workfare agenda, and is arguably geared towards pushing people off benefits and into routine forms of service work (Helms and Cumbers 2006; Cumbers et al. 2009). Accordingly, the research aims to explore how call centres are viewed and used by the workers within them. The final aim of the thesis is to feed the theoretical insights learned - in particular those relating to more nuanced understandings of work agency - back into the labour geography project. Specifically the thesis aims to inform local labour control regime theory (Jonas 1996), which offers a largely top-down explanation for how capital and the state shape and deliver workers to the point of

production. In order to achieve these overarching aims, the thesis addresses the following research questions:

1. What motives and rationales underpin worker engagements with call centre employment, and how do these vary from person to person? To what extent do motives and rationales reflect existing labour market realities and/or constraints?
2. Inside the workplace, how is agency performed, and how do different forms of managerial control alter the *ways* in which agency is exercised? Relatedly, what does this tell us about the performance of labour agency more broadly?
3. What is the relationship between call centre employment and worker lives on the whole? To what extent are notions of ‘pathways’ and ‘narratives’ useful, as a means for understanding the ways in which people use and understand their life through call centre work?

In terms of the research design and the methodology used, the thesis adopts a case study approach into three distinct call centre organisations in the Glasgow labour market. These cases effectively act as a lens onto the reality of call centre employment, and help to explore how different contexts trigger distinct experiences and outcomes vis-à-vis the same ‘general’ form of work. Qualitative methods in the form of interviews with staff, together with non-participant observation of the call centre labour process ‘in action’ are used to build an accurate picture of call centre life from the subjective standpoint of the workers involved.

1.3 Thesis outline

The thesis is divided into nine chapters, with each serving a particular function with regards to the overall aims of the research. Subsequent to this introductory chapter, **Chapter 2** forms a literature review that covers four distinct strands of research on work, control, and agency. Following a brief introduction on labour’s role within capitalist production, this begins with a review of labour geography, which, as mentioned, largely demonstrates labour’s collective ability to ‘resist’ capital across a range of spatial contexts. In offering an alternative to this approach, the subsequent section turns to literature in the labour process theory (LPT) tradition. This literature represents a series of debates (dating back to the early 1970s) on the nature of control and labour resistance inside the process of doing work itself. The third section of the review then shifts the analytical focus (again) towards forms of worker agency in the sphere of reproduction, primarily through a review

of James C. Scott's (1990) research into 'passive' forms of peasant resistance and the work of Cindi Katz (2001; 2004). The chapter finishes with a final section on service work, which reviews (often geography based) literature undertaken on the nature and experience of the tertiary sector. Ultimately this review chapter forms a theoretical 'toolbox' of different perspectives on labour agency; which are subsequently carried forward and developed in the main discussion chapters.

Chapter 3 outlines the research design and the methodology used to explore call centre employment, beginning with a brief overview of the philosophical framework informing the research. In line with a critical realist approach, the chapter outlines the adopted case study design and the qualitative methods used within this: namely semi-structured interviews and ethnographic observations of the call centre labour process. Subsequent sections then explain how organisational access was achieved, followed by an explanation of the case study selection. This is followed by a reflective discussion of the need to remain flexible to the needs of gatekeepers throughout the research process; and a discussion on positionality politics and the presentation of self. The chapter concludes with an overview of grounded theory and the manner in which material was collated and analysed with the use of Nvivo.

Chapter 4 provides an historical overview of the Glasgow labour market, dating back from the end of the 19th century up to the present day. This is necessary in order to explore how workers in Glasgow have been socialised over time by different institutional approaches and past forms of work. Accordingly the chapter draws upon the concept of a 'local labour control regime' to demonstrate how local capital and the state have attempted to regulate and shape a workforce suited for production (Jonas 1996). The chapter begins by tracing the industrial origins of Glasgow, with particular reference to early forms of civic governance and corporate paternalism. This institutional mix is shown to indoctrinate a masculine working class attitude to work, which was particularly beneficial to industrial capital (especially shipbuilding). The middle body of the chapter then focuses on Glasgow after World War 2, and the failed attempts to diversify this economic base. The final third of the chapter is spent analysing Glasgow's post-industrial labour market (i.e. the present day), which maintains a high rate of unemployment, and is based upon a mainstay of service alternatives.

Building on this review of the historical restructuring of the Glasgow labour market, **Chapter 5** situates the call centre industry within the contemporary urban labour market regime. The opening sections cover the evolution of call centre work, which typically relies upon a highly intensive labour process (essentially driven by technological advancements). The chapter then details the rise and the composition of the call centre industry in Scotland. Glasgow is shown to contain an abundance of call centre work; maintaining around 30% of Scotland's total call centre employment (Taylor and Anderson 2008). Building on this contextual backdrop, the second half of the chapter then focuses specifically on the case study organisations under investigation. Despite similarities as a work form, each centre is shown to vary in terms of its requirement for qualitative and quantitative forms of service, which impacts upon the work organisation of each case. The final section reviews the technical and social divisions of labour present within each centre.

Dovetailing from this review, **Chapter 6** explores the control regimes of each centre from Management's perspective. This chapter essentially details the managerial attempt to maximise worker productivity through different forms of control, bearing in mind the unpredictable and social nature of the labour 'commodity' (Peck 1996). This begins with a review of staff recruitment in each centre, which underlines the difficulties management face in hiring 'ideal' candidates from the local area. Subsequently, the section explores *why* management draw upon the social division of labour in different ways. After a review of the training procedures in each case, the chapter then focuses upon the technical forms of control and the use of Taylorist work methods and surveillance. The chapter finishes with a review of the normative control in each setting, and the extent to which discursive cultures are used to encourage staff to *self-govern*. Throughout, the chapter illustrates that different methods are required for garnering consent and productivity from a socially variable workforce. Methods of control are shown to vary between different operations.

Chapter 7 then provides a materialist critique of the control arrangements outlined in Chapter 6, by exploring the lived experience of call centre work from an agent's perspective (i.e. the call centre worker). In particular, this chapter applies the work of Cindi Katz (2004) and James C. Scott (1985; 1990) to ascertain how workers cope with different aspects of the call centre role. This discussion chapter tackles head-on the need for a labour geography that incorporates nuanced forms of worker coping out-with formal acts of 'resistance'. The first section begins with an exploration of staff feelings towards

targets and work intensity, and the self-help strategies that subsequently arise. The middle body of the chapter then focuses on feelings towards deskilling and repetition, and the multiple (and often creative) strategies for dealing with boredom and alienation. The final section of the chapter then focuses on less constructive forms of coping, which are often directed against ‘top-down’ cultures from above (i.e. forms of normative control). The discussion details the similarities and differences between forms of coping across each of the three centres.

Chapter 8 explores the motivations that workers hold for choosing call centre work, with a view to exploring the connections between the spheres of work and home. This begins with a discussion on the different perceptions and rationales behind call centre employment, which are often tied to worker subjectivities (including gender and class) as well as spatial and temporal factors (such as life-stage, and the places workers come from). The second section of the chapter then discusses how identification practices tied to outside life are carried over and performed as a means of coping and personalising the role. This section also details the ways in which organisations themselves are embedded with gendered meanings, which impact the promotion prospects of different workers. The final section of the chapter then explores the work-life identities that individuals foster through call centre employment. This involves a discussion of Richard Sennett’s understanding of a work-life ‘narrative’, in which stable patterns of work (and implicitly careers) are seen to matter in character formation. The section explores the different ways in which individuals ‘make sense’ of their work-life identities through call centre work.

Chapter 9 forms the conclusion for the thesis as a whole. The chapter is divided into three sections, with the first seeking to answer the original research questions as laid out in this introduction. The relevant ‘answers’ to these questions (which are interspersed throughout the thesis) are summarised, with a view to delivering the overall aims of the research. With regards to the motives and rationales behind call centre work, individuals are shown to possess both general and subjective motivations. However, generally speaking workers are shown to favour the ease and the malleability of call centre work for structuring a desired work-life balance (across a range of subject positions). Inside the workplace, and drawing upon the work of Cindi Katz (2004), the bulk of worker agency is shown to involve passive and informal coping responses to stress and boredom in the day-to-day role. In terms of ‘making sense’ of this routine work, the pathways into call centre

employment (which often relate to class and gender) are shown as pivotal in framing an overall work-life identity. Subsequent to these findings, the second section of the chapter distils the main theoretical contribution(s) of the thesis. This discussion is largely based on agency-related findings, with a view to providing a more ‘discriminating grasp’ (Castree 2007) of what labour agency actually means in the context of the ‘everyday’. The chapter concludes by proposing future avenues of research, with particular reference to how labour geography may benefit from the theoretical findings and the methodological approach of this study.

CHAPTER 2**THE GEOGRAPHIES OF LABOUR AGENCY: A REVIEW****2.1 Introduction**

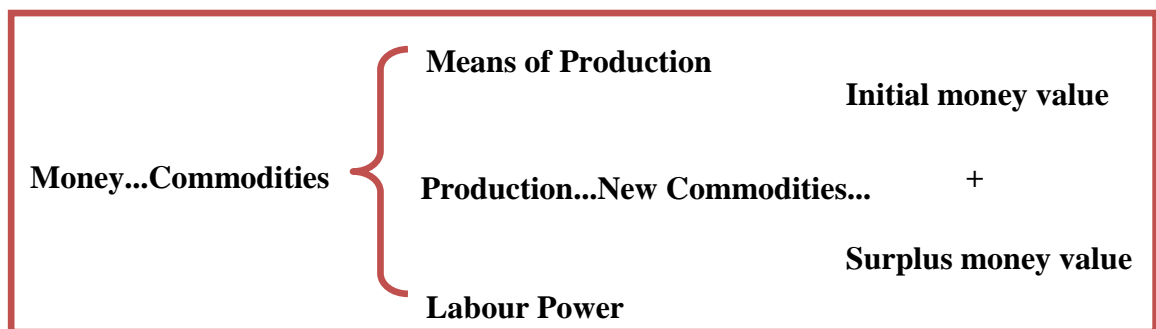
The following chapter forms a literature review which serves a variety of functions for the thesis as a whole. At its most basic level the chapter introduces the concept of work under capitalism, and situates labour's role within this as that of a 'pseudo commodity' from which capital draws a profit. This initial standpoint acts as a springboard from which three distinct perspectives on labour agency are introduced and developed. Each strand provides a different theoretical insight into the labour-capital relation; by exploring issues of power, class and agency across a range of spatial contexts. In doing so the chapter effectively forms a theoretical toolbox for the thesis as a whole, as several of these understandings are carried forward and applied within the main empirical discussion chapters. Most notably the concept of worker 'resistance' is challenged, and more nuanced expressions of labour agency are unpacked which refrain from challenging the power relations which workers face on a day-to-day basis.

The chapter is divided into five main sections. Subsequent to an introduction on the role of labour within capitalism, the chapter reviews the work of Marxist economic geographers who have sought to explain the spread of capital across space. Following on from this, the chapter outlines the growing sub-discipline of labour geography. After critically appraising this maturing field, notable gaps within labour geography are identified which the thesis as a whole – and the subsequent two sections of the literature review in particular – seek to address. Most notably, labour geography is seen to require a wider ranging grasp of labour agency; and in particular an appreciation of the subtle and everyday forms of coping which workers invoke during the labour process itself. Bearing this in mind, the following section reviews Labour Process Theory (LPT) and the debates emanating from this (which rose to prominence during the 1970's and 1980's in particular), while the fourth section shifts the theoretical and empirical focus to agency outside the workplace and the sphere of (social) reproduction. The final section of the chapter then provides a brief review of recent studies into service sector employment, as a means of contextualising the empirical focus of call centre employment.

2.2 What is labour within capitalist production?

Before delineating some perspectives on worker agency, it is first necessary to define and explain how workers as a subject are theoretically conceived throughout the thesis. In line with a political economy approach to economic geography, the research draws upon a basic Marxist conception of the capitalist economy as a profit driven system of production and exploitation (Marx 1965).

Figure 2-1: The capitalist mode of production (Castree et al. 2004: 28)



At the crux of the capitalist system lies a basic equation, whereby firms (capitalists) purchase and combine two commodities: the means of production – such as factories and machines – together with the labour power of workers (Castree et al. 2004; Lier 2007; MacKinnon and Cumbers 2007). These two elements (‘commodities’) are combined to produce a fresh commodity that is then sold on for profit, in an ever-repeating cycle of capitalist accumulation (Figure 2-1). Accordingly, and in this abstract sense, workers effectively represent a mere commodity input which is harnessed by capital for the sole purpose of extracting profit. However, unlike actual commodities, wage labourers are not designed solely with capitalist gain in mind. The fact that labour maintains a social and independent nature has led to a rephrasing of labour’s status to that of a ‘pseudo’ or ‘fictitious’ commodity (Castree et al. 2004: 29; Polanyi 1944; Cumbers 2007).

For Polanyi, labour is best understood as a ‘fictitious’ commodity due to the fact that labour is never actually produced for sale. To this end, people sell but a proportion of their time as labour so as to accrue enough money to meet their own reproductive needs (including necessities like food and shelter). The fact that labour cannot be detached from the ‘rest of life’ is key. As Polanyi (1944: 71) notes:

‘...labour is only another name for a human activity which goes with life itself, which in turn is not produced for sale but for entirely different reasons, nor can that activity be detached from the rest of life, be stored or mobilized...’

Importantly, workers are all ‘produced’ within societies out-with the control of firms, and this creates a fundamental ‘supply’ side problem for capital. Outside the sphere of production (i.e. the workplace), workers exist as complex subjects in society. It is here in the ‘reproductive sphere’ that individuals foster and develop unique characteristics, skills and values – and beyond all the capacity to think and do outside the remit of capital. Furthermore the labour supply is fractured along a number of lines including class, gender, race and all manner of other socially constructed divisions (Storper and Walker 1989; Castree et al. 2004). These differences (which are all external to capitalism) are the things which make us who we are, and are carried wherever we go¹. Ultimately all of these points render labour a socially unpredictable and variable commodity form. As people we possess needs and wants which – although undoubtedly influenced by capital (for example through advertising) - exist independently and at times in opposition to the owner class. In turn, we are often capable of acting on our own volition, which may impact ‘how well, for how long and under what conditions’ (Castree et al. 2004: 29) we are willing to work. Due to this basic ability to think and act independently, capital has historically sought to regulate and control the labour ‘commodity’: with a view to realising labour’s *potential* to produce.

2.2.1 *Regulating labour: out-with the workplace*

In response to labour’s variable nature, capital has traditionally devised ways of regulating labour both inside (i.e. the sphere of production) and outside the workplace within the reproductive sphere. With regards to this latter realm, regulating the supply of labour within locally variable labour markets is a far more complicated affair than that purported within neo-classical economics (notably, see Peck 1996²). As Lier (2007: 818) notes:

‘Labour markets are complex and unruly. What goes on in the workplace is affected by what goes on in people’s homes and in public life. As the sphere of reproduction operates relatively autonomous to the demands of capital, capital cannot coordinate and control the reproduction of labour solely according to its own needs’.

To help mediate the needs and interests of both firms and workers, the state plays a pivotal role in the social regulation of the labour market. Thus, it is government which provides the laws of employment for both labour and capital to abide by, in addition to the schools, hospitals and housing schemes which help to maintain the workforce. In addition, a host of institutions within civil society - including the family, churches, schools and so forth - help (if inadvertently) to shape and prepare workers for the world of work (Castree et al. 2004). In light of these factors, labour's relationship with capital (and vice-versa) often depends on the specific institutional arrangements that are present at a given time and place.

Notably the Fordist regime of accumulation (post 1945) represented a period of stable capitalist growth via a 'three-way' institutional balance between the interests of corporations, government and organised labour (Coe et al. 2007: 71). Since this period labour markets have continued to evolve in distinct and locally specific ways according to particular political and economic processes. More recently (since the early 1980s) the influx of neo-liberalism has had a marked impact upon the labour-capital relation and labour market regulation; as seen through attacks on organised labour (i.e. trade unions) and through an emphasis on the free market, deregulation and flexible work arrangements (Harvey 2005). In Peck's (1996) eyes this has served to benefit (a relatively footloose) capital by 'fuelling inter-local regime' competition between the workers of different places in order to attract investment (Lier 2007: 5). This has often resulted in lower wages and a marked instability in the employment relation (Allen and Hendry 1997) as capital attempts to put labour 'in its place' (Peck 1996; Lier 2007). This is not to say that the state or indeed firms themselves play no role in sustaining the workforce within specific labour markets. While labour is relatively rooted in a fixed location compared to the ever mobile capital, the latter is also forced to 'touch base' and settle down depending on how much it has invested in infrastructures (such as buildings or technologies). As such, capital is required to tap appropriate skills and qualities from workers within specific and locally contingent labour markets (Peck 1996; Harvey 1999; Massey 1984; Clark and Wrigley 1995).

2.2.2 Regulating labour: inside the workplace

Once hired, capital has historically sought to organise and control the worker force - with a view to realising labour's productive potential. Advances within mechanisation and machine based manufacturing during the industrial revolution gave rise to factory

production, and with it the technical division of labour. Under this new method of production, staff were made to repeat the same simplified tasks again and again, thus rendering their status interchangeable from one worker to another (typified by the textile factory regimes of the 1830s onwards). These techniques ensured a huge increase in productivity for capital (as argued by Adam Smith), by removing worker autonomy in the production process. As a result of this ‘deskilling’, old skills and trades have historically been replaced by non-monopolizable skills for capital to draw upon. In turn, Marx argued that capitalist systems of production and control have acted to deny workers of their basic humanity over and above that of an actual commodity, thus alienating workers from their own sense of worth. An extreme example these techniques is that of the early 20th century Fordist production line; which combined a fine division of labour with the rational principles of scientific management (or ‘Taylorism’). Taylorism (which is typically coupled with close monitoring) involves the use of simple and pre-defined instructions for staff to follow: in order to maximise production and to rule out inefficient steps (MacKinnon and Cumbers 2007: 54).

Although the issue of deskilling and alienation has widespread consequences for labour, capitalist production and the manner in which workers are organised within production has acted to fragment class identification. This, in turn, has helped to stem the threat of a class based revolution. Specifically, the social and technical divisions of labour present in a given firm – i.e. the different roles/positions which make up a production process, and the sorts of people who fill them – have served to divide workers into multiple classes ‘for’ (rather than ‘in’) themselves. Put simply, the type of work we perform imparts a certain status and identity upon us (such as the notion of ‘blue’ and ‘white’ collar roles; see McDowell 2003). In combination with the differences already external to capitalism (i.e. race, class, age, and so on), the worker force as a whole is thus marked by a series of intra-class differences (Sayer and Walker 1992; Castree et al. 2004). Subsequently, and as capitalist economies develop to include a myriad of different sectors, the potential for workers to perceive one another as part of a broader ‘worker class’ is arguably eroded.

From this it is clear that a complex (and contradictory) relationship exists between labour and capital, with each side co-dependent upon the other. On the one hand, workers are effectively forced to sell their labour to earn a living wage. On the other, capital – wherever it locates – is forced to harness an unpredictable and socially variable workforce

(Peck 1996; Storper and Walker 1989). It is this understanding of the labour-capital relation that forms the theoretical backdrop for the thesis as a whole. Most importantly, workers are understood to hold a broad sense of agency in spite of capital's attempt(s) to regulate and control.

2.2.3 *Alternative understandings of agency across the social sciences*

Having outlined this broad capacity for workers to act in the labour-capital relation, at this point it is worth contrasting three distinct approaches to interpreting human agency across the social sciences: namely structuration theory, work in the subaltern studies tradition, and Actor-Network Theory (ANT). This exercise is useful as a means of contextualising the distinct manner in which an understanding of agency is conceived and developed throughout the thesis.

Firstly, it is worth touching upon Giddens' (1984) structuration project, as a body of work which sought to reconcile the perceived divide between structure and agency evident across the social sciences. As Coe and Jordhus-Lier (2010) note, understandings of structure and agency – and the interrelations between these related concepts - remained 'hot topics' in human geography throughout the 1980s, 'with structuration approaches in particular seen as a way of bringing together the somewhat divergent Marxist and humanistic perspectives that had prospered in the 1970s' (ibid: 4). Through structuration theory Anthony Giddens (1984) presented a duality view of structure and agency in marriage together, which (in part) sought to transcend an understanding of structure as that of a constraining force or 'barrier' which operates externally of human action (Cloke et al. 1991). Accordingly:

'Giddens explained social life as being continually produced and reproduced through a process of structuration. From this perspective, both structure and agency were implicated in every moment of social interaction. In turn, semantic rules, resources (e.g. authority and property), and moral rules were seen as the 'modalities' connecting structure and action, both through repetitive conduct and long-term institutional change' (Coe and Jordhus-Lier 2010: 5).

Via a process of structuration, Giddens thus argued that day-to-day social practices – which stem from both conscious and unconscious human actions (i.e. agency) – help to link and sustain the social structures in which we as people are embroiled. In turn,

structuration theory (and Giddens' stratification model of structure in particular) proved highly useful in connecting (or 're-embedding') notions of agency *within* seemingly detached structural constraints.

Despite its useful intention, Giddens' project received criticism on a number of fronts. Of particular note, in relation to agency Philo (1984) accused Giddens of collapsing agency into action, whilst structuration theory remained largely insensitive to questions of power and inequality. Alternatively, a culturally sensitive approach to human agency is evident in the subaltern studies tradition, which began through the work of Ranajit Guha. Subaltern studies have often sought to re-cast elitist understandings of nationality and identity (beginning as a radical project concerning Indian history), and typically focus on historical accounts which deny the presence and power of subaltern subjectives (often under colonialism). This approach is recently evident in the work of Featherstone (2008), via an account of Irish 'national' identities in the case of sailors in the 1790s. Amongst other examples Featherstone argued that mutinous conspiracies and events off the Cape of Good Hope in 1797 were influenced and shaped by 'dynamic, spatially stretched forms of subaltern knowledge' (ibid: 101) linked to alternative mutinies across the Channel. Notably, sailors on the lower deck from various ethnic backgrounds and locations (including Jamaica, Barbados, New York and Ireland) drew upon shared knowledge as a means to resist: and as such mutinies were not the sole product of a native political tradition of shipboard organisation. As Featherstone notes:

'Such diversity...runs against the grain of much theorizing of transatlantic Irish identities. Examining the ship as a site of political activity challenges influential accounts of the Irish diaspora which have constructed the Irish as sealed, ontologically discrete unit of study' (ibid:102).

In constructing an alternative and agency-rich 'history from below', subaltern studies bear strong parallels to the work of E.P. Thompson (1963) and Raymond Williams (1961). In turn, this understanding of agency as constituted in social relations which are often 'hidden' in the politics of work is carried forward into subsequent sections of Chapter 2, and remain a strong theme of Chapter 7.

Alternatively, post-structural theorists influenced by the work of Latour have adopted and developed a different perspective on our ability to map structure and agency, under the rubric of ‘actor-network theory’ (ANT). Like structuration theory, ANT attempts to breakdown ostensibly unhelpful binaries – and in particular the perceived boundary between nature and culture. As the name suggests, ANT views the world as constituted through a multitude of ever-unfolding networks and connections. Notions of power and agency are here seen to rest on the networked associations between actors and entities (Murdoch 2006: 62), as opposed to residing in the hands of individuals. Accordingly, ANT supports a notion of ‘agency’ in non-human (and often non-living) actors that are connected by necessary associations. In turn, whilst useful in mapping these connections, ANT has been criticised for equalising the importance of all actors in a given network, and thus failing to account for pre-existing power-relations and the intentionality of human actors.

2.3 Geographies of labour agency

The notion that workers possess agency – and that this agency is complicated by the dialectics of class - has not always been acknowledged within economic geography. To this end, studies which have sought to map and explain the spread of capital have, in the past, tended to perceive labour in true commodity form. In neo-classical location theory economic space was thus conceived as a pre-given stage for capital to operate upon; whereby firms based their locational choices upon categories of labour costs, skills and so forth. More usefully, Marxist geographers from the 1970s onwards have re-theorised the geographies of capitalism as contingently *produced* in ways which auger the accumulation and circulation of capital (cf. Smith 1984; Harvey 1982; Massey 1984).

In Harvey’s understanding, capital continually faces an inherent contradiction between mobility and fixity, remedied (if only temporarily) via the use of a *spatial fix* (Harvey 1982). Importantly capital faces the constant imperative to move and locate in a ‘footloose’ manner from one area to another in the constant pursuit of profits (Smith 1984). However, capital is also forced to place roots through investments in physical infrastructures (such as factories, office buildings, transportation networks and so forth) which enable sustained periods of production and consumption to take place. By producing the economic landscape in certain ways, the built environment may act as a ‘spatial fix’ which absorbs excess capital, thus aiding the accumulation process. However, despite capital’s seemingly ‘footloose’ status, the sunk costs of these investments often

place limits on capital's ability to uproot and move on in practice (Harvey 1982; Castree et al. 2004). In explaining the changing spatial structure and uneven development of the UK economy, Massey (1984) in particular has argued that different capitals continue to base their location decisions on the need to source particular types of workers. In doing so capital is shown to create and draw upon a spatial division of labour, marked in the UK by the concentration of 'core' white collar/high end jobs in the south-east of England, in contrast to areas of the 'north' which have struggled to attract new forms of work (in particular 'old industrial areas'). Whilst providing a vital breakthrough in explaining the uneven spread of capital across space, such 'geographies of labour'³ have tended to perceive workers as inherently passive and in receipt of *capital's* landscape.

More recently Andrew Herod (1997; 2001a) has sought to invert the above approach, in favour of a 'labour geography' which places workers at the heart of its analysis. This rubric essentially builds upon the above understandings of economic space as produced (Lefebvre 1974; Harvey 1982), although this time through a labour rather than capital-centric lens. Herod (2001a) has argued that groups of workers – through their agency - also produce space in ways which further their *own* social reproduction. To this end labour geography makes a deliberate point of exploring human agency; and essentially labour's ability to 'resist' different capitals and their attempts to control and shape the work arrangements we endure. It is for this reason that labour geography forms a key departure point for the thesis as a whole.

For his own part, Herod (1997; 2001a; 2001b) and several others (including Holmes 2004; Castree 2000; Rutherford and Gertler 2002; Anderson 2009; Rhee and Zabin 2009) have focussed upon labour unions as the primary vehicles of labour's agency. In response to specific acts of capitalist restructuring, unions have been shown to adopt scalar and spatial strategies which – when successful – have resulted in 'labour friendly' rules for capital to adhere to. These rules may in turn form a spatial fix of labour's *own*; as workers may secure rights and entitlements – such as collective bargaining agreements at a national scale to limit the effects of whipsawing⁴ – which benefit groups of workers as opposed to capital (see Herod 1997; 2001a; 2001b). Accordingly Herod presents the economic landscape as an ever negotiated product, contested between both capital *and* labour⁵. As Herod notes '...ultimately, it is conflicts over whose spatial fix (capitalists or workers) is actually set in the landscape that are at the heart of the dynamism of capitalism' (Herod

2001a: 36). Whatever its precise focus, Herod has posited labour geography as a sub-discipline not only ‘about’, but crucially ‘for’ workers, and with the optimistic intention of helping the ‘oppressed and dispossessed’ workers of the world (in contrast to prior studies which are seen to benefit capital and firms; *ibid*: 49).

2.3.1 Responses to economic restructuring

In illustrating the importance of geography to this project, the concept of scale has proved crucial in demonstrating labour’s ability to contest capital’s landscape. Commonly unions have been shown to harness different scalar resolutions (such as at local, national, or international levels) to help combat the negative effects of industrial restructuring (to this end, strategies such as outsourcing represent a spatial fix for capital; see Holmes 2004). Accordingly unions may formulate strategies to ‘up-scale’ their struggle from the local to the global scale. Various studies (Herod 2001b; Castree 2000; Fairbrother et al. 2007; Savage 2006; Aguiar and Ryan 2009) have shown how union internationalism – where workers forge links with strategically significant unions/institutions based around the globe – may help pressurise multi-national firms into responding to the needs of local workers. While the up-scaling of local union disputes is now common practice within Western economies (in particular see Herod 2001b; Castree 2000), there is increasing evidence of workers within newly industrialising countries adopting similar scalar tactics. A recent example is that of union organisers at the (Danish owned) Ole Wolff electronics firm in China, who collaborated with a Danish union (‘3F’) to raise awareness over worker factory rights (largely over contractual overtime and the right to organise; CLNT 2008).

Alternatively, workers have also been shown to challenge TNCs through action taken at the *local* level, as demonstrated by the American auto industry and its reliance upon Just-In-Time (JIT) and lean production methods. As opposed to stockpiling components within large warehouses, under JIT components needed for production are produced and brought into assembly shortly before they are required. These changes to production – designed to accrue efficiency and cost savings to capital – have inadvertently provided certain local plants with the power to disrupt production in truly global operations. In turn, Herod (2001b) has shown how strikes in just two component plants in Michigan effectively forced GM to shut 117 assembly plants throughout its global operation. In doing so, the United Auto Workers (UAW) secured a vital spatial fix for its workforce; by forcing GM to agree to new working rules and fresh plant investments (Herod 2001b; similarly see Holmes 2004⁶). Crucially, the appropriateness of one scalar strategy over another – be it

attempts at union internationalism or local strike action - ultimately depend upon the contextual circumstance behind the struggle in question (Herod 2001b; Ward 2007; Rhee and Zabin 2009).

2.3.2 *The use of national institutions and international arrangements as a means of regulating capital*

Other approaches in labour geography have explored the impact that regulatory frameworks and national institutions may have (often in tandem with labour unions) in securing worker rights both within and across geographic regions (see Aguiar and Ryan 2009; Rutherford and Gertler 2002; Wills 1998; Sadler 2000; Cumbers 2004). While globalisation has helped to facilitate the integration of capital on a worldwide basis, Rutherford and Gertler (2002) have demonstrated how national representational structures may (still) play a vital role in regulating the practices of MNCs and global industries. Their point is well demonstrated by the case of auto-workers in Germany, who have effectively negotiated changes in lean production through works councils and through sectoral bargaining between unions and firms. Thanks to this national regulatory framework, autoworkers in Germany have been able to negotiate both work procedures and issues of pay in ways not possible for counterparts in the United States (where workers operate without work councils and with lower union densities; see Rutherford and Gertler 2002; Wills 2000).

Bearing the importance of national regulatory structures in mind, other studies have continued to explore the possibility for unions to up-scale national labour agreements to an *international* level. By tying MNCs to international agreements, it may be possible for workers to stymie capital's ability to source the cheapest and most exploitative work arrangements across space (Fairbrother et al. 2007; Fairbrother and Hammer 2005). Notably European Works Councils (EWCs) have been posited as a means for staff in MNCs based in two or more states to share information and to build more stable and efficient workplaces (as part of a 'social partnership' between labour and capital; see Wills 1998). However, there remains little evidence that such a re-scaling of labour relations has ensured the progressive and effective workplace change originally intended, with Sadler describing EWCs as 'more like part of a shift towards enterprise-specific, decentralised bargaining' (Sadler 2000: 148; Lethbridge 2009)⁷. Alternatively Lerner (2007) has advocated global 'mega' unions as a means of achieving worldwide labour solidarity; with particular reference to the decline of state power and the rise of neoliberal state policies

(i.e. privatisation and deregulation designed to encourage capital investment; see Harvey 2005). Mega unions (such as the Workers Uniting Union; BBC News 2008) are the amalgamation of existing national unions based around specific economic sectors which attempt to 're-embed' global capital by taking labour out of competition (Fairbrother et al. 2007; Turner and Cornfield 2007). The strategy of the global unions typically relies on a concentration of power in a small number of national union bodies, which in turn direct and support local unions. This itself has raised questions about the appropriate scale at which power should rest within the union movement, particularly as the form and content of such large bodies may be vague (Savage 2006).

2.3.3 *Labour market control and the politics of place*

Stepping back from the specificity of particular workplace struggles, several geographers have also explored how institutional arrangements impact the culture and performance of workers within local labour markets (in particular Peck 1996; Hanson and Pratt 1995; Martin 2000). As noted earlier, and despite the spatial mobility of capital, firms are ultimately forced to rely on a local supply of labour imbued with skills, values and patterns of behaviour distinct to that particular place. Accordingly it is often in the interests of capital (and the state) to aid and adjust the social reproduction of workers – through such means as training programmes and housing support - to help socialise, prepare, and deliver workers for particular roles. As Jonas (1996: 328) notes:

‘Labour control is more than simply a technically or cost-driven imperative in which capital finds new ways to improve efficiency and labour productivity. It is an irretrievably historical, cultural and spatial process involving the uneven development of practices which smooth the transition of labour from the labour market to the point of production, reproduce a productive work force, co-ordinate conditions of pay and consumption, and thereby facilitate accumulation strategies’

With this in mind Jonas (ibid) has argued a need for both capital and the state to foster ‘reciprocities’ between places of production, and the spheres of reproduction and consumption via local ‘labour control regimes’ (LCRs). The term ‘regime’ here denotes a *place-specific* network of locally unique institutions and social relations, which are designed to limit the tensions between labour and capital at the same local level (Jonas 1996: 328)⁸. Notably institutional arrangements may often leave lasting (and frequently inadvertent) impacts on the skills, values and behaviours of the workers and communities

in question. To this end Stenning (2005) has shown how steel firms in socialist Poland subsidised both housing and transport for local workers (together with other initiatives such as sponsored excursions) in a bid to foster a sense of community based around steel work. While this regime ensured high rates of production under socialism, the same community values have proved ill-suited to a post-socialist era where firms place little emphasis on supporting workers outside of work.

Perhaps unsurprisingly the LCR model has drawn criticism for its 'top-down' depiction of control, which largely fails to consider the active role which workers themselves play in responding to a given LCR (Helms and Cumbers 2006). With this in mind, it should also be noted that local LCRs play an important role in disciplining workers and (at times) in frustrating worker attempts to organise against the interests of capital. This is particularly evident in certain cases of the global south, as demonstrated by the work of Phil Kelly (2001; 2002) within various spatial contexts in South-East Asia, and Melissa Wright's (2003; 2004) work in both China and Mexico. Notably, Kelly (2002: 404-405) has shown how grass roots union formation is often stifled in Malaysia through the use of state intimidation tactics (such as the implementation of the 'Internal Security Act' which may deem worker organising a 'national threat'). Nevertheless, examples taken from less coercive regimes in the global 'north' have demonstrated labour's ability to resist LCR frameworks in practice (Helms and Cumbers 2006; Cumbers et al. 2010). In particular Helms and Cumbers (2006) have shown how intermediate labour market programmes in Glasgow have struggled to re-cast traditional working class aspirations, as testified by the high rates of turnover in the Glasgow call centre industry, together with recent protests against privatisation schemes within labour's reproductive sphere (including the selling off of council housing and the closure of local hospitals). In undermining the success of a local LCR, Helms and Cumbers (2006) thus argue that workers are capable of developing their own strategies for social reproduction, which may stifle the accumulation strategies of capital in a given place.

Other approaches in labour geography have explored the importance of community politics in the reproductive sphere and the ongoing struggle to regulate low paying forms of service work (Savage 2006; Walsh 2000; Wills 2009). Notably, many service roles do not face the risk of spatial relocation; for example, the cleaning of an office cannot be out-sourced to workers in a cheaper location. In this instance it is the *fragmentation* of service work

which has kept wages low and diminished worker rights. In particular the fact service work is often organised on a part-time, high-turnover and subcontract basis (see Allen and Henry 1997) has required a new form of worker organising which ‘moves beyond the industrial model of worksite-based unionism’ (Walsh 2000: 1599). With this in mind, several geographers (e.g. Wills 2001; Wills et al. 2009; Savage 2006; Walsh 2000) have explored alternative approaches to worker organising, which involve collaboration between unions and non-worksite institutions within labour’s reproductive sphere. The most prominent example of such collaboration is that of the ‘living-wage’ campaigns which have spread successfully throughout the United States (since the first campaign in Baltimore in 1994). Under pressure from a constellation of church, trade union and other social groups (representing different racial groups) more than 100 city governments in the United States have now passed living wage laws to guarantee better rates of pay to cleaners, security guards and so forth at the scale of the city itself (Walsh *ibid*; Cumbers et al. 2010: 65).

Building on this focus on labour’s reproductive sphere as a site for labour agency, Wills et al. (2009) have called for a broader conception of class politics which acknowledges the political struggles taking place throughout communities and labour’s reproductive sphere. As above, faith groups in London have also been shown to play a pivotal role in supporting migrants at the bottom end of the labour market, by providing an important source of social capital for new migrants looking for places to live and work. Furthermore, faith organisations continue to engage in campaigns over core welfare issues such as housing, wages, and immigration control, in a bid to improve the lives of migrants and those at the bottom end of the labour market (Wills et al. 2009: 450). Building on the living wage model pioneered in the United States (Walsh 2000), in 2001 the group London Citizens – itself a coalition of educational, community, faith and labour organisations - launched its own living wage campaign to push ‘real employers’ at the city-scale to pay increased wages, and to demand rights for illegal migrants. In 2008 the campaign generated a new London living wage of £7.45 for public sector workers, which Mayor Boris Johnson sanctioned. As Wills et al. (2009) note, the success of such campaigns – driven by community institutions – has proved the need for labour geography to expand from its traditional empirical focus of the workplace. Similarly the living wage campaigns have demonstrated that workplace unions are not the only (or often the most relevant) vehicles for labour agency. Many of the spatial strategies and resources which workers draw upon

to negotiate with capital clearly exist *outside* of the workplace as well as in it, within communities at large.

2.3.4 *Appraisal and critique: taking labour geography forward*

Labour geography has grown significantly in the last twenty years and now represents a somewhat mature ‘project’ which has successfully demonstrated labour’s agency across a range of spatial contexts. Bearing this success in mind, recent critical appraisals (notably Castree 2007; Lier 2007; Tufts and Savage 2009; Coe and Jordhus-Lier 2010) have reflected upon the shortcomings and challenges which labour geography now faces, with a bid to improving future research in the field. In terms of methodology and case selection, labour geography has been criticised for a sectoral bias towards those workers involved in strategically important positions at the heart of the world economy (see Moody 1997; Lier 2007). Certainly there has been a tendency in many studies to focus upon those workers who are *capable* of using capital’s spatiality against itself – as in the case of auto workers operating within JIT production (Herod 2001b; Holmes 2004). Case studies have also tended to involve both de- and re-industrialising labour markets within Anglo-Saxon economies (Lier 2007). This backdrop is not incidental, as labour agency is arguably more apparent (and necessary) within the context of recent bouts of economic restructuring and the difficulties this has posed different worker groups. It is also noticeable that migration has not been properly covered as a topic of analysis within existing labour geographies (Castree 2007). Thus, whilst discussing the spatial strategies available to workers in negotiating a better life, few geographers have explored the possibility of workers *moving* to accrue more desirable forms of work (which raises further questions, such as which sorts of workers are prepared to move, and why?). As a result, the sub-discipline has tended to explore the agency of geographically ‘fixed’ workers over and above those who are prepared to relocate; although recent work by Wills (2009), Rogaly (2009), and Datta et al. (2009) has responded to this gap.

One of the major criticisms of the sub-discipline has been the tendency to focus upon ‘success stories’ of labour’s agency. This has arguably resulted in an unrealistic picture of labour’s ability to affect change (Lopez 2004). Given Herod’s (2001a) stated intention of presenting labour’s case as a sentient spatial actor, this should perhaps come as little surprise. Having successfully achieved this aim, it may now be time to present the more routine and daily struggles workers face in negotiating the relations between work and other spheres of social life. With this in mind the majority of workers are more likely to

engage in day-to-day practices of *coping* than they are in practices which challenge capital in a direct or profound sense. Such coping strategies are likely to take place both inside and outside of work, and may involve no definite goal other than day-to-day survival.

Castree's (2007) review of labour geography has also raised a series of theoretical and normative concerns for which this thesis makes a direct point of addressing. Building on the above 'survival' comment, Castree contends that labour 'agency' has (somewhat ironically) remained an under-theorised and under-specified topic within the majority of works in labour geography. Accordingly, it is noted (*ibid*: 858, emphasis original):

'The term agency...has become a catch-all for any instance in which some group of workers undertake any sort of action on behalf of themselves or others. All too often labour geographers resort to reporting on the 'facts' of what some worker group has done as if reference to the empirical domain in and of itself tells us all we need to know about 'agency'. What is missing is a *discriminating* grasp of worker agency that both informs and arises from a variety of empirical studies.'

This is an important point which the thesis as a whole – and the next two sections of the literature review in particular – seeks to address. Clearly different kinds of agency are available to and performed by workers within different spatial contexts and conditions. Accordingly labour geographers need to think more carefully about what options are available to workers within one case study environment over another (i.e. the impact of different structures upon labour's ability to act; Coe and Jordhus-Lier 2010). As mentioned, the majority of works in labour geography have tended to depict labour unions and collectivist worker action – which often culminates in somewhat dramatic spatial victories – as the only form of agency which workers can and do employ (similarly see Cumbers et al. 2008: 371). As most workers throughout the world are not represented by a union, this produces only a partial view of the options available to labour.

In addition, the majority of studies in labour geography have tended to neglect labour's *reproductive* sphere as an empirical focus in its own right. This represents a significant 'gap' within labour geography's approach, as the time consigned to paid employment is but one aspect of a person's life. As Peck (1996) and others (e.g. McDowell 2003) have shown, it is within the reproductive sphere that worker identities, personalities, values and

all manner of behaviours are learned by labour, which capital in turn is often forced to 'deal with'. This point relates directly back to the understanding of labour as a *pseudo* or fictitious commodity which is not 'produced' solely for the world of work. Workers tend to hold reasons for choosing particular roles, which are both conditioned by patterns of social reproduction and existing labour market conditions at the local level. Accordingly it is noted that:

'...the 'best kind of labour geography analyses the geographies of employment and labour struggle not in themselves *but as windows onto the wider question of how people live and seek to live...*' (Castree 2007: 859, emphasis added).

Both Wills et al. (2009) and Cumbers et al. (2010) have also called for a broader conception of class-politics which acknowledges the struggles of different worker groups *outside* the workplace. To this end, many of the prominent social movements throughout history (for example black power, feminist and gay rights movements to name but three) have tended to be street-based movements unattached to a specific workplace or industry (Cumbers et al. 2010; Cleaver 2000). Labour geography must acknowledge and explore such non-work based forms of class struggle if it is serious about furthering understandings of labour's own ability to affect change and to ensure the terms of social reproduction. Due to the decline in workplace unions and the continued rise of neo-liberalism (Harvey 2005), the future forms of organising are likely to continue outside of industry, as demonstrated by the pertinent role of religious organisations in pursuing citizen rights for migrants (e.g. via the London living wage; Wills 2009; Datta et al. 2009).

Clearly labour geography has made an important contribution to economic geography, not least in emphasising labour's *own* need and ability to secure a spatial fix. However, in achieving this aim the sub-discipline has tended to present over-zealous accounts of labour's ability to resist certain capitals. To this end not all labour agency or worker struggles are geared towards 'making landscapes', at least in an overt or eye-catching sense. As opposed to collectivised acts of strategized 'resistance' (often in *response* to capital), it is the contention of this thesis that labour agency also - and more typically - takes place on an individual, less confrontational basis and within the labour process: i.e. the micro-spaces of production where work itself takes place. Workers may be seen to shape and contest the economic landscape in a slower and more gradual sense from the

‘inside-out’. To help explain this apparent paradox, the following section reviews labour process theory (LPT) and some pertinent debates emanating from this alternative body of work. LPT not only offers an alternative empirical site for exploring worker agency (i.e. the geographies of worker agency found *inside* the workplace); it also provides a more subtle conception of labour ‘resistance’ than that presently residing in labour geography.

2.4 The labour process perspective

As mentioned, labour geography’s focus upon ‘space shaping’ resistance largely reflects an empirical focus on labour unions and collectivist institutions as the main vehicles of worker agency (Herod 2001a). This focus has, by implication, underplayed the impact that *individual* workers can make as active spatial agents in their own right. In so doing labour geography has continued to overlook the complexity and range of worker agency; as workers also perform a host of individual and deceptively subtle coping strategies on a day-to-day basis within the *process of doing work itself*. This ‘missing subject’ of the labour process is somewhat ironic, given that labour process theory (LPT) and the scholars of this tradition (often industrial sociologists, and more recently those found within management and business schools) have been exploring the more micro-acts of worker agency within the capitalist mode of production (i.e. the workplace) since the early 1970s (Thompson and Smith 2000; Thompson 1989; Ackroyd and Thompson 1999).

2.4.1 Braverman and the deskilling thesis.

Harry Braverman and his text ‘Labour and Monopoly Capitalism’ (1974) is largely credited with sparking the labour process debates around workplace control and labour agency. Inspired by Marx, Braverman (1974) sought to expose capital’s subordination of labour during what he saw as a ‘monopoly stage’ of large firm domination. While capitalism as a whole had long been critiqued as a mode of distribution, Braverman turned to capital’s mode of *production* as the key determinant in impoverishing worker life. In particular Braverman lamented the apparent separation of conception from execution within work, as production work divided into a series of simple and repetitive operations through Taylorism and scientific management (thus dubbing Braverman’s work a ‘deskilling thesis’). As control of the labour process seemingly passed from worker to management, Braverman presented a notion that:

‘...work has become increasingly subdivided into petty operations that fail to sustain the interest or engage the capacities of humans with current levels of education; that

these petty operations demand ever-less skill and training; and that the modern trend of work by its ‘mindlessness’ and ‘bureaucratization’ is ‘alienating’ ever larger sections of the working population’ (Braverman 1974: 4).

Through the fragmented and simplified procedures of Taylorism and scientific management, Braverman’s vision saw labour stripped of its requirement to think while performing tasks in production. As a result, workers were understood as interchangeable, thus rendering their status more in line with a ‘pure’ commodity form for capital to draw upon. Drawing heavily on Marx’s understanding of *alienation*, Braverman argued that workers had now lost control of their own skills and knowledge: thus inducing estrangement and dissatisfaction with the process of work itself.

2.4.2 *Debates on the labour process: resistance and control*

Braverman’s compelling text accordingly sparked debate throughout industrial sociology and beyond, as various authors sought to challenge and/or amend this passive and deskilled vision of labour. Critics were quick to swoop on Braverman’s assumption that control through Taylorism should unfold *tout court* as capital intends. Harvey (despite his own focus on capital) has also echoed this critique:

‘For all their compassion and concern, both Braverman and Marx treat the workers within the labour process as objects, dominated by and subordinate to the will of capital. They ignore the workers as living human beings, endowed with a consciousness and will, capable of articulating ideological, political and economic preferences on the shop floor, able (when it suits them) to adapt and compromise, but also prepared, when necessary, to wage perpetual war against capital in order to protect their rights within production’ (Harvey 1999: 111).

Importantly, a general sense of worker agency was largely absent from Braverman’s deskilling thesis, and this in turn sparked a second wave⁹ of labour process debates intent on demonstrating the negotiating power of workers on the *real* shop floor. In doing so, the LPT debates have variously explored the employment relationship between workers and management, often through investigations into management control and the multiple attempts by capital to maximise worker productivity (Thompson and Smith 2000: 40). Theorists of this tradition have commonly argued that the labour process is a far more intricate and interdependent affair than Braverman espoused, and with plenty of scope for

worker agency and disruption (Burawoy 1979; Edwards 1979; Thompson 1989; Wood 1982; Zimbalist 1979; Thompson and Warhurst 1998).

2.4.3 *Dispelling Taylorism: resistance and alternative forms of control*

The nature of capital's control over labour has caused continual discussion within LPT (Wood 1982; Salaman and Thompson 1973). What is not under dispute is the fact that capital requires systems of control to help maximise worker productivity (i.e. to help realise as much of labour's *potential* to work efficiently as possible). Thompson (1989: xiv) defines such control systems as 'mechanisms by which employers direct work tasks, discipline and reward workers, and supervise and evaluate their performance in production'. However, the application and effectiveness of scientific management and Taylorism as a particular control system has come in for widespread scrutiny. Many authors have questioned the lasting significance of Taylorism, citing it as only one of a number of experiments designed to extract the greatest productivity from workers (Littler 1982; Thompson 1989; Edwards 1979). Friedman (1977) has also called into question the viability of scientific management as a system for ensuring productivity due to the constraints that Taylorism places upon worker creativity and the 'positive aspects of labour power' (Thompson 1989: 129). This point is backed up by Cressey and MacInnes (1980), who argue that the labour's tacit skill and informal knowledge is crucial in generating a profit for capital (Cressey and MacInnes 1980; Manwaring and Wood 1984; Thompson and Smith 2000: 53).

Friedman (1977) went on to argue that that worker resistance (e.g. early quitting, breaking machinery, deception and so forth) consistently forces management to adjust the labour process and forms of worker control. Rather than directly controlling workers through Taylorism, management are likely to govern a core group of workers through less coercive forms of 'responsible autonomy'¹⁰. Responsible autonomy allows workers the freedom to perform under less instruction and supervision, whilst authority is maintained through connecting employees with the *aims* and productivity goals of the enterprise (thus invoking a sense of responsibility to the work). Attempts to co-opt the workforce this way have also been bolstered by internal labour market structures, whereby new positions inside firms have opened up to provide fresh incentives for staff to work hard in order to progress internally within the firm (Thompson 1989: 134; Gordon et al. 1982)¹¹. In doing so internal labour markets have grown to play a key role in segmenting workers within an array of different roles in the modern workplace. To further indoctrinate staff within the

company, job enrichment schemes have also been put forward as an example of capital smoothing tensions between labour. Thompson presents these as ‘new or revamped measures manifested by the abolition of the time-clock, salaried status, the elimination of direct supervision, the replacement of assembly lines by job-enlarged ‘roundabouts’, elaborate staff participation schemes, and a host of other new working arrangements’ (Thompson 1989: 139-140).

Writing shortly after Friedman (1977), Richard Edwards’ (1979) further expanded the labour process debates by arguing that forms of control ultimately stem from worker conflicts and economic contradictions within capital’s operation (thus forming a ‘contested terrain’). Edwards maintained that management resort to specific forms of control in response to labour market conditions and the specific types of worker employed. Thus, small firms and firms in competitive industries were shown to govern cheap and unskilled labour through *simple* control (i.e. direct and close supervision), whilst larger organisations were shown to develop *technical* forms of control. Technical control reduces the need for direct supervision, through mechanical modes of directing labour (such as the assembly line or work quota). Edwards termed a final control method ‘bureaucratic control’, which is characterised by formal rules, procedures and hierarchies of command/administration. Bureaucratic control has the effect of segregating work and establishing set routines for staff to follow. While Edwards’ understanding of control was criticized for its rigid and sequential nature, the plurality of control measures – and the acknowledgement of staff input in forcing these changes – has offered a helpful corrective to Braverman’s simplistic depiction of near total control through Taylorism (and hence deskilling).

In response to both Friedman (1977) and Edwards (1979), a more astute summary of control should understand that a *variety* of controls may be adopted by a given firm, with direct control and responsible autonomy ends of a continuum of practices. Alternatively, critics of Braverman have also pointed to recent working paradigms such as ‘flexibility’, ‘lean production’ (with links to Japanese production methods) and the ‘knowledge economy’, which have signalled the demise of Taylorist methods and the direct control of staff. Nevertheless academics within and out-with the LPT tradition have continued to report Taylorist work conditions throughout the modern service industry (for example Ritzer 2000; Sennett 1998). To this end it is noted that modern day call centre work is ‘subject to intense technical pacing of work, close electronic monitoring, and tightly

scripted interactions’ – thus demonstrating how these and other service roles (such as fast food) have provided a revamped environment for scientific management (Thompson and Smith 2000: 52; Bain and Taylor 2000).

In addition, Du Gay (1996) has also demonstrated how modern service roles have turned to strategies of ‘enterprising’ to help encourage self-regulation amongst staff: ‘whose sense of self-worth and virtue is inextricably linked to the ‘excellent’ performance of their work and, thus, to the success of the company employing them’ (Du Gay 1996: 119 – 120). Through this form of control – which clearly draws on Foucauldian notions of self-management - staff are ideally selected/aligned with the same productive ‘values’ as the company in question, and are thus *willing* to provide good service to the customer. This strategy implies less coercion and greater partnership between employers and staff (see Flecker and Haufbauer 1998; Rose 1990). Notwithstanding these *efforts* to indoctrinate and to align staff with corporate ideals, Cumbers and Atterton (2000) have illustrated the flip side of the self-management coin with recourse to workers in the oil industry. Subsequent to the oil price collapse in 1986, the authors detail a shift from hierarchical centralised structures within oil firms (which offered stable and well paying employment), to a leaner and decentred structure, involving instable contracts and intensive work conditions. In response to this restructuring – and amid the enterprising language of ‘team working’ and ‘multi-skilling’ – Cumbers and Atterton (*ibid*) found a clear resistance on the part of workers, who withdrew their long-term consent to these operations. Among other impacts, the authors uncovered a growing resentment in the ‘core’ workforce towards management, a lack of trust, and a reduced long-term commitment to the firm.

Overall, the above control debates suggest that labour remains a creative force to be negotiated with – and not quashed - by capital. Labour is harnessed and controlled in different ways; it is not merely ‘deskilled’ and ‘alienated’ by the dictates of Taylorism. However, Crang (2000) has correctly commented on the convenient space which Braverman’s work (1974) has opened up for these and other studies into worker agency in the labour process. Labour control debates have helped to confirm labour’s position as that of a sentient ‘*pseudo*’ commodity, endowed with independent thoughts, and capable of independent action. Subsequently capital is forced to negotiate with labour in order to realise profitable ends, resulting in a range of control structures geared towards *encouraging* the greatest worker effort. To this end, Harvey (1999) has argued that shop-

floor struggle itself plays an important ‘equilibrator’ role for capital, by restraining the pace of technological change and keeping it within ‘acceptable bounds’. Accordingly, workers play a significant role in shaping capitalist development from inside the labour process itself.

2.4.4 *Transcending resistance: consent and satisfaction at work.*

While the above is clearly useful in demonstrating capital’s need to tailor forms of control, it is worth acknowledging that many of these accounts view control from a managerial perspective (i.e. control as a ‘top-down’ strategy). With this in mind, Thompson (1989: 152) has argued that categories of control ‘do not reach deep enough into what some would call the ‘subjective’ facets of people’s experiences of work’. This tendency provides an incomplete picture of agency in the workplace, as the manner in which workers consent to workplace control may also reflect an independent agency on the part of labour. As various ethnographic studies have shown, the social relations between employees themselves often provide an important source of stimulation for workers in combating the ill-effects of Taylorism and other forms of control (Burawoy 1979; Roy 1973; Baldamus 1961).

Burawoy (1979) has demonstrated this point by reference to the game play enjoyed by machine operators of the engine factory within ‘Allied Corporation’. Despite Braverman’s (1974) depiction of a thoughtless and deskilled work experience, Burawoy (who himself worked within the factory) has demonstrated the often high degree of tacit skill involved in factory production, particularly when striving to achieve a piecework target (with pay incentives up to 140% production, the goal of ‘making out’). Rather than acting as passive incumbents, Burawoy insists that ‘workers control their own machines instead of being controlled by them, and this enhances their autonomy’ (Burawoy 1979: 81). Working on different tasks himself, Burawoy found that certain machinery could only be mastered by skilled and experienced staff, and that different rates and relations with scheduling men meant that workers engaged in a game seeped in a certain degree of *uncertainty*. Workers competed amongst one another for prestige, with game play concerned not chiefly with pay - but knowledge, skill, ingenuity, and ‘self expression’ (thus reflecting an ‘expansion of choice within narrow limitations’ (ibid: 94)). Such practices represent a double-edged sword for workers combating work alienation; as high rates of production clearly benefit management and so help to reproduce capitalist work relations.

Coupled with such examples of creative game play, several studies have highlighted the importance of informal interactions and conversational group interplay in combating alienation in the workplace (e.g. Katz 1973; Roy 1973). To this end, D.F. Roy's (1973) account of factory life aptly demonstrates how informal pecking orders and sub-groups in the workplace are often influenced by subjective identifications held outside the workplace - such as class, race, religion and so forth - which impact the informal systems that workers use to cope with the tedium of work. During production, Roy uncovered a pattern of intervals based around distinct conversational themes. In particular, two middle ranking workmen (both Jewish, and in their fifties) in Roy's factory were shown to feign arguments and acts of horseplay - at set times of the day - which provided entertainment for the workgroup as a whole. One worker in particular consistently adopted the role of 'victim' in these interactions, while the lead-man engaged in more serious topics of conversation (often covering his daughter's marriage to a college professor, thus signifying higher-class credentials than that held by the rest of the group). In doing so workers 'brought in' and performed aspects of their (perceived) identity and status from outside of the workplace. As Roy (1973) notes, group interplay of this kind effectively represents '... a separate and distinct system in which the members...(have) *active*, at times even *creative*, participation contrasting sharply with their minimal participation in the larger organization' (ibid: 200, emphasis added). Creative interactions of this sort help to compensate for unpleasant work realities, by providing 'relative satisfactions' within routine and repetitive forms of work (Baldamus 1961).

Huw Beynon's account of working life in Ford has also detailed several examples of subtle worker coping (such as 'going blank' during production) and the '...the sneaking into the workplace of undetectable moments of illicit everyday life' (Crang 2000: 208-209). In Beynon's study workers also carried over and acted upon subjective values born outside the workplace, as when stewards turned down incentive/promotion programmes in the interests of working class solidarity ('stewards weren't interested in promotion, in becoming 'dedicated Ford men'' (Beynon 1984: 134)). Furthermore, Ford's attempt to 'colonise the self' was commonly resisted by workers on the line, who developed tactics to reassert their own humanity - often through covert chatter (the 'Ford whisper') and humour. Such findings again offer insights into the ways in which staff can and do resist more normative forms of control (i.e. those attempts to align the subjective features of workers in line with company goals; see Du Gay 1996).

In summation, labour thinks and acts for itself both in helping to negotiate and determine the forms of control present; and through informal social systems which often operate during the process of work itself. With this in mind, Thompson and Smith (2000: 57) point towards a 'structured antagonism' that exists at the level of the workplace. In order to revolutionize the production process, capital requires a degree of cooperation and creativity with the workers in question. Subsequently:

'The result is a continuum of possible, situationally driven, and overlapping worker responses – from resistance to accommodation, compliance, and consent.'

Outside of out-right resistance, these latter instances of 'accommodation, compliance, and consent' represent a vital means by which workers respond and cope with structures of control inside the workplace. Through a materialist approach, a 'core' of LPT continues to contrast the control strategies of different capitals against worker responses to these (across a variety of industrial contexts; see Thompson and Warhurst 1998). To this end, studies (in particular Friedman 1977; Edwards 1979) have shown how different capitals must alter their operation (in particular control over the labour process) in order to gain the greatest productivity from different types of workers. This in itself demonstrates the efficacy of individual labour agency as separate from more formal and collective procedures for negotiating with capital (i.e. unions).

2.4.5 *Assessing LPT*

The above review has focussed upon managerial control, and forms of worker coping from a LPT perspective. In particular LPT has helped to further an understanding of the multiple – often subtle and informal - worker responses to capital within the process of work itself. This is an important insight as clearly not all agency is geared towards challenging capital and/or altering the conditions of employment. Rather, labour's agency on a day-to-day basis is more commonly geared towards informal acts of coping. In exploring the nuanced ways in which workers offer their consent to (often tedious and deskilled) conditions of employment, LPT has demonstrated how the negative effects of work are overcome in practice.

Nevertheless, several criticisms could also be levelled at the labour process tradition. Foucauldian writers (particularly in the late 1980's/early 1990s) have commonly sought to

inject a greater sense of identity and subjectivity into the LPT debates and understandings of labour (Spencer 2000: 235; O'Doherty and Willmott 2001). To this end Knights and Willmott (1990) are correct when they assert that behaviour within subjects 'is not simply or exclusively determined by the forces of capitalist production and exploitation'. However, the main problem with this post modernist critique and its 'missing subject' of identity and subjectivity must be the failure to acknowledge capitalist realities and worker pressures to attain available forms of work. As Thompson and Smith (2000: 55) note:

'...for those influenced by post structuralism, employee action is merely an illustrative example of a largely individual and external struggle for and against self, or contextualized within the framework of the general conditions of modernity rather than the specifics of capitalist political economy' (Thompson and Smith 2000: 55).

Rather, Thompson and Smith (ibid) suggest a renewal of labour process theory that maintains a strong link to capitalist political economy. This point notwithstanding, a more valid criticism which has been levelled against LPT is its tendency to focus on the agency of *management*, and the implied ability of capital to manage and control labour in ever more effective ways. Through this tendency, LPT (like labour geography) has maintained an understanding of labour's agency as a reactionary force ever acting in *response* to capitalist control and the agency of management.

Finally, LPT has rarely explored the ways in which labour's reproductive sphere conditions the types of workers who choose to work in different settings, or how labour market *cultures* alter the performance of staff inside the workplace. Studies have seldom explored why certain workers adopt the working roles in question, or how subjective rationales may or may not frame the resulting coping strategies of different workers. To this end LPT has struggled to articulate the impact which place and contextual circumstance has upon the different strategies available or appropriate to workers. This is almost certainly the 'downside' of LPT's sole focus upon the workplace and the process of *doing work* as a means of exploring the labour-capital relation.

With these criticisms in mind, the following section shifts the empirical focus onto strategies for coping within labour's sphere of reproduction. Workers not only negotiate with capital inside the workplace, but also through more subtle processes of class

formation outside (although crucially linked with) the world of work. In elaborating on this point the section then draws upon the work of Cindi Katz (2004) to provide a more nuanced understanding of agency which synthesises variations in more passive and transformatory forms of worker action.

2.5 Unpacking agency: social reproduction and strategies of ‘getting by’

Both of the above approaches (labour geography and LPT) have tended to focus upon the sphere of production as the primary site for worker struggles against capital. This prioritisation at the neglect of labour’s reproductive sphere is particularly unhelpful given the socialisation processes which condition worker identities, values, and behaviours outside the workplace (McDowell 2003). As mentioned, Wills et al. (2009) have recently shown the importance of the reproductive sphere as a realm for organising all manner of seemingly disparate worker groups around a common goal. With this in mind, the following section entails an analytical shift outside the workplace; and focuses upon the social relations and coping strategies that workers adopt outside of work to ensure their own social reproduction. As opposed to overtly resisting capital, these coping strategies are often *informal* in nature, and rarely challenge configurations of power in a direct sense (as in LPT). In elaborating on this point the section draws upon the work of Cindi Katz (2004) to provide a more nuanced understanding of worker agency and the variations of this across/within different contexts. As such the following section provides a final ‘take’ on labour’s agency which is sensitive to the politics of the reproductive sphere and specificity of local place.

2.5.1 Hidden transcripts of opposition

An important starting place for discussing labour coping strategies *outside* of work is provided by the ‘history from below school’ of E.P Thompson (1963) and the work of Raymond Williams (1961;1975). Rather than passively accepting conditions wrought by capital, Williams (ibid) in particular has argued that workers develop collective understandings, values and behaviours based upon the shared experience of day-to-day living. This represents a fluid reading of class formation as that of a collective consciousness, ever responding to contingent circumstance. Shared experience in the sphere of reproduction ultimately provides a foregrounding to labour’s agency and various forms of social action (often via social networks) which local communities rely upon for self-survival (Cumbers et al. 2010). Building on this fluid understanding of class

formation, it is important to acknowledge that many of the coping strategies invoked in the reproductive sphere represent subtle and non-confrontational strategies for ‘getting by’.

Through exploring a different context to most theorists of work, Scott (1985) has considered the coping strategies of villagers in Malaysia; and in particular the acts of *everyday insubordination* performed by peasant networks against a ruling elite. Far from threatening to seize state control or to obtain power *over* this group, peasants were here shown to collaborate through ‘passive’ and covert acts of resistance aimed at resurrecting a sense of dignity. As Scott suggests:

‘...most sub-ordinate classes are, after all, less interested in changing the larger structures of the state and the law than in what Hobsbawm has appropriately called ‘working the system...to their minimum disadvantage’ (Scott 1985: xv).

Scott’s case study details how informal, back-stage village networks actively undermined village elites who had introduced new production methods in line with the Green Revolution¹². While in the past land lords were expected to assist and help the peasant class in various ways – ranging from ceremonial and charitable obligations to reasonable rates of tenancy and wage advances - the influx of unpopular government programmes and intensified (often machine driven) farming led to an ideological class vacuum in the village. Crucially peasant resistance to this was said to steer clear of contesting formal definitions of hierarchy and power. Rather than overtly challenging the power relations of the village, peasants resorted to more passive practices of ‘foot-dragging, dissimulation, desertion, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, sabotage, and so on’ (Scott 1985: xvi). Behind these minor (yet effective) acts of insubordination lay a class struggle imbued with meanings and values which the villagers themselves understood. While on the surface peasants presented an accepting and subordinate show, cultural norms and the offstage performance of the underprivileged determined the (actual) accepted social order of village (similarly, see Scott 1990).

2.5.2 *Redefining ‘resistance’*

Building on Scott (1985; 1990), it is clear that non-confrontational acts of agency – which by their nature, rarely challenge existing power relations – represent a vital means of coping (in particular, for those suffering under oppressive regimes who cannot voice their distain openly). However the tendency to label the above behaviour ‘resistance’ (even in

‘passive’ form) creates a problem of definition. Is all autonomous action a form of ‘resistance’? Almost certainly not. To this end Cresswell (2000: 259) has remarked that ‘...resistance has taken centre stage in geographical, social and cultural analysis to the extent that there is a danger that no area of social life will not be described as resistance’. Even in its ‘passive’ form, there runs a risk of romanticising the term for its own sake (Abu-Lughod 1990). With this in mind, Cindi Katz (2001, 2004) presents a more nuanced breakdown of what ‘resistance’ may more accurately entail, in a bid to problematise and define the term more rigorously, and to differentiate its various forms both ‘analytically and practically’ (Katz 2004: 19). Katz achieves this through juxtaposing two contrasting communities (Harlem and the village of Howa, in Sudan) and their own unique responses to processes of neo-liberal restructuring. Rather than ubiquitously ‘resisting’ capital, residents of both locations are shown to enact a hybrid of reactions (combining new and old practices) to reconfigure a new means of social reproduction¹³. To make this point, Katz expands upon the term ‘resistance’ to incorporate two other kinds of coping: namely acts of ‘resilience’ and ‘reworking’. Resilience is best described as the small autonomous acts for ‘getting by’ and attaining (often through new and creative ways) the resources which aid a better living. Alternatively ‘reworking’ strategies differ from this in their attempt to *progressively alter* difficult conditions. Crucially neither acts of ‘resilience’ nor ‘reworking’ directly challenge hegemonic power, and so stop short of ‘resisting’ the existing social relations in a given place. These forms of coping also draw upon existing social and cultural resources - which tend to vary from place to place – in unique ways. This is one of the strengths of the case study approach used by Katz – as people in all locations call upon their own means of responding to problems and situations out with their control (i.e. neoliberal restructuring).

In order to illustrate the differences implicit in strategies of ‘resilience’, ‘reworking’ and ‘resistance’ it is worthwhile elaborating on Katz’s Sudanese example. Traditionally, social reproduction in Howa is shown to revolve around subsistence farming, wherein the household formed a vital resource in transferring working knowledge to younger generations. The bedrock of this social reproduction was severely jolted by the influx of a state-sponsored ‘Suki Project’ (originating from the 1970’s); whereby traditional crops, livestock and ways of farming gave way to mechanised production, paid employment and the harvesting of cash crops. This transition and the resulting socio-economic differentiation came in direct opposition to the more communal solidarity and family

structures that previously sustained village life. However, the bulk of villager responses stopped well short of directly challenging/resisting these changes and the new power relations outright. Instead of resisting, villagers practiced an alternative form of ‘resilience’, using ‘small acts’ of autonomous initiative to help recuperate a better life. Faced by such adjustments to their daily lives, the village faced the threat of depopulation and a general deskilling of its rural workforce (who faced unemployment due to a lack of work under mechanisation). Ultimately residents enacted their own solution to this problem by drawing on a larger terrain in search of charcoal, grazing land and other labour opportunities (termed a time-space expansion by Katz, as the marooned community expanded its terrain in search of work).

Alternatively Katz argues that acts of ‘reworking’ differ from the above in attempting to *progressively alter* problematic conditions (as opposed to recuperation by other means). To take the example of Howa again, villagers here responded to the demise of agriculture – which ultimately threatened the future livelihoods of children - by placing a greater emphasis on schooling the young. To this end the village used the sale of a sugar cooperative to place resources into constructing a new school, thereby equipping the next generation with skills applicable to the future (schooling rates increased by 75% and 1000% respectively for boys and girls over a 15 year period). To help demonstrate how such ‘reworking’ strategies may vary from place to place – in both morality and scope for long term change - Cumbers et al. (2010) present catalogue scams in Glasgow as an autonomous (if small) means by which the urban poor attain otherwise unaffordable goods:

“‘Bumping the catalogue’ was recalled by members of a focus group as a common practice with which households would order clothes or electrical goods and find ways of not paying. This would involve using neighbour’s addresses while the latter were on holidays, using false names or simply returning worn clothes as unwanted’

As such (and like the practice of ‘resilience’) acts of ‘reworking’ stop well short of fundamentally challenging capitalist social relations. Instead this form of agency responds pragmatically to the *conditions* imposed by capital, by carving out an autonomous space for improving everyday (and future) life.

In a similar sense to Scott (1985), Katz understands ‘resistance’ as an oppositional consciousness aimed at directly *confronting* the conditions of oppression. Examples from Sudan are shown to include the illicit grazing of animals on cotton, as well as the use of the Tenants Union in fighting to ensure the growth of a traditional non-cash crop (i.e. sorghum). In turn Cumbers et al. (2010) present the growing national campaign against the stock transfer of council housing as a chief example of working class resistance to neo-liberal policies in Glasgow. These latter forms of coping both demonstrate a more oppositional and confrontational strategy for coping, whilst again reflecting the resources available to different groups in different places.

This section has demonstrated the importance of labour’s reproductive sphere as a site in its own right whereby workers negotiate with capital to attain better standards of living. Importantly, it is in communities that workers foster shared values, experiences and an active sense of class. These experiences provide a foregrounding to labour’s agency and the ways in which workers respond to capital on a daily basis outside of work as well as in it. This section has also sought to equip the thesis with a more ‘discriminating grasp’ of labour agency (Castree 2007), so that this may be taken forward into the empirical discussion chapters. In addition to highlighting the importance of labour’s reproductive sphere as an empirical focus in its own right, labour ‘resistance’ has been shown to take place on a more passive, informal and everyday basis than is commonly understood in labour geography. Furthermore, where labour does ‘resist’ the conditions of existence, it is often through more nuanced forms of ‘resilience’ and ‘reworking’ whereby workers foster their *own* means of recuperation. Crucially these solutions rarely threaten the existing power relations, and the exact forms of response vary from place to place in line with the social, cultural and economic resources available.

2.6 Exploring service work

Having detailed these contrasting theoretical perspectives on worker agency, this final section provides a brief review of work conducted on the service industry (i.e. the empirical focus of this thesis). As noted in the introductory chapter, Britain’s economy has undergone a rapid restructuring since the 1970s in particular, due in large part to the loss of manufacturing (and other forms of production work), and the replacement of these roles with intangible forms of service work. Rather than analysing the nature and the impact of new forms of service work, studies initially tended to focus upon the decline of wage rates,

union memberships, the loss of masculine forms of work, and the rise of regional inequalities (McDowell 2009: 5; Massey 1984; Massey and Meegan 1982).

More recently an alternative narrative has emerged, which focuses upon the negative reality of the service work experience in Britain's post-industrial economy. A key part of this understanding is the role that neo-liberal workfare policies have come to play in cutting back welfare support, with a view to placing greater emphasis on the individual's responsibility to attain work (Peck 2000). In doing so, and via intermediary labour market programmes, both local and central tiers of government have sought to push people off benefits and into low paying forms of service work (Helms and Cumbers 2006). As McDowell (2009: 5) notes:

'This story emphasizes the less successful and less glamorous side of service sector growth, recognising the steady expansion of poorly paid, low-wage jobs, increasingly undertaken by women or by economic migrants but also by less-well educated or low-skilled men, especially young men'.

As part of this analysis, several studies have also highlighted the increasingly instable and intensive nature of the modern service work (Beynon et al. 2002), with particular reference to the growth of contract labour since the mid 1980's (Allen and Henry 1997).

In addition to mapping this trend, several studies have also sought to explore the qualitative experience of modern service work. Sennett (1998) in particular has demonstrated how flexible work regimes have eroded a sense of character and identification within modern working roles. Flexibility may be understood as the changes to worker contracts (i.e. in work time, benefits and entitlements) which, whilst rendering workers 'flexible' for capital to draw upon, have created a marked insecurity for many (in particular those at the bottom end of the labour market; see Allen and Henry 1997). Amongst several examples, Sennett's (1998) point is well demonstrated through a 'before and after' comparison of a Boston bakery. Where previously a skilled migrant workforce (largely Greek) used traditional working methods to bake, modern day workers (who are often part-time and on 'flexible' work schedules) are shown to rely upon simplified machines which ensure efficiency without the need for baking knowledge. This in turn is

shown to foster a weak identification to the work in question, although curiously Sennett argues that alienation was *not* the primary concern of the modern day bakers:

‘According to old Marxian notions of class, the workers themselves should be alienated because of this loss of skill; they ought to be angry at the stupefying conditions of the workplace. The only person I could find in the bakery who fit this description, however, was the black foreman, who stood on the lowest rung of the management ladder’ (Sennett 1998: 69).

As opposed to alienation, Sennett argues that the *character* of modern workers has suffered. What he means by this is that working roles today offer little stability or means to structure our lives more broadly; workers today often hold weak work identities and unpredictable futures. Accordingly the present generation is seen as one ‘indifferent to specific labours’ (ibid: 70).

Other studies have tended to focus on the similarities between certain service roles, and previous forms of manufacturing. Thus, Ritzer (2000) has argued that fast food restaurants – and various other modern work settings – have come to adopt the tenets of bureaucracy: and in particular Taylorism and scientific management as a means of organising production. In doing so the service workplace is seen to revolve around the tenets of efficiency, calculability and predictability (often through non-human technologies), in much the same way as a Fordist factory. Through this model of (essentially industrial) production, workers also suffer the same widespread alienation and deskilling which Braverman predicted under ‘monopoly capitalism’. Similarly, research conducted on the call centre industry has commonly highlighted the existence of Taylorist work methods, coupled with the use of electronic surveillance technology: which has combined to produce intensive factory style conditions in this modern service setting (Taylor and Bain 1999; Bain and Taylor 2000).

Despite this trend, many customer-facing roles require distinct interpersonal skills, which bear little relation to previous forms of production work. For this reason Allen and Du Gay (1994) have argued the case for a hybrid service identity; based around presentation, communication, and display skills. In turn, interpersonal skill and in particular the need for ‘emotional labour’ (Hochschild 1983) in modern service work involves the use of hidden

skills, incongruent to the 'deskilled' image of many service roles. Emotional labour involves the management of one's feelings so as to create an observable display; which in turn is designed to produce certain feelings/emotions in a customer. Crucially, such performances require emotional *acting* (either 'deep' acting whereby emotions are truly felt, or else 'surface' where the worker pretends) to help encourage the desired reactions from consumers. As a result of these pressures, emotional labour may often lead to forms of emotional exhaustion or 'burnout' (Morris and Feldman 1996). As such, whilst service work may be organised through traditionally industrial methods, these roles are clearly not reducible to a 'discourse' of manufacturing or deskilling (Allen and Du Gay 1994). The work itself involves distinct emotional skill – which is often tacit - and carries with it the potential for emotional distress in ways not present in productionist forms of work.

In exploring how service work is performed, Crang's (1994) research into 'Smoky Joe's' restaurant detailed the experience of restaurant waiting through ethnography. Notably service in this restaurant was partially standardised through a set order of service, which attempted to routinise and order staff behaviour so as to 'commodify' a dining experience for customers. Nevertheless Crang argues that workers here acted spontaneously to the needs of customers, often by anticipating the needs of different customer 'types', and tailoring responses accordingly. Furthermore Crang details how the 'front' and 'back' regions of the restaurant were harnessed by workers to help cope with the role and deliver the necessary service. 'Front' regions are here understood as bounded regions (or 'stages') where performance is enacted for those who observe, while 'back' regions are removed from the gaze of such observers, and so facilitate performance reprieves (Goffman 1990: 115). Accordingly Crang and his co-workers took reprieves 'back stage' in the kitchen and other areas out of sight from the customer – thus demonstrating how restaurant waiters may covertly cope with pressures implicit to this role through the use of (performative) space. Crang also argued the need for an embodied and specifically gendered performance within the role, which at times included flirting with customers.

The issue of gender and embodiment at work has been well examined by McDowell (1997), who has highlighted the persistence gender divides in the traditionally masculine world of corporate banking. Through case study research into this setting, McDowell argued that women were frequently 'othered' through distinctly masculine norms and

practices, which permeate day-to-day working life. Accordingly McDowell (1997: 147) notes:

‘.. women are marked as ‘Other’ and made to feel out of place by the inappropriate ways men refer to them as sexualised bodies and by all sorts of puns, jokes and other forms of verbal harassment. It is also clear that women are often made to feel out of place in the workplace not only because of the disjunction between their bodies and the commonly accepted ideal of a professional employee but also because of the ways they talk.’

More recently McDowell (2009) has extended this exploration of embodiment and identification in the workplace through a range of case studies (covering examples drawn from care work, sex work, firefighting and basic shop work). Through this case study research, McDowell has helped to explain patterns of labour market segmentation; as class, gender and nationality ascriptions and accepted behaviours are shown to interconnect and so create accepted patterns of work for different sorts of people. Notably, McDowell has argued that masculine ascriptions (such as strength and aggression) act to disadvantage young males who are facing up to instable futures within low-paying forms of service work. This latter point ties in with the authors previous research (McDowell 2003) on the effects of industrial decline on young working class males. Working class males are often ill-qualified for knowledge intensive roles at the top of the service labour market, while roles at the bottom end (e.g. waiting and call centre work) require emotional skills which are often incongruent with working class upbringings. This, in turn, has contributed to high rates of unemployment and a knock on effect of crime.

2.7 Conclusion

This chapter has summarised the relationship between labour and capital from a Marxist perspective, and has detailed three distinct approaches to understanding worker agency. This primarily took place through a review of labour geography; which has demonstrated how workers (as well as capital) shape economic landscapes through collective forms of resistance. Although useful in delineating the potential for workers to act, the chapter has subsequently sought to explore more typical expressions of day-to-day worker agency, through perspectives within the labour process theory (LPT) debates. This section has proved important in providing an appreciation for subtle and informal forms of worker coping within the process of doing work itself. The third section of the chapter has then

focussed on anthropological explorations of human agency in the reproductive sphere; and elaborates on the tactile ways in which workers cope with coercive conditions without directly challenging hegemonic power relations. In particular this section has outlined more passive forms of coping (Scott 1990), and the use of *resilience* and *reworking* (Katz 2004) as a means of coping with the different structural constraints that workers face. Different elements of each theoretical perspective are subsequently carried forward and applied within the main empirical chapters. The chapter has concluded with a brief summary of work conducted on the service industry, which forms the main empirical backdrop for the thesis as a whole. Following this literature review, the subsequent chapter focuses upon the research design and the methodological approach adopted for exploring call centre work in Glasgow.

Notes

¹ Accordingly, ‘...many of the ingredients that go into making potentially or actually ‘compliant’ and ‘productive’ workers are to be found outside the workplace’ (Castree et al. 2004: 38).

² As Peck (1996: 2) notes: ‘Contrary to the ideal, real-world labour markets are not like commodity markets: prices do not coordinate supply and demand, participants do not enter the market as equals, and commodities do not pass...from buyer to seller’.

³ I.e. those capital-centric approaches which view labour as a somewhat passive factor of production, existing within *capital’s* landscape.

⁴ Whipsawing occurs when employers that are multi-locational or geographically footloose are able to ‘pit workers in different regions against one another...on the basis of what may be quite significant geographical variations in wages and conditions’ (Herod 2001a:102-103). Accordingly, whipsawing may result when unions are unable to take wages and working conditions out of competition (through such means as collective bargaining).

⁵ And at times between different groups of workers who hold different interests to one another.

⁶ Holmes (2004) has shown how the same tactics have ensured successor rights for workers (where firm owners must recognise prior union agreements over pay and conditions) and work ownership deals to prohibit the outsourcing of work traditional to local areas.

⁷ Lethbridge (2009) has also pointed out that the drive for multi-national collective bargaining has at times been undermined by the national focus of trade unions, which may in turn need to develop coherent transnational strategies by sector.

⁸ Importantly, while the national state and other supra-local regulatory institutions influence many of the policies within a local LCR, it is at the local scale that employment initiatives are carried out in practice (Helms and Cumbers 2006).

⁹ The ‘first wave’ of LPT is best understood as a renewal/reworking of Marx’s analysis of the labour process.

¹⁰ Aside from this core group of workers, Friedman (1977) argued that a peripheral group of workers (inside the same firm) were commonly viewed as more expendable in monopoly capitalism, and that this group were more likely to be subject to coercive forms of direct control.

¹¹ Gordon et al. (1982) have observed that larger firms in particular tend to promote and transfer staff within the company to different roles, rather than looking externally for new workers. Logically this may encourage staff to work hard for promotion, reducing the need for coercive measures to incentivise work. This is one means by which workers have been divided into various classes ‘for’ rather than ‘in’ themselves.

¹² The ‘Green Revolution’ refers to the transformation in agriculture production methods throughout the so-called ‘developing world’ from the mid 1940s onwards. This typically involved a transfer of Western farming techniques (including the use of mechanisation, techniques of mono-cropping, irrigation, and a reliance on pesticides to radically increase crop yields) to countries previously reliant upon traditional and labour-intensive methods of farming. Socially the transition to such methods has often resulted in a loss of employment and an increase in class disparities within rural economies (benefiting large land owners/those with the capital to invest in these methods over most others).

¹³ To Katz, social reproduction represents ‘the fleshy, messy, and indeterminate stuff of everyday life’ (Katz 2001: 710), comprising political-economic (e.g. the welfare state), cultural (such as the household, religion) and environmental aspects (the material grounds for reproduction) that intertwine to produce who we are.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the research design and the methods used to achieve the broad and specific aims of the thesis. With this in mind, much of the following format may be described as a case of ‘before’ and ‘after’. As helpful as the planning and preparation of the methodology was, the research took a number of twists and turns which required a degree of pragmatism and flexibility throughout the research process. The original design had to prove malleable enough for the reality of dealing with situations out-with the researcher’s hands. In conveying this reality, the chapter serves as a corrective to the perceived lack of methodological transparency within economic geography as a whole (Barnes et al. 2007) and labour geography in particular (Lier 2007; Castree 2007).

The chapter begins by outlining the philosophical underpinnings of the research, which informed the subsequent case study approach and the methods used. The subsequent section then outlines which methods were chosen and *why*. The research design opted for a case study approach involving interviews as well as ethnographic observations. The next section then discusses how access to three call centre organisations was achieved, before a reflexive discussion of how the research design unfolded *in practice* within each case setting. This section focuses upon the need for flexibility and opportunism in approach (Jackson 1985); factors which are seldom conveyed in economic geography. This should not imply that economic geographers are uniformly rigid in their approach to methods. Rather, there is a current lack of reflexivity regarding methods and research practice which this chapter seeks to redress (Barnes et al. 2007; although see McDowell 1992a 1992b and Schoenburger 1991). These reflexive accounts also include a discussion on the subjective and situated nature of different interview encounters. The penultimate section then explains how the data was coded and analysed, before a conclusion is made on the research design and methodology as a whole.

3.2 Philosophical framework

In ontological terms the research design and the methodology used here are both informed by critical realism, which essentially views the world as an independent reality,

fundamentally *separate* from our knowledge of it (Sayer 1992; Kitchin and Tate 2000). In accordance with this understanding, any attempt to understand ‘reality’ must take the form of ‘perceptual schemata, concepts, and discourses’, which are adopted as practically adequate solutions for understanding the world around us (Aitken and Valentine 2006: 98). Critical realists understand that interpretations are never wholly accurate, and tend to vary from person to person and place to place. The chief remit of the realist position is an attempt to investigate *causality* through an examination of the underlying mechanisms and structures which constitute social relations (Kitchin and Tate 2000: 21). The social world is here seen as an ‘open’ system, in which *particular contexts* trigger actions and outcomes. As such, critical realists are inclined to place emphasis on the specificity of contingent settings, based on the understanding that distinct settings help to produce different outcomes. Dubbed a ‘philosophy in search of a method’ (Yeung 1997), realists have frequently turned to means of abstraction; whereby a partial aspect of an object is isolated in a bid to conceptualise causal mechanisms (Sayer 1992: 87). Accordingly, approaches for ‘doing’ realism are notoriously opaque, and may depend on the intensive or extensive objective of the research (Del Casino Jr. et al. 2000; Pratt 1995: 63).

In fitting with these basic critical realist tenets, the research design incorporated a case study approach, which initially sought to explore call centre experiences in two contrasting labour markets: Glasgow and Dublin. As shall be discussed, this design was later altered (out of necessity) to focus primarily on the Glasgow labour market. Within Glasgow, three case study organisations were chosen for their instrumental and collective value. This means that cases were chosen to support an understanding of ‘something bigger’ – i.e. labour’s agency ‘as a whole’ - with the intrinsic value of cases themselves secondary in importance (Stake 2000: 437). Yin (2003) defines case studies as empirical enquiries into the ‘how’ and ‘why’ (causality, in realist terms), which are designed to investigate contemporary phenomena in real-life contexts.

In a similar vein, Cindi Katz (2001, 2004) has advocated the use of case studies for producing ‘counter topographies’. Unlike traditional topographies (which merely describe the features of places), critical counter topographies examine the *effects* of general processes (such as globalization) on local places. In turn, Katz has used this approach to map out the connections between different places along analytic ‘counter lines’: ‘marking,

not elevation, but rather a particular relation to a process – for example, the deskilling of workers or the retreat from social welfare’ (Katz 2001: 70). From an epistemological standpoint, this demonstrates that case studies can be used to map contingent responses (i.e. lived experiences) towards more general processes, and, importantly, that such responses are likely to vary from place to place (see Johnston 1984). Based on this understanding, the thesis uses a case study approach to show how workers employed in distinct organisations use and respond to the ‘general process’ of call centre work. Thus, in a critical realist fashion, the research design is geared towards exploring how particular contexts trigger different outcomes, responses and agencies towards the same form of work.

At this point it is worth commenting on the manner in which case studies are used throughout the thesis. As noted, Cindi Katz (2004) has used case study research in both Howa (Sudan) and Harlem (New York) as a means of teasing out contingent responses to a more general process of neo-liberal restructuring. Elsewhere, Andrew Herod (2001b) has demonstrated the benefit of comparison cases when illustrating the appropriateness of both international and local organising efforts of worker unions. Like Katz and Herod, the research seeks to benefit from a comparative case study approach when considering the lives of call centre workers. Although the research considers case studies in their own right, the thesis often contrasts working life in one call centre with another in order to emphasise particular points. Workers are shown to behave and respond differently to particular structural constraints. As such, the research uses the evident *differences* between case studies as a means of illustrating both general *and* distinct forms of worker coping.

It is also worth clarifying two points of definition. Throughout the research the term ‘discourse’ is used to refer to embedded practices, representations and expectations through which meanings are produced and legitimised within and through call centre work. The role of discourse is particularly evident in the discussion chapters which refer to different social norms and managerial expectations present within each of the case centre regimes (Chapter 6). In addition, the thesis operates with a particular understanding of the term ‘narrative’. Section 8.4 of Chapter 8 uses Sennett’s (1998) understanding of the term as a means of articulating the value and importance of a work identity. According to Sennett, narratives relate to stable and coherent patterns of work which form vital building

blocks from which ‘meaning’ and character formation stem. In turn, working ‘narratives’, which are traditionally generated over the course of a long-term career, offer an all-round life purpose and direction which workers carry forward both inside and outside of work.

3.3 Research Design and Methods

The research design and the methods used followed a qualitative approach of putting people and their experiences at the heart of investigation, so as to learn from the way they live and interpret the world (Cloeke et al. 2004; Crang 2002). Accordingly, qualitative methods were chosen to mine intensively into the subjective realities and experiences of call centre employees (Pratt 1995; Sayer 1992). This comes from the understanding that each person sees the world differently. Rather than uncovering a singular and objective truth through an extensive methodology, intensive methods were needed to explore the inter-subjective and *multiple* interpretations of call centre workers (Cook and Crang 1995). Specifically the research design targeted semi-structured interviews with call centre staff as the primary means of gaining insights into call centre experiences, in addition to non-participant observation of the call centre labour process. To achieve this, the research sought access to four call centre organisations from which to conduct observational ‘tours’ – so as to understand the nature of this work – in addition to interviews with the same workers under observation. In doing so the research design combined a conventional approach to exploring working life (i.e. through speaking to people in an interview format) with a more ethnographic method for observing a working day ‘in action’.

This design stemmed in part from an ethical review panel which reiterated the need for informed consent throughout the research process. Initially I did consider the possibility of using covert participant observation, through obtaining a call centre role and recording observations and experiences in a field diary. This option offered the chance of experiencing the work first hand, in a similar fashion to Beynon (1984) and Crang (1994). However, this idea was relegated to something of an emergency ‘back up plan’, due to the ethical and practical concerns which resulted. Informed consent was not possible through a covert methodology, and any findings would arguably represent an invasion of worker privacy. On a practical level the research also sought explorations into life within different contexts, and I did not have time to ‘go native’ within three to four settings (Bryman 2008; Cook and Crang 1995). Amongst other intentions, and in line with a critical realist

ontology, the research aimed to explore how different call centre contexts facilitate distinct work experiences and outcomes. Subsequently the design sacrificed a ‘deep’ analysis of one call centre setting, in favour of a cross-section of different call centre experiences from consenting call centre organisations and their workers. These points notwithstanding, an overt research design using semi-structured interviews and (non-participant) observation maintained several distinct benefits to the research.

Rather than unions being the primary research object (as in much labour geography; Herod 2001a), the research design targeted semi-structured interviews with call centre workers themselves. This method was deemed useful for interpreting the rationales and motivations of workers through their own words (Schoenberger 1991). This is based on the understanding that individuals enter call centre employment on the back of unique life histories and social circumstances – contexts which pre-defined surveys would struggle to convey in real depth. Conversely, interviews are apt in their capacity to acknowledge the contexts which often underlie rationales. In many instances workers have not unpacked their own feelings towards working life (for these are questions which are often seldom asked), and fashioning information is only possible through (often ambiguous) subjective narratives. As the data which is generated essentially represents an interaction between two parties, interviews require a dialogical closeness that is usually absent from more quantitative methods (Clark 1998; Pratt 1995). To help foster a degree of intimacy, the *semi*-structured nature of the interview process was chosen to allow a more flexible and conversational dialogue (Valentine 2005). This format was also chosen to help clarify unclear meanings, through elaborative probing as and when required (‘...what do you mean by that, exactly?...’). Accordingly, interview schedules were designed to operate around broad themes, rather than following a prescriptive list of questions (see Appendix A¹; May 2001; Hoggart et al. 2002; Silverman 2005). This overall flexibility in interview design was chosen to help generate fresh categories and assumptions held by interviewees, unforeseen by the researcher (McCracken 1988).

In tandem with interviews, overt non-participant *observations* of call centre work in practice were chosen to explore what people *do* as well as what they *say* they do (Herbert 2000; Dunn 2007). To this end, Yeung (2003: 452) has argued that:

‘...‘being there’ promises not only more reliable data, through direct observations and experimental recording, but also more valid data from observing the subtlety of certain economic processes and the behaviour of social actors’.

The chief benefit of observation is the lens that viewing a phenomenon shines on to the *processes* and *meanings* which sustain social groups (Herbert 2000). Observations offer different insights into staff behaviour, as meanings are often embedded in subtle, taken for granted practices which individuals themselves may be unaware of. Thus, observing a working day in progress offered the chance of a deep insight and understanding of the normalised work day practices, symbolic constructions and meanings ‘present’ on the call centre floor (Cook 2005; Cook and Crang 1995; Bogdan 1972).

Observations also provided the research with practical benefits to feed into the interview process. Firstly, by observing practices on a call centre floor it was then possible to incorporate fresh categories and insights into subsequent discussions with workers (Schwartzman 1993) - for example ‘...I noticed you dealt with that call a certain way, is that what you’re supposed to do in that instance? Was that from training or your own intuition?...’. Seeing and listening to work in action also promised a degree of familiarity with a given working role, bearing in mind that different call centres involve more or less complex work processes and tasks.

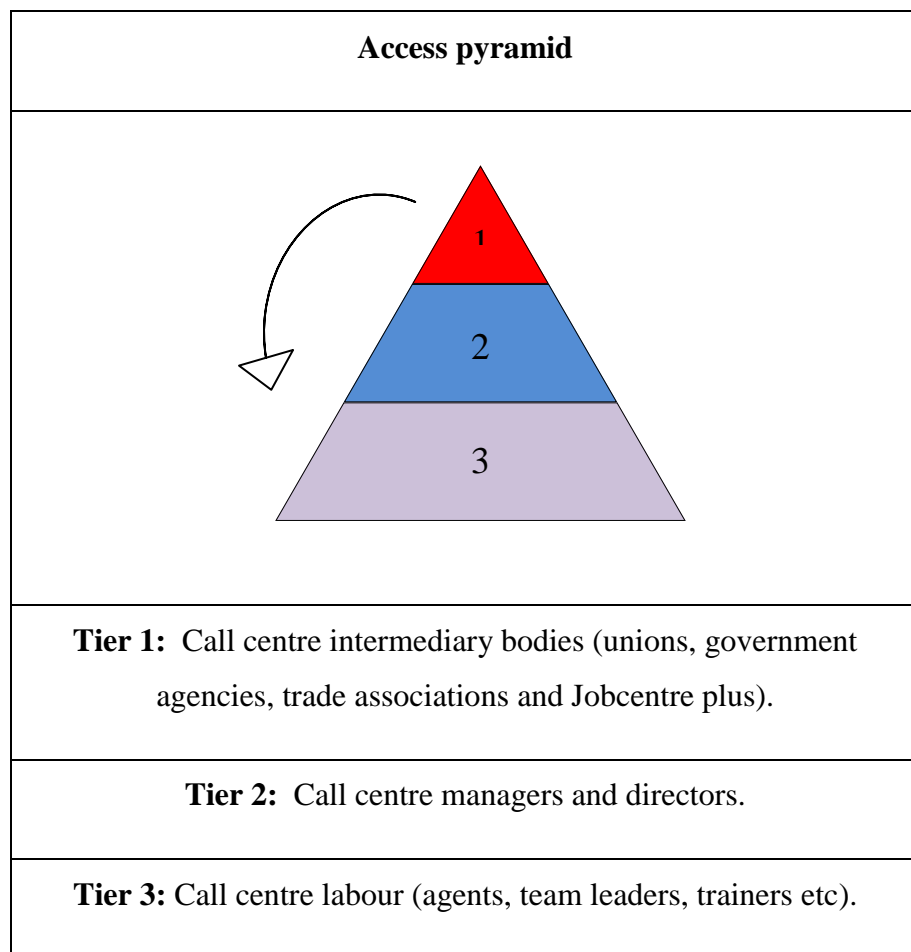
In combination, these two research methods served complementary functions in answering specific research questions (outlined in Chapter 1). Interviews were chosen primarily to explain the rationales and motivations of workers, together with their life histories and pathways in and out of the labour market (research questions 1 and 3), while observations were elected to help grasp what processes and meanings constitute the labour process in action (linking pertinently to issues of agency and performance concerning question 2).

3.4 Establishing access

In order to ‘operationalise’ the research design and methodology, access to call centre organisations themselves had to be agreed. Knowing where to start this process formed an initial quandary, as the use of pre-existing ‘connections’ is often vital in securing access to bounded worlds outside of academia² (McDowell 1998; Smith 2005). Despite having a

year's worth of experience working in call centres, I began the research with no prior connections to organisations based in Glasgow. Subsequently I set about creating fresh contacts, who held links to Glasgow call centre organisations and their management. This strategy is best represented through a schematic 'pyramid' (see Figure 3-1) of tiered stages, whereby the objective was to move down through different intermediary gatekeepers in order to access call centre workers (i.e. agents) themselves. In contrast to studies 'researching up' chains of elite groups or individuals (Desmond 2004), here the objective soon turned to 'researching down'.

Figure 3-1: Stages of access through gatekeeper tiers



The initial strategy was to contact unions, government agencies, trade associations and recruitment agencies ('Tier 1' – see Figure 3-1) broadly involved with the call centre industry in Glasgow. These bodies could potentially provide useful contact details of call centre managers and directorate ('Tier 2'), who in turn could provide interviews and overviews of their operation. After an initial visit and interview, I hoped a selection of these managers would lend their operation as a case study organisation. Any agreement on

this would thus grant access to the call centre workforce itself, in the form of interviews and observational ‘tours’ of the work within each chosen centre (Tier 3).

This strategy forced theoretical reflection in itself, as unions and management were here viewed as gatekeepers *into* the research site. Allowing managers to mediate the access to their staff proved somewhat unorthodox, given labour geography’s mandate as a sub-discipline not just ‘about’ labour, but ‘*for*’ labour – both theoretically and politically (Peck 2003: 518). Put simply, labour geography projects are designed to help *workers*, yet this research strategy placed power in the hands of call centre management, who would go on to dictate (at times) the choice of interviewee, the location of interviews, and what I could observe. The implications of this are dealt with later in the chapter.

3.4.1 *Problems of access*

Securing access in this way held significant implications for the research design itself, as well as the use of methods further down the line. As mentioned earlier, the initial research design had hoped to consider workers in the contrasting labour markets of Dublin and Glasgow as well as different organisations within these settings (similarly, see Paulet 2008; Kolinko 2002)³. This design failed to materialise largely due to a lack of ‘Tier 1’ leads and contacts in Dublin who were willing to meet with me. In total eight organisations spoke with me about the possibility of gaining research access (see Table 3-1), but only two of these were based in Ireland.

Table 3-1: Meetings with ‘Tier 1’ agents

	Organisation name	Type	Location
1	Scottish Trades Union Congress (STUC)	Trade union	Glasgow
2	Unison	Trade union	Glasgow
3	Contact Centre Association (CCA)	Trade association	Glasgow
4	Broadcasting Entertainment Cinematograph and Theatre Union (BECTU)	Trade union	Glasgow
5	Scottish Enterprise	Public body	Glasgow
6	JobCentre Plus	Government agency	Glasgow
7	Communication Workers Union (CWU)	Trade union	Dublin
8	Call Centre Manager’s Association (CCMA)	Trade association	Dublin

Despite this being the case, hope was renewed when a board member from Ireland’s Call Centre Manager’s Association agreed to meet with me to discuss my proposal. By good fortune, this contact also sat as Director of a major Irish telecoms call centre (‘Ire-Tel’, based in Dublin). Following a positive interview and tour of this call centre, Ire-Tel agreed that the sales department of their centre would take part in the study. This floor of the call centre held both in-bound and out-bound functions, handling sales on a number of telephony products (in particular residential phone services and broadband). Subsequently, I interviewed thirteen workers up and down the company, and conducted three observation sessions over a two week period (during December 2007, see Appendix C). During this

two week period, I tried and failed to secure meetings with rival Dublin call centres⁴, but returned to Scotland with one completed case study.

Within Glasgow, an interview with Scottish Enterprise produced the major ‘breakthrough’ in terms of accessing an array of potential call centre organisations⁵. Specifically I spoke with an accounts manager whose own role involved establishing links with the call centre industry throughout Scotland (and implicitly, with encouraging growth throughout this sector). During the course of the interview, this contact volunteered a spreadsheet of seventeen organisations of which Scottish Enterprise held some involvement, and advised me to drop his name when contacting these bodies (thus demonstrating the importance of elite contacts in accessing organisational structures; see Herod 1999: 313). Accordingly, I sent an email to each call centre manager on the list with a brief explanation of my research intentions and methodology. Within this, I affiliated myself with the account manager at Scottish Enterprise, as well as the ESRC, in the hope of appearing ‘trustworthy’ and legitimate in my intentions (Thomas 1995). I asked for permission to conduct an hour long interview and visit to each operation in a bid to scope potential cases. Out of the seventeen contacts, seven replied within the space of a week for preliminary discussions over my request. These corporate interviews were used specifically to outline the business practices and operational contexts of each call centre (Hughes 1999: 365). Based on this positive feedback, the research design shifted from a focus on call centre life in two contrasting labour markets, in favour of a design contrasting life in three distinct call centre organisations within Glasgow alone.

Before exploring the case study selection process in Glasgow, it is important to outline the strategic role that ‘Ire-Tel’ has come to play in the research. Rather than wasting this case study experience *tout court*, Ire-Tel effectively became a pilot study which provided useful experience of negotiating organisational access, conducting worker interviews, and performing work-day observations. In addition to this experience, findings from the Irish case study essentially formed something of a verification tool, akin to a ‘control’ case study. At certain points in the empirical discussion chapters, examples from Ire-Tel are used to better illustrate findings from the main Glasgow cases.

3.4.2 *The selection process*

Following discussions with the seven Glasgow centres, a table was compiled (Table 3-2) delimiting six characteristics of each operation. Based on these characteristics three different operations were chosen. To reiterate, cases were chosen for their instrumental value, with a view to furthering theoretical insights into the nature of worker agency in different organisational contexts. I was not looking for a ‘representative’ sample from which to draw broader conclusions on the nature of call centre work per se. Rather, I deliberately chose distinct operations in order to explore whether different structures enable and constrain different work experiences and agencies. At the same time I did not seek *especially* un-representative or ‘unusual’ operations. Each case was broadly chosen as a window into ‘routine’ call centre work within Glasgow’s economic landscape, and different manifestations of this.

Table 3-2 details the criteria used to assess each centre, which included: functionality (i.e. the main activities involved within the centre); the degree of skill involved; pay; working hours; and size (number of staff employed). This criteria was compiled on the basis of various readings (particularly Taylor et al. 2002), although certain variables involved a large degree of approximation (in particular, measuring ‘labour skill’). The sixth criterion is that of a ‘rapport’ factor. This factor reflects the general vibe picked up from interviewing the management at each centre, with a view to establishing a good level of access to the operation. Each centre in Table 3-2 (and throughout the research) has been ascribed with a pseudo-name in order to protect the organisation’s real-life identity. In addition, all call centre clients and interviewees have been ascribed a fictitious name for the same reason. To help contextualise the final case selection, a more thorough discussion of the call centre industry in Scotland (including a profile of the different industrial sectors) is reserved for Chapter 5.

Table 3-2: Call centre profile table

	<i>Loans-Tel</i>	<i>Game-Tel</i>	<i>Eye-Com</i>	<i>Gov-Tel</i>	<i>Insure-Tel</i>	<i>Sales-Com</i>	<i>Travel-Com</i>	<i>Ire-Tel ('control')</i>
Main activities	In-bound customer support	Mostly in-bound Technical support	Mostly in-bound enquiries and account updates	Mostly in-bound general public enquiries	Inbound/outbound sales and customer service	Out-bound sales	Inbound calls for holiday packages (to companies)	Inbound and outbound sales
Labour skill	Average	Average – High	Low-Average	Low-High	Average	Low-High	Average-High	Average
Working hours	Various between 8am-8pm Monday-Friday	Various between 7am-8pm Monday-Friday	Various between 8am-8pm Monday-Saturday	Various; 24/7 opening hours	Various between 8am-8pm Monday to Sunday	Fixed 9 am – 5 pm or 11 am - 7pm Monday-Friday	Fixed 9am-6pm during the week and 9am-5 pm on a Saturday	Various between 9 am - 9pm Monday to Saturday
Pay	£14,000. Few bonuses	£15,500 - £20,000	£11,500 – £15,000. (Extra for language skills)	£15,000 flat wage	Sales agent – £14,200 including bonus	£12,500 - £13,000, plus bonus	£11,500-£17,000 depending on area	19,500E, plus bonus.
Centre size	Large: 450 heads	Small: 35 heads	Small: 80 heads	Medium: 130 heads	Medium-Large: 400 heads	Medium: 100 heads	Medium-Large: 270 heads.	Medium: 110.
Access and rapport	Average	Good	Average	Good	Lack of 'on-floor' access due to data protection	Good	Average	Good

In terms of activities, I sought a combination of in-bound and out-bound operations from the chosen cases. Based on the pilot study in Ire-Tel, I was keen to 'recruit' an outbound sales centre, with a view to exploring how workers cope with the stress induced from outbound sales (in particular cold call sales; Toynbee 2003). On this front, Insure-Tel represented an inbound/outbound sales and customer service centre, specialising in car insurance, while Sales-Com performed out-bound sales calls for a range of third party clients. Travel-Com (which mediated between holiday package whole-sellers and high street travel shops) also performed a sales role, dealing largely with in-bound sales to high-street travel agents. The other centres: Loans-Tel (a loans company); Gov-Tel (a local council call centre providing a range of residential services); Eye-Com (a firm specialising in contact lens provision); and Game-Tel (a computer game and technology technical support centre) dealt mainly with in-bound forms of customer service/support. Ascertaining the skill levels of each centre proved difficult based on a single visit, although Game-Tel stood out as particularly 'high-end' due to its requirement for multi-lingual staff with some level of IT and technical support knowledge. Outside of this centre, the majority of cases maintained roles requiring basic customer service and/or sales skills,

although Gov-Tel, Sales-Com and Travel-Com also maintained a series of higher-end sales and support teams.

The majority of the seven centres provided a range of different working hours. This factor was of interest in terms of the sorts of people who were likely to apply; bearing in mind that workers with family commitments (often mothers) tend to base work choices on job proximity and the availability of certain shifts (Hanson and Pratt 1995). Five centres operated with a range working hours (Loans-Tel; Game-Tel; Eye-Com; Gov-Tel; Insure-Tel), while Sales-Com and Travel-Com tended to provide conventional shift patterns (predominantly 9-5 and 10-6). Ideally I sought a combination of different shift patterns from the chosen three. Pay was another obvious factor for consideration, bearing in mind the difference money makes in fostering a broader lifestyle outside of work. Pay varied from a bottom rate of £11,500 at Eye-Com to £20,000 for the upper agent positions at Game-Tel. Loans-Tel, Insure-Tel, Travel-Com and Sales-Com paid workers a variable rate in-between these poles, which fluctuated in accordance with a sales bonus. In terms of numbers employed, the larger case centres employed upwards of 400 workers (Insure-Tel and Loans-Tel), while the smaller operations employed less than 100 agents (80 at Eye-Com and just 35 workers at Game-Tel). This factor held several possible implications; with larger centres more likely to adopt a labour intensive ('mass production') model for processing a large customer base. Smaller operations, on the other hand, offered the potential for more personalised relations between management and staff. It should also be noted that, of the seven Glasgow centres, only Gov-Tel recognised a trade union for workers.

These points notwithstanding, the rapport generated during the initial visit to each centre was deemed vital in tipping the balance towards certain operations. Although each organisation was broadly positive towards the research (i.e. with regards to taking part on a longer term basis), management tended to offer varying degrees of access. Insure-Tel, for, example would not permit me to listen in with staff due to Data Protection reasons, while Travel-Com limited their availability to the summer. Conversely the management at Gov-Tel and Sales-Com were particularly enthusiastic with regards to future access. Management here were open to both interviews with staff as well as observations of the labour process itself, and each assigned a specific member of staff to help guide my initial

tour through their operation. Based on these responses, and the various operational factors outlined above, I ultimately selected the following three case centres:

Table 3-3: Case study selection summary

Gov-Tel:	A city council contact centre set up to handle high volume, low complex in-bound calls from the citizens of Glasgow.
Sales-Com	An outsourced, out-bound sales centre which handled the sales functions for a number of clients (such as telephone service providers and computer insurance).
Game-Tel	An outsourced, in-bound technical support centre, handling enquiries for several IT and computer gaming firms in several European languages.

Theoretically this selection provided the research with three distinct windows into call centre work experience. However, while I had deliberately chosen organisations that offered the potential for a deep insight into call centre life, the level of access at each centre varied considerably from centre to centre *in practice*. The following section focuses on the need to remain pragmatic vis-à-vis the terms and conditions as outlined by management at each setting.

3.5 Research methods in practice

Despite agreeing access with management at each centre, in practice my control over the research process was never total – and this resulted in distinct case study experiences. Due to the imbalance in power between myself and the call centre management (who I essentially sought favour), I adopted a non-threatening ‘supplicant’ role throughout access negotiations (see McDowell 1992b; Parry 1998). I advised each centre that I was happy to conduct staff interviews outside of working hours, and that I was merely looking for volunteers in this respect. In turn, each centre agreed to forward my study request to all workers, with a view to securing interviewees for the research through informed consent. During the course of any tour, I agreed to introduce myself to the staff I came across, and

to ask permission to observe, informally chat, and to take notes. If staff had any questions about my work – which they often did – they could ask me directly. Notably, the contents and proceeding of the observational ‘tours’ were also left open for management to decide, and as such, specific ‘research bargains’ (Bryman 2008) tended to unfold. It is also important to note that the research took place during specific (and sometimes sensitive) political moments in the life-span of each centre - termed a ‘political-temporal contingency’ by Ward and Jones (1999) – which affected the terms of access to Game-Tel in particular (see Raco 1999). The following discussion details the different levels of access afforded in each case centre.

Management in both Gov-Tel and Sales-Com were highly supportive of my study, and both provided me with a specific contact to help handle my request. My contact in Gov-Tel was Gemma, the ‘service development manager’ whose department designed and implemented the service specifications for each function Gov-Tel supported. Meanwhile, in Sales-Com a French project leader (Jean) was placed in charge of handling my requests. In terms of observations, both of these centres allowed me time to speak with agents informally on the floor, and to listen in to various agents working on the phones (via an extra headset). In addition, I was also privy to periodic meetings at both centres; including two quarterly award ceremonies at Sales-Com (used to reward staff for high sales performances) and managerial performance meetings in Gov-Tel. However, the procedures for interviewing staff tended to vary in each of these centres. In the case of Gov-Tel, Gemma emailed my study request to all workers on the floor: and I was subsequently greeted with a list of volunteer interviewees for my study. All of these interviews took place in a boardroom inside the centre during working hours, and workers were relieved of their role for this purpose. In Sales-Com I was granted greater flexibility to self-select interviewees, and these interviews took place outside the call centre at various public locations (of the interviewee’s choice; such as bars and cafes). Interviewees in Sales-Com were identified through informal discussions during observational tours, and also through my contact Jean. Through this contact I also ‘recruited’ two former Sales-Com workers who had recently left the call centre (who remained in contact with Jean). As these workers were to meet in their own private time, I offered each interviewee a £10 gift card for taking part in the research.

Conversely, my experience at the Game-Tel centre differed greatly from the above. My opening visit here yielded a day long tour conducted by the director herself, where Game-Tel was presented as a skilled, laid back and *mature* workplace. The director was keen to offer the organisation as a case study into ‘higher end’ lines of call centre work, and was open to all my requests for access. However, after conducting five interviews en site, and one observation session (all in February 2008), my communication with Game-Tel broke down. My director contact left under bouts of restructuring. I was later advised that Game-Tel were enduring a busy period – amid negotiations over fresh clients - and it took several months for a replacement manager (Robert) to resume contact and to renegotiate my access. Far from any static relationship, this case itself showed the need for a fluid reading of control, which fluctuated in tandem with temporal politics (Ward and Jones 1999). My access resumed in June 2008, under restricted terms, and with Robert always at the helm of each visit. I was no longer allowed to listen in to agents performing their role due to fears over client confidentiality, and tours tended to be brief and superficial. Eventually I was given a restrictive list of volunteers (many of whom were higher end employees) to interview inside the centre. These agents were not granted time away from their role, and were subsequently interviewed during quiet periods of the day *whilst* they performed their role on the phones. These interviewees were also offered a £10 gift card for taking part.

All interviewees were provided with an informative sheet explaining the purpose of the interview to the thesis, with a view to securing informed consent (see Appendix B). Not including initial corporate interviews, in total I interviewed twelve workers from Gov-Tel; thirteen workers from Sales-Com; and eleven workers from Game-Tel (not including repeat interviews; see Appendix C). Four observational tours took place at Game-Tel; five at Gov-Tel; and six at Sales-Com.

3.5.1 *Researcher agency*

Unsurprisingly these stipulations created a number of centre-specific concerns with regards to the data generated. While I was happy to accept whichever interviewee was made available to me (Bryman (2008) terms this ‘convenience sampling’), I was wary of an interviewee sample bias in both Gov-Tel and Game-Tel. Furthermore I was alive to the impact that location can make for conducting worker interviews. To help counter these

issues, I remained vigilant to the opportunity to tweak and ‘mine’ opportunities to their full potential (Jackson 1985). In this sense I required my own researcher agency to maximise the potential for ‘deep’ and reliable data at each setting (Dunn 2007).

To circumvent the potential of interview bias at Gov-Tel – i.e. the risk that Gov-Tel had presented me with a list of ‘safe’ volunteers - I recruited two volunteers of my own (Eddie and Victoria). These additional interviewees were chosen on a theoretical basis, as I felt both offered ‘something different’; including the possibility of fresh categories for analysis (thickening those that were likely to emerge; Strauss and Corbin 1998). Eddie’s name arose in various interviews as an exhibitionist member of staff, who was prone to breaking rules, whilst Victoria was identified during an informal discussion on an observational tour. Victoria held ambitions to start her own photography company outside of the call centre, and stood out as an overqualified and ambitious member of staff. In Game-Tel it was not possible to recruit extra volunteers, and subsequently I decided to conduct repeat interviews with my replacement manager contact (Simon) and the knowledge based administrator for the centre (Angus; who primarily monitored a database of known technical solutions). Each held a strategic role in the centre, and the additional interviews helped to provide clarification of the more complex Game-Tel role. Throughout the writing up period I also maintained contact with several members of staff through e-mail and Facebook. This latter forum proved useful as a means of ‘member checking’ the emerging findings within Game-Tel in particular (Baxter and Eyles 1997).

The location of the interviews also proved an initial concern, given that individuals often choose ‘...to present a certain aspect(s) of their individual and social identities in particular spatial contexts’ (Sin 2003: 306). I was concerned that interviewees from Gov-Tel and Game-Tel in particular may have felt uneasy sharing feelings *about* work whilst *inside* the workplace. In Gov-Tel the privacy of the boardroom at least shielded workers from the eyes and ears of management, but in Game-Tel I interviewed most staff in open view of other workers. Whilst staff in this setting undoubtedly held back from certain thoughts and reflections, I nevertheless uncovered a series of frank opinions on the nature of this call centre role. This persuaded me that staff felt comfortable enough to open up to a reasonable degree. Moreover, while each interview settings varied from case to case, staff in each instance used the interview setting itself to emphasise key points of discussion.

Sites were often used to convey skills and identities of working life. For example, Penelope used the call centre floor (filled with her working colleagues) to justify her continued stay at Game-Tel – ‘Look around! *Everyone* here has a degree ...so I’m not really overqualified’ (interview with Penelope, June 2008). Conversely, Sven from Sales-Com used a bar setting to demonstrate his transferable skill of selling: by enacting the ‘sale’ of a cold pint of Staropramen. As a result I found examples of how the interview setting was adapted for use in construing a worker identity in all cases.

3.5.2 *Power relations and the presentation of ‘self’*

In addition to these concerns, and echoing feminist and post-structuralist critiques of objectivity, it is also worth reflecting on the power relations that influenced each interview exchange (Rose 1997; Schoenberger 1992). Firstly, my status as an ‘outsider’ to each organisation raised questions over how open and up-front respondents would be, bearing in mind that management in Game-Tel and Gov-Tel delivered my request to the bulk of employees (Herod 1999; Sabot 1999). The last thing I wanted to resemble was that of a managerial ‘informant’. At the start of each interview I presented workers with a cover letter reminding interviewees of my detached role as an independent research at the University of Aberdeen (as I was at the time; see Appendix B). In doing so I sought to present myself as ‘a ‘neutral’ or ‘impartial’ observer of events’ (Herod 1999: 332) – and certainly nothing to do with management or the call centre in question. As such, rather than attempting to auger favour through gaining an ‘insider’ status in a centre, I maintained my *distance* between myself and the cases in order to secure worker confidence.

Notwithstanding this official ‘distance’ between myself and interviewees, my positionality as a young researcher also complicated certain exchanges. As a young, male research student, my own positionality often contrasted from those I spoke with, up and down the research process. In interviewing ‘non-elites’, I did not like the implication that I was somehow above workers in my own status (McDowell 1992b, Rose 1997). This implication could be hard to avoid, because certain workers felt bad about what they were doing. Many workers interpreted their role as an inferior form of work; while I ostensibly performed a higher status role as a ‘researcher’. To break down such power imbalances, many feminist geographers have pursued ‘suppliant’ and ‘collaborative’ relationships based around ‘empathy, mutuality and respect’, (McDowell 1992b: 405). Bearing this

approach in mind, it is important to stress that the presentation of my position tended to shift between persons, sites and stages.

For agents who held a degree (of whom there were plenty, especially in Game-Tel), I often broke the ice early on with a discussion of student life, and the different directions people take after university. These exchanges were often the most natural, particularly when speaking to a worker around my own age (i.e. mid-twenties). Workers in their early-mid twenties often shared an ‘aimlessness’ which I could genuinely relate to, and this helped auger a mutual respect which aided the flow of the discussion. In addition to student life, I also held my own call centre experiences which I brought up as a means of relating to the people I talked to. Alternatively, when interviewing workers who held different backgrounds and no experience of university, I deliberately downplayed my status as a PhD student by referring to my thesis as a ‘project for ‘uni’’. In these instances I was perhaps overly self-conscious of the mismatch between my own background and those who, for example, held a history of assembly line work which I simply could not relate to. In response, I often identified other topics of conversation (such as football or areas people came from) to help break the ice. I also rephrased questions of discussion, in order to place the interviewee in the role of teacher (Thomas 1995). I demonstrated an eagerness to see the world (if only the world of call centre work) through the eyes of correspondents, based on their own experiences.

3.6 The Analysis of Data

After completing all interviews and observations, I was then left with the daunting task of analysing and making sense of the resulting data. All interviews were recorded using an Olympus VN-3100PC voice recorder, apart from one telephone interview conducted with the Call and Contact Centre Association (CCA). These recordings were subsequently transcribed in full. This time-consuming process covered a total of sixty-nine interviews, and helped to generate a strong familiarity with the interview data. In addition, call centre tour observations were initially recorded by hand in the form of field notes, and were subsequently typed along with any afterthoughts and ruminations. The prospect of analysing and evaluating the resulting mass of data initially proved daunting, and I began this process by printing off hard copies of interview transcripts to read through and evaluate. In order to ‘make sense’ of the data I adopted a grounded theory approach to

analysing the transcripts, which sought to construct the theory ‘bottom-up’ through the data itself through an iterative/ recursive process (Strauss and Corbin 1998).

My first step was to assign shorthand labels in the margins of a sample of fifteen transcripts, in reference to emerging concepts, ideas, and themes contained within the text. These notes helped formulate an initial set of twenty codes. At this point I decided to utilise a software package to help sort and compile the coded data in full; and I subsequently inputted all transcripts into Nvivo 7 (a qualitative data analysis software package). I then began the menial task of assigning codes to all of the interview transcripts through this package. It is important to state that my engagement with Nvivo was only ever ‘light’; and I used this software as a tool for sifting through and assigning codes as opposed to a means of substantive analysis. As MacKinnon (1998: 24) notes, ‘The benefits of software packages...lie not in their capacity to ‘do’ the analysis but in their ability to retrieve coded material more rapidly and efficiently than traditional manual methods’. Furthermore, the development of relationships *between* codes and concepts largely took place by hand and through the use of word documents.

Through Nvivo, I was able to develop and apply a more detailed level of coding than was practical by hand, based on an iterative process involving analytic induction and a re-appraisal of existing codes. The process involved a continual moving from ideas contained in the data itself, to thoughts of my own (often based upon readings), and back again. Subsequently Nvivo helped to facilitate a more nuanced ‘intermediate’ level of coding, which resulted in 120 codes spanning all interview and observation material. This expansion often involved a break-down of general codes into more detailed and related sub-categories until I reached a point of saturation. Strauss and Corbin (1998) refer to this process as a form of ‘Axial coding’: ‘because coding occurs around the axis of a category, linking categories at the level of properties and dimensions’ (ibid: 123). To provide an example of this, my initial list of codes contained a broad ‘agency in the workplace’ code, which essentially referred to any form of autonomous coping in the role. I later split this code into numerous related categories in reference to different agency dimensions; such as ‘foot-dragging’; and ‘sweet sake agency’. This latter code referred to worker acts that generated satisfaction from some form of productivity in the role. As Cook and Crang

(1995) note, coding and analysing is often a personalised process which varies from one researcher to another.

Bearing these codes in mind, it is important to note that the full list of codes contained both *emic* categories (i.e. codes derived from the interviewee's own words); as well as *etic* categories born out from my own reading of the meaning in the text. Etic codes were frequently informed by prior readings and theoretical understandings, at times in relation to research questions. In the above example, 'foot-dragging' refers to Scott's (1985) notion of 'passive resistance' and false compliance; a term aptly applied with many extracts from interviewee transcripts. Another good example of etic coding is my common reading of staff boredom and frustrations as a form of 'alienation' in the role, despite the fact few interviewees used this Marxist term. This balance between etic and emic abstractions in the data helped counter Yeung's (1997) criticism of grounded theory in relation to critical realism. Essentially Yeung (ibid) has argued that grounded theory relies upon an inductive approach which is overly reliant on the subject's own narrative of social phenomena in identifying causal mechanisms. To counter this issue, I adopted an iterative process which combined both deductive abstractions together with an inductive grounding of generative mechanisms.

The final stage of analysis moved away from the majority of codes, and focussed upon a core group of 'primary' codes: which contained the most interesting and relevant quotes and material, often in relation to the research questions. Through this form of 'selective coding' (Strauss and Corbin 1998), I not only dropped my attention from the majority of codes, but also focussed my attentions on unpacking the relationships between these codes and understandings of key literature and theory. This in turn helped me to tease out and illustrate the salient points and 'findings' of the research in the main discussion chapters.

3.7 Conclusion

This chapter has provided an overview of the research design and the methodology that informs the thesis, and has demonstrated several twists and turns in the research process. As opposed to relying upon relative 'elites' to inform the research, the design has identified the need to discuss call centre working life with those performing the role itself. This approach was informed by a critical realist ontology, which attempts to identify

causality through an examination of underlying mechanisms and structures. Crucially, critical realism places emphasis on the impact that contingent settings make in mediating particular outcomes. For this reason, a case study approach into three Glasgow call centres was adopted, with call centre managers playing a facilitative ‘gatekeeper’ role. The bulk of the research data was subsequently accrued using semi-structured interviews and overt non-participant observation of call centre work ‘in action’; although distinct research ‘bargains’ structured the terms of access on offer in each case.

Having detailed the specifics of the research design and the focus upon three Glasgow case centres, the following chapter forms an overview of the Glasgow labour market itself. Amongst other purposes, this chapter provides an important contextual overview of Glasgow’s transition from an old industrial labour market to one reliant on new forms of service work such as call centres.

Notes

¹ While set questions were aligned on thematic sheets, these were operationalised more as reminders, and were not asked in a sequential or set manner.

² To explore the bounded world of merchant banking, McDowell (1998) used college connections from Cambridge University to target elite board members, while Smith (2005) visited estates familiar through his youth to base his enquiry into life ‘on the margins’.

³ The thinking here was again in line with a critical realist focus on contingent outcomes in response to general processes, and in particular looked to compare call centre life through Dublin’s ‘Tiger economy’ with that of de-industrialised Glasgow. This may also have produced a greater insight into the social reproductive ‘sphere’ of labour’s agency via the attitudes brought about through living and working in different types of cities supported through the same ‘type’ of work (Boyle 2006; Breathnach 2000; Bishop et al. 2003).

⁴ I had hoped to secure interviews with other Dublin call centres through snowballing contacts I had made at Ire-Tel, although this did not materialise.

⁵ None of the unions I spoke to could help me gain access into a call centre. Rather, these interviews shed light onto common problems and concerns that unions have with call centres. One union was currently struggling with a pay negotiation and did not feel the timing of such a request was appropriate, and further attempts to snowball my request did not succeed. The general impression was that unions suffered an uneasy relationship with call centres in general, thus hampering my request for access.

CHAPTER 4

THE EVOLUTION OF THE GLASGOW LABOUR MARKET

4.1 Introduction

As mentioned in Chapter 2, labour markets are not and never have been *aspatial* (Peck 1996). Rather, labour markets are contingently shaped at the local level through patterns of employment, in tandem with various institutional mechanisms which help to regulate and shape the behaviour of workers. It is through distinct institutional arrangements that local labour markets are marked by patterns of income inequality, social inclusion, and built up skills, which invariably affect the sorts of workers which capital may draw upon within a given place (Martin 2000). Accordingly:

‘It is within specific spatial settings and contexts – ‘local labour markets’ – that workers seek employment and employers hire and fire workers, that particular forms of employment structures evolve, that specific employment practices, work cultures, and labour relations become established, and particular institutionalised modes of labour regulation emerge or are imposed.’ (ibid: 456)

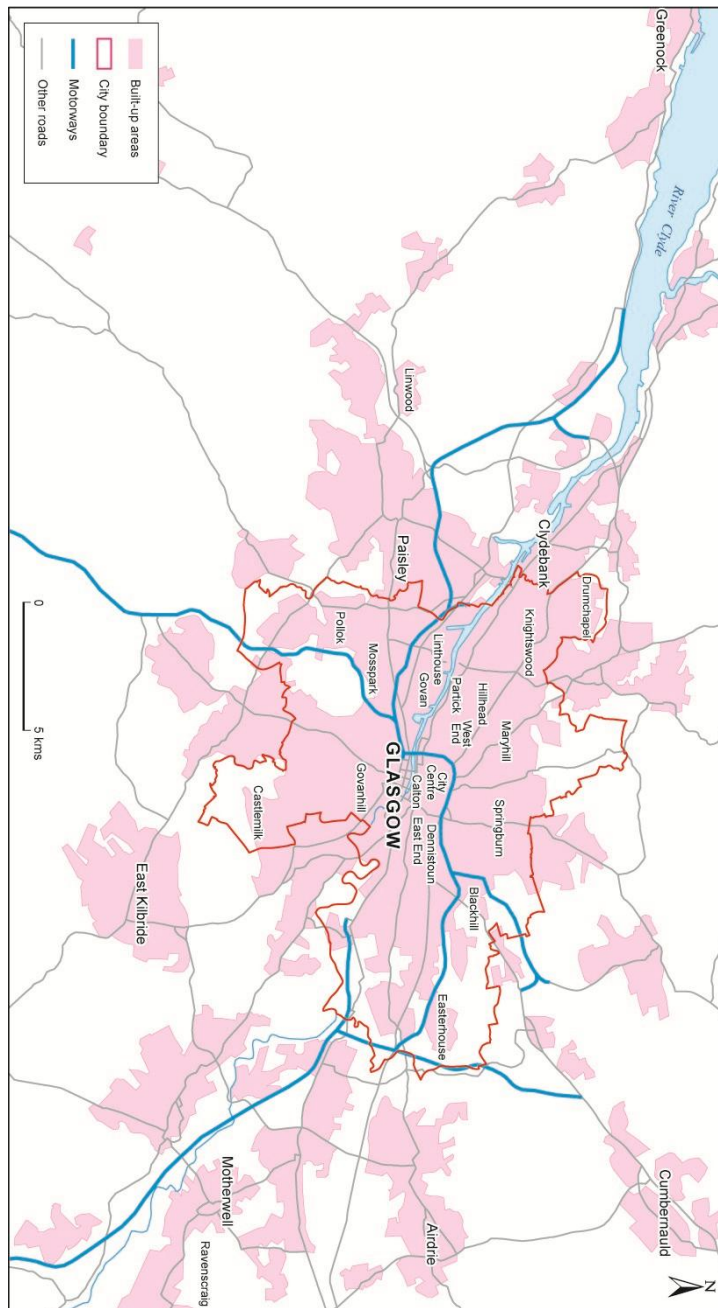
As the culture, behaviour and skills of a local workforce are shaped differently from one labour market to another, Jonas (1996) has argued a need for capital to regulate labour at the same local level via local labour control regimes (local LCRs; Castree et al. 2004: 115; Helms and Cumbers 2006). An LCR may be defined as ‘a stable local institutional framework for accumulation and labour regulation constructed around local labour market reciprocities’ (Jonas 1996: 323). Put simply, capital is required to negotiate and maintain a relationship with labour and this involves a degree of control and influence over labour’s private sphere. Together with state involvement, this commonly involves a constellation of institutional arrangements which provide (amongst other things) assistance in the form of welfare, training, and housing policies to help influence and sustain the social reproduction of labour. This is required in order to develop ‘reciprocities’ between labour and capital which will result in more harmonious production for different factions of capital. Labour control regimes are local; they vary from place to place and over time – and furthermore the impact which they have on labour tends to be *lasting* (and often unintended). This latter point is particularly relevant for old industrial areas (OIA’s) such as Glasgow, which

have traditionally developed inherently masculine worker cultures and identities geared towards hard industrial labour.

The following chapter provides an overview of the Glasgow labour market from an institutional perspective, which traces Glasgow's transition from a city based on heavy forms of industry to one currently reliant on new forms of service work. As shall be shown, understanding this history is of significant contextual importance for appreciating not only *how* and *why* service work (and implicitly call centre work) has come to prominence in Glasgow, but also how contingent worker cultures have carried over from the past. In doing so the chapter utilises the concept of the local LCR to demonstrate the varying attempts by capital and the state to produce and regulate a compliant workforce. Many of these attempts have arguably held unexpected consequences for labour's socialisation, which have not always been to the benefit of capital. In making this latter point the chapter seeks to retain a sense of labour's agency amid somewhat 'top-down' understandings of labour market control (in particular, see Helms and Cumbers 2006).

The chapter is broadly divided into three sections which cover distinct periods of the economic and social development of Glasgow, and the corresponding forms of labour market regulation. Following a brief overview of the LCR concept, the first section traces Glasgow's growth as an industrial hub from the late 19th century up until World War 1. This period – one of marked economic success – represents a baseline in Glasgow's identification as an industrial working class and productivist city. Crucially this period also marked the formation of a socialist (and at times radical) class consciousness within Glasgow. Following the breakdown of this regime, the second section reviews fluctuations in the Glasgow economy from World War 1 up until the end of the 1970s. During this period the labour market was largely regulated by a 'managerialist' approach (Harvey 1989) from the Glasgow Corporation, which sought to provide forms of social welfare to the local workforce. The final section then provides a critical overview of the contemporary Glasgow labour market and the process of rapid de-industrialisation over the last thirty years (roughly 1980-2010). This, in turn, has been accompanied by a contemporary local LCR based around a neo-liberal workfare regime.

The chapter intends to illustrate how forms of work and institutional change have shaped the Glasgow labour market and (in particular) the Glasgow workforce over time. This should not detract from the understanding that, in reality, labour market regulation is a constantly evolving process as opposed to one of sequential and coherent regime breakdown and replacement. Peck puts it well when he states: ‘Institutional responses are just that: responses. Rarely if ever do they provide absolute solutions to regulatory dilemmas. Rather, the process of labour regulation is *continuous and imperfect*’ (Peck 1996: 25, emphasis added).



Map 4-1: Map of Glasgow and surrounding hinterland

4.2 The industrial origins of the Glasgow labour market: 1875-1914

It was during the latter half of the 19th century that Glasgow rose to prominence as an industrial city of global significance, specialising in Department 1 capital goods production. These industries included coal mining, chemicals, iron and steel, and crucially the related industries of heavy engineering, shipbuilding and locomotive production (Cumbers 1996: 35). Glasgow contained important advantages for this kind of work, with its close proximity to coal and iron deposits, and with the Clyde providing ideal access to outside markets. Crucially, Glasgow at this point in time played a pivotal role in supporting the British economy and in particular the expansion of the British Empire, which provided a strong demand for such ‘heavy’ industrial goods¹. It was within this heyday period of 1875 to 1914 that Glasgow projected itself as the ‘second city’ of the British Empire, and as well as shipbuilding the supporting trades of engineering in general expanded². Mechanical engineering and metal manufacturing in particular came to account for nearly half of Glasgow employment by 1901 (Damer 1990: 32). Such an expansion was ultimately made possible by a ready supply of labour which – bolstered in particular through Irish migration - increased from 547,000 in 1871, to over 1 million people by 1914 (Checkland 1976: 8).

4.2.1 *Early labour market regulation*

Looking back over this period it is possible to trace a local control regime which attempted to maintain a broad equilibrium between labour and capital. Throughout Glasgow’s industrial boom period (1875-1914), the state played little role in terms of regulating business or attracting new forms of work to the area. However, the Town Council (known as the ‘Glasgow Corporation’) has traditionally played a supportive role for Glasgow residents, and by the end of the 19th century supplied water, gas, and electricity to city residents (Checkland 1976: 28-30). Sanitary inspectors surveyed the poor houses, alcohol was strictly policed, and thieves were swiftly prosecuted in a bid to govern and uphold the social values underpinning civic governance. Indeed, the Corporation of Glasgow became something of a ‘model’ for those interested in civic governance (possibly rivalled only by Birmingham at the turn of the 20th century), and arguably socialised the Glasgow workforce to expect state assistance/involvement at an earlier point than in other British

cities. These institutions were designed, in particular, to benefit (and so encourage) the hard-working and teetotal segments of the labour market (Damer 1990: 111-116).

During this phase of industrial expansion, housing the growing population became an irrevocable problem for the state. Around 85% of residents lived in tenements of which 2/3rds were grossly over-crowded (Checkland 1976: 18-20). The deteriorating standards of this living drew a combined effort from the Glasgow industrialists themselves (i.e. 'capital') as well as the Corporation, who drove housing inquiries and subsidised public services such as hospitals and libraries. Notably the industrial bourgeoisie also invoked 'paternalistic' strategies for regulating workers and encouraging desired behaviours outside of work. Ideally many of the Clydeside industrialist owners sought to foster a 'shipyard-as-community' world-view (Damer 1990; similarly see Joyce 1980), as demonstrated by shipyard owners such as John Elder and Alexander Stephen. This latter industrialist not only banned pubs from the adjacent Linthouse area; he also built houses for workers, and provided boys clubs, summer clubs and sponsored outings for workers in the local community (ibid). Such paternalist ventures – clearly in line with Gramsci's notion of work as a 'cultural hegemony' (Gramsci 1971) – demonstrate how industrialists throughout the late 1800s and early 1900s in particular sought to forge 'reciprocities' between the spheres of work and social reproduction (Jonas 1996; Stenning 2005). By embedding the workplace within the local community at large, capitalists sought to shape and deliver a local workforce conducive to heavy industrial labour.

As well as adopting a paternalistic approach to labour market governance – ostensibly in the interests of the local community - the Glasgow industrialists also relied upon more pernicious tactics for controlling and dividing labour both inside and out-with the sphere of production. The industrial bourgeoisie at the time were fiercely anti-trade union, and often relied upon a 'core' group of skilled workers to oversee production. Many of the chosen foremen within this core shared the same Masonic and Protestant connections to the firm owners (see Damer 1990: 35), and skilled workers in particular were often provided with housing and job security by Clydeside firms. Initiatives such as these helped to legitimise industrial authority by reproducing the hierarchies of the workplace within local areas themselves, as well as publicising the social conscious of the firm in question³ (Melling 1982: 63; Helms and Cumbers 2006; Checkland 1976). Reinforcing class status along

such lines potentially fostered class cooperation rather than conflict, and firms similarly played a role in reproducing labour market segmentation along (in particular) sectarian lines⁴. As Helms and Cumbers (2006: 73) note, this often included ‘...the tradition of families working in particular firms with recruitment and training into skilled work often regulated by birth and kinship’⁵. As a result of these practices, the majority of Highland and Irish workers were ultimately forced to adopt semi or unskilled occupations marked by casualisation and low pay.

Nevertheless, it is important to stress that marginal segments of the local population also responded autonomously to maintain their own identity and to fight for better working and living conditions. Highland immigrants from the 1700s onwards had long established their own institutions, which included various social clubs, churches and schools of their own to help maintain Gaelic culture, history and identity (Damer 1990). Similarly Irish migrants erected their own pubs, clubs (including, of course, Glasgow Celtic) and church organisations to combat the discrimination so prevalent in the city. These cultural resources provided important mechanisms for coping with sectarian abuse and divide, without (yet) threatening to alter or overthrow the power-relations of the city. In addition to these institutions, the shared experiences and struggles of migrant segments helped to establish a lived experience of class and a consciousness akin to the ‘history from below’ school of E.P. Thompson. Politically both the Irish and Highland segments of the labour market also carried with them a radical tradition dating back to their own historical struggles over land reform, which naturally linked these groups to socialist and egalitarian worker parties (notably the Socialist Labour Party and the Industrial Workers of Great Britain: the ‘IWGB’).

While workers of skilled trades in particular had traditionally maintained unions on a local, multi-trade basis⁶, this growing popularity of socialist politics – and the influence of the IWGB in particular – encouraged the uptake of unions for workers outside of the skilled engineering professions (including those within unskilled trades, often involving women as well as men). Notably, membership of those affiliated with the Scottish Trades Union Congress rose from 129,000 in 1909 to 230,000 in 1914; and more strike activity took place between 1910 and 1914 than the whole of the previous 1900-1910 decade (Glasgow Digital Library, no date). Flashpoints prior to World War One included the Glasgow

railway strike in 1890, the engineering lockout of 1897 and the Singers strike in 1911. During this latter strike at a sewing machine plant in Clydebank, the majority of 11,000 workers ultimately withdrew their labour in protest to changes in production tied to scientific management. The Singer strike eventually ended with an unconditional return to work, yet it was evident by the dawn of World War 1 that a staunch and increasingly intractable working class culture was taking shape throughout Glasgow.

In sum, this loose LCR from the late 1800s to the start of the First World War relied largely on corporate paternalism, coupled with early forms of civic governance as the primary institutions in smoothing the social relations between labour and capital. The industrial bourgeoisie in particular invested great efforts to smooth the work-locality relations for those employed in the Clydeside yards. In a general sense the work itself also impacted the culture and identity of the Glasgow workforce as a whole. There existed a sense of pride and achievement through heavy engineering and the immense ships which resulted from skilled work and hard graft. These roles were, of course, traditionally male – thus caricaturing the city as one of ‘masculine’ hard labour, heavy drinking and bouts of violence (Damer 1990). Yet at the same time, the launch of a major vessel became a family spectacle which the city as a whole could take pride from. Nevertheless, by 1913 these institutional arrangements were clearly struggling to contain the increasingly militant and politically active worker classes. As Boyle and Hughes (1994: 455) note: ‘As the first world war approached, Glasgow’s working classes had formed and their militancy was already giving Glasgow the reputation of the most socialist city in the UK’.

4.3 New forms of control: The managerialist era and state provision of social welfare

Throughout World War 1 a demand for engineering, steel and coal maintained the Glasgow economy; yet the end of the war heralded a faltering world economy and a lack of industrial demand. Glasgow’s dependence upon heavy industry was evident and yet little was done to help diversify its economic base. Alternative industrial products (such as the airplane or automobile) commonly required a flexibility and responsiveness incompatible with large-scale heavy engineering (Checkland 1976). This problem was reflected in the wider spatial division of labour in the UK as a whole. New and footloose industries primarily located in the Midlands and the South-East of England - in close proximity to

consumer markets - whilst regions of the 'North' maintained their concentration in old basic sectors such as heavy engineering and shipbuilding (Massey 1984). With its over-specialised economy, the inter-war depression hit Glasgow hard and throughout the 1920's unemployment never fell below 14% (ibid: 35). Unemployment was heavily linked with Glasgow's declining share of world ship production, which fell from 20% to 14% from the mid 1920s – 1930s in the face of subsidised foreign competition (Pacione 1995: 132). At this stage, local government still maintained little role in terms of nurturing new forms of employment, and Glasgow generally still relied upon the British Empire and the demands of world trade to generate industrial demand. Fortunately, the Second World War again brought new capital investment to Glasgow and a fresh demand for the products of heavy industry (which effectively 'mopped up' the 178,000 who were out of work prior to this period; see Checkland 1976: 45).

4.3.1 Labour market control: The rise of 'Red Clydeside' and state managerialism

Between the years 1914-1939 the Glasgow Corporation sought to mediate the increasingly volatile tensions that had developed between worker groups and different factions of capital (notably landlords and industrial owners) both inside and outside of the workplace. During this time the Corporation adjusted its relationship with industry, and also developed a more comprehensive role as the 'people's institution' (Keating 1988). This effectively marked the start of a new LCR involving local service provision to assist the social reproduction and wellbeing of Glasgow's urban population. These institutional adjustments – effectively early forms of managerial governance dubbed 'municipal socialism' - held a profound cultural effect on the local population of Glasgow, which has arguably carried over to this day.

Ultimately a series of strikes and well publicised social protests signified the breakdown of the previous forms of labour market control: i.e. that of corporate paternalism and basic civic governance. Glasgow's reputation as a socialist working class city was captured in the epithet 'Red Clydeside', although it is widely understood that strikes and protests centred upon the interests of specific groups. In the sphere of production, notable examples included the engineering dispute of 1915; the resistance to skill dilution in 1916, and most famously the '40 hour' engineering strike in January 1919 (Glasgow Digital Library, no date). This latter (general) strike involved engineering shops and shipbuilding

yards on the Clyde, who sought to reduce the working week to these hours. The strike was ultimately successful in winning a 47 hour week – 10 hours less than the previous arrangement - but not before tanks and troops were sent in to break up the peaceful protests of 60,000 demonstrators in George Square (on January 31st 1919; see Damer 1990).

However it was strike action outside of the workplace which arguably induced the greatest social gains for the Glasgow workforce. The 1915 Rent Strike took place in several districts of the city in protest to the rent increases at this time⁷. With so many of Glasgow's men at war, it was women in particular who began organising strike committees and campaigns for the non-payment of rents. In turn, the pursuit of court action by landlords to evict tenants gained widespread public support for the strikers. These strikes were also backed by the Independent Labour Party (ILP) and workers in the munitions factories and shipyards, who subsequently threatened their own sympathy strikes. In turn the national attention this generated (which involved upwards of 20,000 tenants) effectively forced the Corporation to respond through the Rent Restriction Act of the same year, which froze rent rates at pre-war level. Linking back to recent critiques of labour geography, this again demonstrates the need to acknowledge community politics outside the workplace as well as in it as a means by which workers can secure a 'better deal' from both capital and the state (Cumbers et al. 2010; Wills et al. 2009).

In response to these radical protests, the form of labour market control changed markedly throughout the 1920's and 1930's. In 1922 the Independent Labour Party⁸ (the 'ILP') secured Glasgow in the general election: a victory which included the election of John Wheatley, a leader of the 1915-1916 Rent Strike. In turn, various other Housing Acts (following the formation of the Housing Department in 1919) came into being. Of particular interest, the Wheatley Act of 1924 guaranteed subsidy for local authority housing on a 'rent not sale' basis, and in doing so the local population secured low rent and subsidised living through the Glasgow Corporation (Finlay 2004)⁹. In allocating new houses, the Corporation began to determine the socio-spatial makeup of Glasgow via strong centralised control and planning of the city (Boyle and Hughes 1994). As Checkland (1976: 38) notes:

'The Corporation, ruled by the 'Moderates', took its tenants for the green-field developments on a selective basis; they were largely skilled and semi-skilled men

and white-collar workers, to the exclusion of the dwellers in the slums. This represented, in effect, a continuance of nineteenth and early twentieth century policies of assisting the ‘deserving’, those who could most ‘benefit’ from the new homes’

It was not until 1933 that the Labour Party united its distinct factions and won control of the local council itself. By this stage the Corporation employed upwards of 40,000 workers and provided a ‘fair wage’ clause for all those in its employment (Checkland 1976). Culturally these institutional developments held a profound effect on the Glasgow workforce. Following on from earlier forms of civic governance a significant proportion of the population now came to rely upon the ‘municipal socialism’ of the Glasgow Corporation for both housing and employment in a wholly co-dependent fashion (Craig 2010; Checkland 1976; Damer 1990). Between 1919 and 1939, upwards of 76,000 houses were built throughout the city: of which 54,289 were Corporation houses (with 10,235 receiving state assistance; Checkland 1976: 40). The provision of welfare and state housing in particular came in addition to a culture already geared towards masculine/productivist forms of heavy industrial work, in which unions and the possibility of striking played a key role in defending the terms and conditions of employment.

4.3.2 Deindustrialisation, restructuring and responses to decline and decay

After World War 2, unemployment dropped to between 3 - 3.5% as Britain in general regenerated under a new ‘Fordist’ regime of accumulation. Reflecting the widespread acceptance of state intervention and the use of Keynesian economic policies to tackle social and economic ills, the British state began a more active involvement in the economy and society as a whole. This translated into high spending on social welfare programmes to help uphold social stability. In exchange for high rates of productivity, labour was effectively rewarded by strong union representation, relatively decent wages and job security: thus perpetuating a cycle of relative harmony between labour and capital (Coe et al. 2007: 68; Cumbers et al. 2010). In its capacity as a local arm of the welfare state, the Glasgow Corporation expanded its role as a provider services, facilities and benefits to the urban population. This led, in particular, to a renewed effort to address the continued issue of overcrowding and appalling housing conditions in the city.

During the inter-war years the Glasgow Corporation built some 50,000 houses in a bid to address the legacy of 19th century tenement over-crowding. Initially the Corporation had sought to break from Glasgow's tenement tradition, as evident by the semi-detached housing schemes of Knightswood and Mosspark (built during 1921-1923). However, due to cost restrictions the Corporation reverted to cheaper forms of tenement construction throughout the 1920s and 1930s (Keating 1988: 17). As Keating notes 'such schemes as Blackhill and Calton (1933-38) were associated with slum clearance under a 1935 Act and attracted a social stigma from the outset' (ibid). Following World War 2 it became apparent that housing conditions in Glasgow were (to say the least) ever poor and over-crowded. As Damer (1990: 187) notes:

‘According to the 1951 census the city still contained 1,090,000 people, of whom 750,000 were living in some 1,800 acres at an average density of 400 persons per acre...24.6 per cent of the population lived at a density of more than two persons per room; 44.2 per cent of houses were overcrowded. A staggering 29.2 per cent of houses lacked an inside toilet while 43 per cent had no bath.’

The national and local tiers of government held contrasting solutions to this problem. At the local level the Glasgow Corporation - maintaining responsibility for the social reproduction needs of Glasgow residents - sought to build 200,000 new homes within Glasgow's periphery¹⁰. The plan was rejected by the Scottish Office, who saw a reduction of Glasgow's population as vital in restructuring Scotland's economy. In turn, the Scottish Office adopted the Abercrombie plan (directly opposed by the Corporation) which posited the relocation of 250,000 Glasgow residents into New and Expanded Towns outside the city (such as Cumbernauld and East Kilbride). These areas were subsequently connected by post-war motorways and rail links (MacInnes 1995; McGregor and Mather 1986). In addition to the New Towns, less affluent segments of the population were to be re-housed in the peripheral estates of Castlemilk, Pollok, Drumchapel and Easterhouse. These ventures were primarily constructed during the late 1940s and early 1950s, and fell under the direct control of the Corporation. The estates were notoriously under resourced, and struggled to provide even basic amenities such as shops, community centres and transportation services. Nevertheless, based on year on year expansion from 1945, these estates came to house some 130,000 people in 44,000 houses by 1969 (Damer 1990: 190).

Notably the Housing Act of 1954 had initiated slum clearance in the city, and the subsequent ten years saw the removal of more than 30,000 homes. As a result of this rapid restructuring, Glasgow's population was to fall from over 1,090,000 in 1951 to just 688,195 by 1991 (Damer 1990: 204).

While the Corporation provided this new housing as a solution to the overcrowded and squalid conditions of city living¹¹, restructuring did not take place without marked pockets of resistance. In particular the deprivation in the new peripheral estates such as Easterhouse and Pollock sparked a fresh wave of community politics from the 1950s onwards, as tenants associations sprang up to campaign for missing amenities such as shops and community halls. In other areas (e.g. Partick) similar bodies were later turned into housing associations which opposed the demolition of traditional working-class tenements (instead favouring a modernisation approach). Far from fostering 'reciprocities' between the spheres of production and reproduction, this form of community politics – carrying over from traditional socialist struggles in the city – demonstrates the increasingly strained relationship between workers and the Corporation from the 1950s onwards (Damer 1990).

4.3.3 Industrial decline and attempts to rejuvenate the economic base

In addition to the problem of re-housing the urban population, by the late 1950's Glasgow's economy was now causing serious concern for both local and national tiers of government. Between 1948 and 1960, the Clyde's share of world ship tonnage collapsed from 18% to 4% in the face of more efficient foreign competition (Pacione 1995: 135). By the early 1960s most shipyards were losing money, and in 1965 the Fairfield's yard suffered financial collapse (Checkland 1976). This decline reflected the wider social relations of how Glasgow was linked to UK and international political economy. The UK Government no longer required the products of heavy industry on the same scale as before, and foreign competition was fierce amid a state of global over-production¹². Crucially, the majority of Clydeside firms were also slow to adopt new technologies and production methods; and much of the equipment used remained technically obsolete. Many of the foreign yards utilised more efficient assembly line production methods which Clydeside firms struggled to apply due to the short frontages onto the narrow river Clyde (Pacione 1995: 135). Furthermore, the global demand for ships had changed towards larger and more powerful cargo vessels which Glasgow's small shipyards struggled to produce. In

pinpointing these factors it is also important to note that the British state lacked an effective modernisation policy for the UK economy as a whole subsequent to World War 2¹³ (Massey and Meegan 1982; Massey 1984). As a result, the decline in Glasgow shipbuilding drew an ad hoc and largely unsuccessful response from the British government.

In an attempt to rejuvenate shipbuilding on the Clyde, the British government, trade unions, and private enterprise began to pool their resources for the first time¹⁴. This largely resulted in industrial experimentation¹⁵ and the amalgamation of inefficient and competing ship yards in a bid to encourage a more efficient and competitive shipbuilding industry. In particular 1968 saw the amalgamation of five struggling shipyards into one company: the Upper Clyde Shipbuilders (UCS). These and other rejuvenation projects ultimately failed to induce lasting employment, despite respective spending of £30 million and £59.4 million on the UCS and the Govan Shipbuilders groups alone (Checkland 1976: 50-52). Different factors have been cited to help explain these failures. On the side of workers, Damer (1990) in particular has levelled the blame solely on the ownership of the engineering and shipbuilding firms ‘which refused to innovate either in terms of capital investment or management structures’ (Damer 1990: 185). Alternatively, more conservative accounts have pointed to the militant nature of the Clydeside labour force - and in particular worker loyalty to shop stewards over management - as a key contributor in Glasgow’s industrial decline (Checkland 1976). This loyalty is well demonstrated by the 1971 UCS ‘work-in’ wherein shop stewards of the UCS resisted government attempts to close the yard by persuading workers to *maintain* production (as opposed to traditional striking methods)¹⁶. Despite demonstrating a clear willingness to work, the publicity of the UCS work-in served to heighten Glasgow’s reputation as militant working class city.

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s the national government also pursued a regional development policy, using financial incentives to encourage new forms of industry to locate in depressed areas of the country (in particular OIAs). This resulted in a fresh ‘layer’ of investment in the form of branch plant manufacturing, as Glasgow adopted a new ‘niche’ role in the wider spatial division of labour (Massey 1984). Branch plants commonly represented routine assembly line work, quite unrelated to the former layer of heavy industrial employment. Furthermore, control of these firms tended to remain

external, offering little possibility for knowledge transfer or sustained economic growth (see Firm 1975; Phelps 2009; Hudson 1988). However, in terms of labour market control, branch plants did offer the potential to adjust the old industrial attitudes to work (whilst still providing workers with at least some form of productivist employment). As Hudson (1992) notes, in this scenario high unemployment rates formed something of a resource for investors to draw upon, as subsequently firms could pick and choose the most productive and flexible employees from a pool of 'green labour'. In doing so branch plant employment represented a means for the state to reformulate the working class '...in terms of its age and gender composition and attitudes towards work and trades unionism' (Hudson 1992: 6). Around Glasgow key examples came to include the Ravenscraig steel mill (buoyed by a £50 million loan) as well as the Rootes car plant in Linwood (where investments totalled £45 million by 1975). However neither of these ventures developed into self-sustaining industries, and both experienced persistent industrial disputes and stoppages.¹⁷ By the late 1970s, it appeared that Glasgow was finally paying the price for a historical dependence upon heavy industrial production (the 'lock-in' in Grabher's Ruhr example; Grabher 1993) and its failure to diversify its economic base through investment in new forms of engineering technology.

Notably, attempts to lure branch plant operations required regional and local institutions to promote suitable sites for firms to take root, and so the promotion of these industries became heavily entwined with urban planning. As a result, the New and Expanded Towns in particular gained a much larger proportion of new jobs than that of Greater Glasgow¹⁸. The proportion of employment in manufacturing establishments opened since 1950 verifies this fact; in 1970, 19% of Greater Glasgow's employment came from post-1950 manufacturing establishments compared to 31% for Scotland as a whole. These figures rose to 31% for Greater Glasgow and 50% for the whole of Scotland by 1984 (MacInnes 1995: 84). This pattern created virtuous cycles of growth for the new towns, but also ones of decline for the old industrial areas. Those remaining in the city often came to represent an ageing and alienated segment of the labour market, coupled with fewer skills and less experience of recent employment¹⁹ (ibid: 82).

4.3.4 Unemployment and deprivation: the failure of managerial governance

Looking back on the period 1950 to 1980 it is clear that Glasgow's economic base underwent a significant period of restructuring, which was ultimately marked by sharp

economic decline. While the shipbuilding industry effectively collapsed, the numbers employed in manufacturing fell from 265,000 to just 135,000 over this period (see Table 4-1). As a result, unemployment increased to 6.5 percent in 1970 and more than doubled again to 15.1 percent by 1980.

Table 4-1: Employment structure – Glasgow City, 1950-89 (000's)

	1950	1960	1970	1980
Manufacturing	265	279	192	135
Services	255	260	273	263
Total employment	521	540	466	399
Unemployment (per cent)	2.2	2.8	6.5	15.1

Source: Paddison (1993: 344)

In tandem with this failure to rejuvenate Glasgow's economic base – and despite the efforts made to re-house the urban population – social deprivation was also rife in much of the city, as confirmed by appraisals in the early 1970's. Using an index of six factors²⁰, in 1972 it was discovered that no less than 13,000 acres (half the city of Glasgow) came into the worst three classes of social deprivation (Keating 1988: 27). Crucially, poverty was shown to extend well beyond the old slum areas and included much of the post-war housing schemes. In addition, media reports throughout the 1970s portrayed Glasgow as a violent and deprived city. Many of the new estates (in particular Easterhouse) had taken on similar reputations of gang violence and poverty as those previously held by the old Gorbals area. As Damer notes '...violence mirrored the way the city appeared to the outsider – as an ocean of dereliction, blackened tenements, public drunkenness, dozens of unlovely skyscrapers, (and) featureless housing schemes...' (Damer 1990: 203). Attempts at reversing this image took paramount importance from the early 1980s onwards, and effectively marked the end of the managerialist approach to labour market control.

4.4 The de-industrialising city: the switch to entrepreneurial governance and new strategies for regeneration

From the 1980s onwards, Glasgow's City Council²¹ adopted an alternative strategy for curbing the city's economic decline. After 1977, the Labour Party reflected its local election loss, and re-emerged in 1980 with a fresh mandate to reduce unemployment and to increase the stock of jobs in Glasgow. In theory this involved a change in governance strategy from the previous regime of urban managerialism (based on reproductive welfare support towards the community), in favour of urban entrepreneurialism (Harvey 1989). This latter model was geared to attract investments from private capital – often through public-private project funding - in order to promote fresh growth in the service and consumption industries, and as part of a bid to reverse negative perceptions of Glasgow. Subsequently, better representation of the city became an imperative for the council, and Glasgow became one of the first British cities to embrace place marketing as a regeneration strategy (Paddison 1993; Boyle and Hughes 1994).

City marketing is closely tied to urban entrepreneurialism, and broadly translates as promotion strategies aimed at image rehabilitation and reconstruction, often in targeted forms (Paddison 1993; Gomez 1998; Hall and Hubbard 1996). Following the advice of the McKinsey and Company report (1994; commissioned by the Scottish Development Agency), investments in cultural and arts infrastructure were sought as a vehicle for reversing the image of Glasgow as a rough industrial city in decline (Hudson 1992). The response was a series of cultural campaigns and initiatives launched throughout the 1980s and early 1990s,²² which famously included the Glasgow's 'Miles Better' promotion which ran from 1983-1990. In 1990 Glasgow became Europe's sixth City of Culture; and with a budget of £52 million over 3,800 events took place over the course of the year. Entrepreneurial discourses were present throughout these campaigns - with millions of pounds spent on advertising the city as an exciting, vibrant, exhilarating place - in an attempt to attract as much cultural industry and tourism as possible.

The publicity and reinvention also attracted a fervent base of local opposition, best articulated via a collection of politically Left artists, celebrities, and academics dismayed at the false sanitising of the city's image. These groups in turn campaigned for an alternative, more accurate portrayal of a traditional 'Workers City' (MacLeod 2002; Boyle and Hughes

1991; Boyle and Hughes 1994). This movement in itself generated negative media attention, especially in the local Glasgow Herald. The group felt Glaswegians should be better able to present their own culture: that of a gritty socialist history of enduring industrial hardship, as opposed to a more sanitised brand of life, geared towards outsider consumption.

More tangibly, the built environment of Glasgow also underwent considerable change during this period, involving several designer retail developments such as Princes Square and the Italian centre within 'Merchant City': a now gentrified residential, shopping and leisure area in the city centre. The city's main retail street - Buchanan Street - was also refashioned and adapted to include the £250 million construction of the 'ultrastylish' Buchanan Galleries shopping centre (opened in 1999, see MacLeod 2002: 611-612). In direct contrast to the municipal socialism and the Keynesian-welfare regime of the past, these changes were also accompanied by new geographies of displacement in a bid to cover up many of the social ills of Glasgow. Specifically this included the closure of hostels for the homeless (notably the former George Hotel opposite the Buchanan Galleries), the restriction of Big Issue sellers, and the heightened presence of CCTV to help monitor and regulate the behaviour of citizens and tourists (MacLeod 2002; Belina and Helms 2003; Fyfe and Bannister 1998). As a by-product of these developments, a 'Skid Row' for Glasgow's street people effectively took shape on the north bank of the River Clyde. Smith (1996) has linked this form of urban entrepreneurialism to the onset of 'revanchist' urban politics: as firms have capitalised on 1970's dereliction by turning cheap city-centre land into gentrified, consumer driven urban space.

Such policies are clearly at odds with the municipal socialism and welfare objectives traditionally held by the Glasgow Corporation. Furthermore, this image of Glasgow as a vibrant and aspirational place continues to sit uneasily with the economic and social reality for many of those living in Glasgow (particularly those on the peripheral estates). Throughout the late 1990s, around one-third of the Glasgow population were still reliant on state benefits for support (Danson et al. 1997). Nevertheless, it is clear that the City Council faced an urgent need to attract inward investment and new forms of work following the collapse of heavy industry throughout the 1960s and 1970s in particular. There can be no doubting that Glasgow's reputation as city of crime and deprivation

(particularly by the end of the 1970s) required urgent redressing, and the entrepreneurial initiatives did go some way to achieving this goal.

4.4.1 *The contemporary Glasgow labour market*

In terms of labour market change, measuring the effects of the entrepreneurial approach to governance and place promotion is a difficult task. Between 1981 and 2006 Glasgow experienced a net growth of close to 15,000 new jobs, although this figure masks profound changes in the nature of work coming in and leaving Glasgow during this period (as Table 4-2 demonstrates). Since 1981, employment within manufacturing and construction has declined dramatically: with Glasgow losing 64,000 jobs (down by 73% on 1981) and over 9,500 jobs in construction (a loss of 35% on 1981 levels). For the most part these roles have been replaced by jobs in the service sector, which experienced a net growth of 91,575 jobs between 1981 and 2006 (a 36% growth rate). The upshot of this change is that some 89% of Glasgow jobs were based in service roles by 2006, with just 10% of jobs corresponding to traditional forms of productivist work in manufacturing and construction.

Of particular interest, the emotional skills and behaviours which many of these new service roles require contrasts directly with the skills required in manufacturing, construction and heavy engineering which once dominated the labour market. While it is true that many of the new service jobs are 'high end' forms of knowledge work (in particular roles in financial and business services), it is equally the case that a large degree of the jobs coming in – in particular those associated with the call centre industry - are often marked by casualisation, low skill, and low pay (Allen and Henry 1997; Helms and Cumbers 2006; Thompson 2004). This fresh layer of investment in the form of service work comes in direct contrast to the more regular, stable, and (often) relatively well paying forms of blue collar work which have left the area (Helms and Cumbers 2006; Cumbers et al. 2009). In turn, these changes have corresponded with a notable 'feminisation' of the labour market: with 18% more women gaining employment between 1981 and 2006 compared to 8% less men (see Table 4-2). Notably this has coincided with an increase in part time and casualised forms of employment, with the rate in part time work increasing by 70%. By 2006 part time work constituted as much as 30% of all Glasgow employment, including more men than ever before (at a rate of 8% compared to just 2% back in 1981; *ibid*).

Table 4-2: Components of change in the Glasgow labour market 1981 – 2006

Sectoral change	1981 (% of total)	2006 (% of total)	% change 1981-2006	Net job change
Manufacturing industries	23.2	6.1	-72.8	- 63,932
Services	68.0	88.8	+35.7	+ 91,575
Construction	7.2	4.5	- 35.3	- 9,580
<i>Gender Composition of change</i>				
Male	54.3	48.1	- 8.0	- 16,414
Female	45.7	51.9	+18.1	+31,316
Male f/t	52.0	40.4	- 19.2	- 37,704
Male p/t	2.3	7.7	+240.0	+21,289
Female f/t	29.3	29.0	+2.9	+3,237
Female p/t	16.4	22.9	+45.5	+28,079
All f/t	81.3	69.4	-11.2	-34,467
All p/t	18.7	30.6	+69.8	+49,368
Total jobs growth			+3.9	+14,892

Source: Cumbers et al. (2009: 8)

It is therefore clear that a rapid process of labour market restructuring has taken place within the last thirty years – whatever the social costs of this re-alignment which are discussed shortly – which has profoundly altered the nature of the Glasgow labour market. What once was considered a staunchly masculine city of long hours and hard production work now lends itself as a service city with high rates of female and part time employment. Whilst 90% of work in Glasgow is now involved in services, as mentioned this figure incorporates a wide spectrum of roles which vary greatly in terms of quality and pay.

Table 4-3 profiles the employment by occupation for Glasgow, in contrast to the rest of Scotland and Great Britain as a whole. Occupations are here broken down into nine ‘Soc 2000’ groups reflecting the roles at the top and bottom ends of the labour market.

Table 4-3: Employment by occupation (Jul 2008 – June 2009)

	(numbers)	Glasgow (%)	Scotland (%)	Great Britain (%)
Soc 2000 major group 1-3	108,900	42.0	41.7	43.9
1 Managers and senior officials	32,200	12.3	13.5	15.6
2 Professional occupations	40,300	15.4	13.3	13.4
3 Associate professional & technical	36,400	13.9	14.7	14.7
Soc 2000 major group 4-5	52,800	20.4	22.7	22.0
4 Administrative & secretarial	29,200	11.2	11.3	11.3
5 Skilled trades occupations	23,600	9.0	11.4	10.6
Soc 2000 major group 6-7	49,700	19.2	16.8	15.9
6 Personal service occupations	23,100	8.8	8.8	8.4
7 Sales and customer service occs	26,500	10.1	8.0	7.5
Soc 2000 major group 8-9	47,600	18.4	18.8	18.2
8 Process plant & machine operatives	17,800	6.8	7.2	6.9
9 Elementary occupations	29,800	11.4	11.6	11.3

Source: Nomis (2010)

At first glance, it is worthwhile acknowledging that the profile of occupations in Glasgow now broadly correlates with the averages for Scotland and Great Britain as a whole. This in itself demonstrates the rapid process of restructuring which has taken place in the last fifty years, bearing in mind the high concentrations of industrial work which formerly distinguished Glasgow (and other OIA's) from the majority of British cities. As a result, Glasgow now employs over 108,000 in a series of high end managerial and professional/technical occupations. At 42% of jobs, this closely reflects the proportions employed across Scotland (41.7%) and Britain (43.9%) as a whole. This figure is more than double the 47,600 – or 18.4% - who are employed in occupations at the bottom end of the labour market (i.e. Soc 2000 groups 8-9; a figure closely matched throughout Britain as a whole).

Between these extremes at the top and bottom ends of the labour market, over 102,000 workers are employed in the Soc groups 4-7, which largely reflects a middle-range of service occupations. Groups 4-5 include administrative and secretarial roles as well as other skilled occupations, for which Glasgow contains a slightly lower proportion compared to Scotland and the UK as a whole (20.4% compared to 22.7% for Scotland). Noticeably Glasgow compensates for this shortfall through a higher proportion of lower end service roles (Soc groups 6-7); where it employs close to 50,000 or 19.2% in contrast to a British rate 15.9%. These occupations include personal service, sales, and customer service operations as well as a significant proportion of call centre roles for which Glasgow is now famed (discussed at greater length in Chapter 5; see Bristow et al. 2002).

4.4.2 A polarised landscape: unemployment, education, and social deprivation

Since the late 1990's there have been signs of economic resurgence within the Glasgow labour market (Turok and Bailey 2004), as testified by the rate of unemployment which dropped by 2.8% between 1997-2009 (higher than the drop rate for Scotland, which stood at 2.4%). However, the rapid shift from an old industrial labour market to one reliant upon a very different set of service roles has continued to leave large segments of the population behind (of which 392,000 were of working age as of 2008). As Helms and Cumbers (2006) note, this has resulted in a 'growing polarisation in the labour market between professional and managerial workers, able to take advantage of the new economy sectors such as financial services and information technology, and those at the lower end who lack

the education and skills’ (ibid: 75). As many as 107,600 people are classed as economically inactive at the time of writing: that is 27.9% of the Glasgow population, in contrast to 20.3% rate for Scotland as a whole (for the period July 2008 to June 2009: Nomis 2010; see Table 4-4).

Table 4-4: Economic inactivity (July 2008 – June 2009)

	Glasgow Scotland Great Britain			
	(numbers)	(%)	(%)	(%)
All people				
Economically inactive	107,600	27.9	20.3	21.1
Wanting a job	24,700	6.4	5.7	5.6
Not wanting a job	82,900	21.5	14.6	15.5

Source: Nomis (2010)

Figures for the period July 2008 – June 2009 also show that the percentage of those in employment in Glasgow stood at just 65.5%, compared to the significantly higher Scottish average of 74.8 % (Nomis 2010). These rates are at least partially explained by the qualification levels held by Glasgow residents, which reveal significant polarisation. 33% of the Glasgow population hold an NVQ4 or above, which is the same rate for Scotland and higher than Great Britain’s rate of 29%. What is especially stark is the segment within Glasgow’s labour market with ‘no qualifications’; which stands at 19% compared to just 13% and 12% for the rest of Scotland and Great Britain respectively (For the period January 2008-December 2008; Nomis 2010). For those who struggle to find work as a result, this has helped to foster disproportionately high numbers of working age residents who claim benefits. Glasgow City’s percentage of total claimants stands at around one quarter (26%) compared to 18% for the whole of Scotland. Crucially, the city records 23% of its working age clients on ‘Key out-of-work benefits’ – a figure which includes job seekers, incapacity benefits, lone parents and others on income related benefits - in contrast to just 12% for Britain on average (Nomis 2010). While a smaller proportion of young (18-24) and older (50 plus) residents claim Job Seekers Allowance than Scotland or Britain

as a whole, it is the core group of residents aged 25-49 who claim at a higher than average rate of 57% compared to 54% for Britain on average.

The knock-on effects for those experiencing life at the bottom end of the labour market are reflected in the high rates of social deprivation and household poverty within Glasgow. To this end, Dorling and Thomas (2004) have reported that over 40 per cent of Glasgow households continue to live below the poverty line (defined as half the median income rate); whilst Shaw et al. (2005: 1017) show that Glasgow contains 9 out of the bottom 10 areas of the UK for premature mortality rates (Cumbers et al. 2009). These findings have also been backed up by the Scottish Government, utilising the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation²³. Despite improvements on previous years, here the latest data (from 2009) reveals that Glasgow contains 45 % of the 5% most deprived areas; 36% of the 10% most deprived areas; and 30 per cent of the 15% most deprived areas in Scotland (Scottish Government 2009). Evidently, Glasgow's reinvention as an 'entrepreneurial' city of services and consumption has continued to leave large segments of Glasgow's population behind.

4.4.3 Glasgow's post-industrial labour control regime

In response to this problem of labour market exclusion and the resulting poverty which has ensued, Helms and Cumbers (2006) have identified a contemporary local LCR for Glasgow which is designed to ease the city's transition to a service based economy. Specifically this regime has targeted the large segment of Glasgow's population which currently rely on benefits, and is heavily bound by New Labour's 'Welfare to Work' agenda (Peck and Theodore 2000). In exploring the LCR's influence on work, Helms and Cumbers focus upon the restructuring of skills training for those out of work, together with the role of intermediate labour market (ILM) programmes which help to deliver the unemployed into the new forms of available work in Glasgow. To prepare workers for this transition, the LCR is shown to rely on both national and, in particular, local institutions (such as Scottish Enterprise Glasgow (SEG) and Glasgow Works) as the main agencies charged with delivering the necessary skills training to the unemployed. Furthermore these agencies are shown to play a key role in 'un-doing' the learned values and aspirations of, in particular, the urban poor growing up in areas formerly reliant on productivist forms of work.

These institutions face several barriers in achieving their aim. Notably, many young people in Glasgow still aspire to productivist forms of work which used to dominate the area – i.e. manufacturing and construction (Cumbers et al. 2009; McDowell 2003; Helms and Cumbers 2006). As shown, job numbers in both of these sectors have radically declined in recent decades, although construction is still acknowledged as a possible growth area for Glasgow. To help train and ready candidates for these roles, Modern Apprenticeship²⁴ (MA) schemes were first introduced back in 1996, while ILM actors (such as the Social Inclusion Partnership and Glasgow Works) work with candidates and help to identify and contact potential (in this case construction) employers. However, these applications are rarely successful, and as such the ILMs are shown to adopt an alternative discursive role in *reshaping* the aspirations and mentalities of the young and unemployed away from traditional industrial work, and towards (the often low paying and instable) forms of work in the service sector. The role of ILMs in addressing this ‘cultural lag’ (McDowell 2003: 24) in working class aspirations is summed up by an early interview with JobCentre Plus in relation to call centre stigmas:

‘I think the unemployed people’s perception of contact centres is ‘it’s not for them’. A lot of people think it’s selling and they’re not comfortable with that. So I think it’s quite hard to ‘sell’ to unemployed people... there’s people coming off the benefit, and they’re thinking ‘am I still gonna get a job in a factory, or shipbuilding, or whatever’. Now they jobs aren’t there, so it’s kind of educating our customers that there are other options where you can have a very good career....’

Team Manager, JobCentre Plus (September 2007)

Many ILM programmes are geared specifically for training and providing work experience so that candidates can take up low paying roles in the service sector. Glasgow Works provides several such programmes (13 projects with 500 participants per year in 2006) to this end, although they last a maximum of just 26 weeks and ultimately struggle to deliver work on a long term basis after this. Once again, the task of ILM supervisors and managers ultimately turns to re-shaping the aspirations of candidates, in addition to ‘placing’ people in employment rather than providing meaningful training and skill acquisition for candidates in need of work (Helms and Cumbers 2006: 80).

4.4.4 *Labour agency and resisting LCR coercion*

Crucially Helms and Cumbers (*ibid*; Cumbers et al. 2010) are adamant that workers are indeed resisting several aspects of this coercive regime. While many of New Labour's initiatives seem more concerned with placing those on the margins into a job and off benefits – without the meaningful training or skills acquisition of industrial times – the high turnover within the call centre industry in particular is cited as an obvious example of labour resistance at work (Jonas 1996; Bain and Taylor 2000; Helms and Cumber 2006). Workfare resistance is also evident in the stubbornly high number of people who remain economically inactive in Glasgow (27.9%, see Table 4-4). This comes despite the clear attempts of ILM's to encourage benefit claimants into new forms of (typically low paying) service work.

In addition, Glasgow residents continue to resist several of New Labour's privatisation schemes designed to (re)regulate labour's reproductive sphere. To this end large sections of the public (42%) are shown to have voted against the transfer of housing stock to the Glasgow Housing Association, despite strong media encouragement to vote 'yes' (Mooney and Poole 2005). These and other campaigns are said to reflect a 'growing resentment about the direction of welfare policy, particularly the increased commitment to public-private partnerships' (Helms and Cumbers 2006: 81). Notable acts of collective resistance are evident in the form of strikes and campaigns, including a sit in and 20,000 strong demonstration against the closure of a local swimming pool in Govanhill (*ibid.*) Furthermore, a host of public sector worker strikes over the issue of low pay in hospitals took place in and around Glasgow during 2001 and 2002. These protests in many ways echo the community politics and tenement movements of the 1950s and 1960s (discussed previously); thereby demonstrating how past practices and ways of coping have carried over from the past and into a neo-liberal era of labour market governance and economic restructuring.

As mentioned in Chapter 2, Cumbers et al. (2010) have also sought to unpack the more 'mundane' strategies of coping which the Glasgow poor rely upon. These strategies translate as the acts of agency which fall short of directly resisting or challenging the dominant power relations behind labour market control. To this end, practices of 'resilience' are portrayed as new ways of coping, making a living, and ultimately getting

‘in the face’ of deindustrialisation (ibid: 62). Examples of this are provided through the need for women – who increasingly act as the single-parent breadwinner - to explore and develop strategies for bringing in extra sources of income into the household. To this end many mothers are said to enlist dependents aged 16 and over into funded employment projects. Alternatively young people who struggle or refuse to find work in the formal labour market are often pushed into illegal sectors (such as the drug industry), thus demonstrating the often unethical and dubious nature of many strategies for ‘getting by’. In addition, residents are also shown to ‘rework’ different situations so as to improve the conditions of their living and to redistribute resources. A small example of such practice is provided by tenements catalogue scams; wherein households ‘order clothes or electrical goods and find ways of not paying’ (ibid: 64). Once again, these examples are not intended as profound demonstrations of labour’s resistance. Rather, they illustrate the subtle ways in which households in particular have developed ways of responding to low incomes and coercive attempts to place workers within undesirable and low paying service roles, out of tune with the traditional values and behaviours.

4.5 Conclusion

Ultimately, the history of the Glasgow labour market is one of marked contrast between the start and the end of the 20th century. The Glasgow of the past (pre 1980) was built around heavy engineering, and was underpinned by a set of institutions geared towards urban managerialism and forms of welfare governance. As the economic base of Glasgow has collapsed, restructured and reinvented itself in the space of the last few decades, it is unrealistic to expect *people* to do likewise in the space of a generation. As a result, there are evident tensions in the ‘post industrial’ Glasgow labour market. These tensions remain despite the efforts of a contemporary local LCR, which is arguably more concerned with placing people in work and off benefits than in securing meaningful and worthwhile careers for the urban population (Helms and Cumbers 2006; Cumbers et al. 2009). In particular, this continues to affect the young people and future generations of Glasgow (especially those based in the working-class areas of the city), who face a labour market largely ill-suited to traditional blue collar aspirations.

This chapter has highlighted the evident tensions at the local level between sustaining capital accumulation and the social reproduction of the Glasgow workforce. In particular,

it has questioned the viability of a service/consumption based economy following a legacy of heavy industrial forms of work, and the impact former institutional arrangements have held for the Glasgow population. Bearing this in mind, the following chapter profiles Glasgow's call centre industry, which represents a flagship industry in Glasgow's new economic landscape. In doing so the chapter provides an overview of this new form of work, and in particular focuses on the three empirical case studies which inform the discussion chapters of the thesis. Bearing in mind the polarisation which is evident in the contemporary Glasgow labour market, the call centre industry is shown to draw upon and recreate a new social division of labour.

Notes

¹ This form of heavy industry came to replace Glasgow's prominent textile industry and spin-off chemical industries which were prominent features of Clydeside industrial production from the late eighteenth century until the mid 1800's (Damner 1990).

² As a result, by 1913 Glasgow was producing 1/3rd of the total British output of shipping, more than the entirety of the U.S.A or Germany (Pacione 1995).

³ As Cumbers et al. (2010) note: 'The division of labour under capitalism is as much a political one as a social or technical one. Divisions in the working class allow some elements of labour to be incorporated into capital's project at the expense of others' (pg 14).

⁴ Caricatured along 'skilled Protestant' and 'unskilled-Catholic' lines.

⁵ Many local employers cemented religious divisions indirectly through protestant institutions which performed social functions – such as 'friendly benefits' and leisure activities for local artisans via trade societies. Preferential treatment through such institutions included the arrangement of employment in neighbourhood pubs, with Catholic immigrants restricted to less skilled roles without the same institutions supporting their claim (Melling 1982: 92).

⁶ Early trade unions tended to be formed around more specialist trade associations.

⁷ These strikes took place primarily within munitions producing areas such as Govan and Partick (see Map 4-1) where demand for work and housing was high. Notably it was women in particular who began organising strike committees and campaigns for the non-payment of rents whilst men were fighting in the War. In turn, the pursuit of court action by landlords to evict tenants gained widespread public support for the strikers.

⁸ The ILP was, in effect, a left sided branch of the labour party.

⁹ In turn, gentrified estates were built on peripheral sites such as Mosspark and Knightswood, thus freeing up other housing stocks for the less well off. Thus, while the state still held little role in encouraging fresh industry to the area, the use of subsidised housing in this way saw the Corporation play a key role in controlling and partitioning class relations into distinct reproductive sites.

¹⁰ In doing so the Corporation clearly sought to retain a high tax base in order to carry out its function as social provider.

¹¹ By 1965 the Corporation owned as much as 43 per cent of the housing stock, while private landlords accounted for 38 per cent of houses (Damer 1990). As a result, the people of Glasgow had almost no stake in house ownership.

¹² The shipyards of Japan and Germany were particularly efficient, operating with newer technology and production methods, and backed by government tax reliefs and low interest loans.

¹³ By the early 1960s, industrial growth and competitiveness were on the slide (Massey 1984). As Massey notes: 'The international capitalist economy was heaving itself into a new position, a new international division of labour was asserting itself, and the British economy was both changing its role and losing out' (Massey 1984: 133).

¹⁴ Thus exemplifying the cooperation underpinning the Fordist regime.

¹⁵ This included the Fairfield yard experiment, where 'Some notable successes were achieved, including the modernisation of techniques, and improved wages.' (Checkland 1976: 50).

¹⁶ This campaign attracted huge media attention (including a contribution from John Lennon) and lasted until February/March 1972 when the Government eventually reversed its decision to close the yard.

¹⁷ Rootes were forced into this relocation by the British government - through the use of Industrial Development Certificates - as part of a bid to rejuvenate depressed areas such as Glasgow. Around three hundred industrial strikes and stoppages took place at Linwood alone between 1963-1969.

¹⁸ An expansion of 131 per cent of their 1968 stock levels, while for the same period Greater Glasgow showed an expansion of just 49 percent on their 1968 level

¹⁹ The proportion of employment in manufacturing establishments opened since 1950 verifies this fact; in 1970, 19% of Greater Glasgow's employment came from post-1950 manufacturing establishments compared to 31% for Scotland as a whole. These figures rose to 31% for Greater Glasgow and 50% for the whole of Scotland by 1984 (MacInnes 1995: 84). This pattern created virtuous cycles of growth for the new towns, but also ones of decline for the old industrial areas.

²⁰ Specifically this covered household structure, unemployment, social grouping, retired persons, housing conditions, occupancy rates and household size (Keating 1988: 27).

²¹ The Glasgow Corporation became known as the City of Glasgow District Council as of 1975.

²² There is a long list of such events and initiatives designed to spruce up and reinvent the image of the city; in 1982 the Glasgow District Council launched the annual Mayfest arts festival; 1983 saw the opening of the Burrell Collection; 1988 saw the national Garden Festival; 1990 saw the opening of the New International Concert Hall; Glasgow attained the status of European City of Culture in the same year; while Glasgow also secured the title of British City of Architecture in 1999 (Boyle and Hughes 1994: 459).

²³ This index is based '...on the small area statistical geography of data zones which contain on average 750 people. There are 6,505 data zones covering the whole of Scotland which nest within local authority boundaries. They are built from groups of Census output areas and designed to have populations of between 500 and 1,000 household residents.' (Scottish Government 2009)

²⁴ Although recent research suggests incidents of abuse with examples of young people being paid as little as £60 per week in some cases and leaving with no qualifications in others (Cumbers et al. 2009).

CHAPTER 5

EXAMINING CALL CENTRES IN POST-INDUSTRIAL GLASGOW

5.1 Introduction

As reported in Chapter 4, in the past fifty years there has been a dramatic restructuring of the Glasgow economy, and a profound shift in the types of jobs which are available. While the last chapter discussed the more general rise of service sector employment, the following chapter focuses on a specific form of service work which Glasgow has come to rely upon: call centre work. Helms and Cumbers (2006) have argued that call centres play a strategic role in the Glasgow labour market, as part of a neoliberal workfare regime designed to push people off benefits and into accessible forms of employment. This chapter verifies the significance of call centre work to the Glasgow area, and provides an introduction to the case study organisations from which the empirical findings of the thesis are based.

The chapter starts by defining call centres and explaining their rise throughout the UK. Call centres have tended to locate (in particular) within old industrial labour markets which contain high rates of unemployment and relatively low labour costs. Despite providing a much needed source of employment, the call centre sector has been criticised for providing workers with low wages, limited work autonomy, and for generating high rates of stress and anxiety in staff. In addition, the sustainability of the call centre sector has been questioned *vis-à-vis* the threat of offshoring and the emergence of a truly global labour market for companies to exploit (Benner 2006; Huws 2008; Russell and Thite 2008). In response to these criticisms, the subsequent section details the current state of the call centre sector in Scotland. Part of this review demonstrates that call centre work may be gathering acceptance as a full time form of work, for men as well as women (at least within a Scottish context). The final half of the chapter is then used to introduce the three case study organisations which inform the remainder of the thesis. Rather than providing a 'generic' employment solution, each centre served a different market sector, offered the potential for a different work experience, and subsequently employed different segments of the local population.

5.2 The emergence of call centres in the UK

Within the last twenty years, call centre work has emerged as a major form of employment in the UK's contemporary service economy, accounting for as many as 790,000 workers spread across more than 5,000 centres nation-wide in 2004 (that is 32% of Europe's total number; see CM Insight et al. 2004). Intra-nationally the growth and spread of call centres in the UK has been a highly uneven process, creating an observable spatial division of labour. In their pursuit of low cost and abundant pools of labour, organisations have tended to locate within old industrial areas of the UK (such as Glasgow, and the North East and North West of England), thus replacing the previous layer of branch plant manufacturing investment in these regions (Massey 1984; Bristow et al. 2002; Bristow et al. 2000; Bishop et al. 2003; Richardson and Gillespie 2003). In turn, both local and regional economic development agencies have actively encouraged call centres to locate in these areas as a solution to the high rates of unemployment caused by deindustrialisation (Richardson et al. 2000).

Despite generating much needed employment in the short-term, call centres have been criticised as a low-paying and undesirable form of work, which are reliant upon factory style and Taylorist production methods. As touched upon in Chapter 4, the same work settings also require emotional labour and 'feeling skills' which are arguably out of tune with the labour market culture of old industrial areas such as Glasgow (Richardson et al. 2000; Helms and Cumbers 2006; Cumbers et al. 2009). Conceptually, the sector first emerged in the late 1980s through a combination of advances within Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), and the growing availability of low-cost and high volume telecommunications. These developments allowed organisations to 'back office' previously dispersed customer facing activities into centralised offices capable of meeting customer demands remotely over the telephone (starting in the financial services industry with Direct Line in 1989). As other industries and sectors have followed suit – in pursuit of the same cost advantage and economies of scale this restructuring afforded – call centre employment has grown throughout the 1990s, and the 'industry' has now received considerable academic and media attention (Russell 2008; Taylor and Bain 1999; Bain and Taylor 2000).

5.2.1 *The call centre labour process*

In terms of the work experience, technology within call centres have helped to produce a highly intensive, routine, and heavily surveyed labour process (Baldry et al. 1998; Taylor et al. 2003). The defining feature of the call centre is the Automatic Call Distribution (ACD) system, which both queues and routes customer calls automatically to the first available operative ('agent') in a given centre. The ACD system acts as a form of 'direct control', which determines both the pace and direction of calls in a similar fashion to a factory assembly line (Taylor and Bain 1999; Callaghan and Thompson 2001). After receiving a call, customer data is delivered into the agent's computer (either automatically or through manual typing), and requests are processed through centre-specific Customer Relationship Management (CRM) software. As Taylor and Bain (2007: 353) note:

'Fundamentally, it is the integration of advanced telephony with various computer technologies that defines the call centre and, by virtue of this mechanisation of customer servicing, mark it out as qualitatively different from other forms of clerical service work.'

In addition to the ACD technology, call centres are renowned for their use of monitoring and surveillance technology which is used to evaluate several aspects of worker performance. As workers are never sure when management may be listening in, surveillance technology has been said to provide management with 'ultimate' or 'total' power over workers (Ferne and Metcalf 1998). This Foucauldian perspective has drawn criticism (in particular) from authors of the labour process tradition, who have been quick to stress the opportunities for worker resistance and the need for centres to directly supervise staff as a result. (Taylor and Bain 1999; Bain and Taylor 2000; Callaghan and Thompson 2001) Nevertheless, monitoring software is capable of producing extensive macro-reports on various aspects of worker performance (from both the team to the individual level), and this has led to the widespread use of target setting and Taylorist work methods throughout the majority of settings. Where available, unions have commonly struggled to adjust these practices which are often seen as endemic or built-in to the call centre labour process (Taylor and Bain 2001; Bain and Taylor 2002; Ellis and Taylor 2006). Agents are commonly evaluated in relation to specific targets on both qualitative and quantitative aspects of their role; which may include the number of calls taken; call length; the adherence to scripts, and so forth. These conditions have acted to severely limit

staff autonomy, and have helped to create a repetitive, stressful, and frequently pressurised work experience (Holman 2003; Knights and McCabe 1998). The call centre industry has in turn drawn parallels to ‘dark satanic mills’; ‘electronic sweatshops’; and ‘assembly lines in the head’ (Ferne and Metcalf 1998; Taylor and Bain 1999; Bain and Taylor 2000). Such conditions are ultimately reflected in the high levels of sickness and churn endemic to call centre sector; with a turnover rate ranging from 20-80% in one survey (see Taylor and Bain 1999; Holman 2003; Helms and Cumbers 2006).

Building on these concerns, research continues to question the value of call centre work on several additional fronts. In terms of staff progression, centres utilise a fine division of labour which offers a limited range of occupations for those looking to climb or forge careers in non-telephone positions (Belt 2002; Belt et al. 2000; 2002). Above the agent role there exists a small number of team leader and managerial positions; and consequently around 85% of those employed work as agents on the telephone (Richardson et al. 2000; Taylor and Anderson 2008). Due to the lack of autonomy within the role, the experience and skills workers develop commonly hold little value outside of the service or call centre sector itself. Furthermore call centre work is low paying (on average between 12,000-£13,000 per annum; CM Insight et al. 2004) and has traditionally drawn upon a heavily gendered division of labour (Belt 2002). In 2004 around 70% of all UK call centre workers were women, although this figure varies significantly between sectors (higher end roles such as those in IT employ a larger proportion of men; CM Insight et al. 2004; Richardson et al. 2000). Many firms also rely upon a large part time workforce (30% on average in the case of Richardson et al. 2000), and the use of temping agencies for the initial screening and recruitment of staff. Taken as a whole, these trends have acted to undermine the status of the call centre work, leading one critic to question whether call centres represent little more than ‘female job ghettos’ for areas now reliant on this form of employment (Belt 2002; Bradley et al. 2000).

There also exists considerable anxiety regarding the long-term sustainability of the call centre industry in Britain. In recent years several UK-based companies – including British Telecom and British Gas - have chosen to migrate activities to cheaper offshore locations abroad (in particular to India), leading one Scottish Minister to claim that ‘there would not be a call centre in Scotland in five years’ (Brian Donoghue, Herald, 13 March 2003; cited

in Taylor and Bain 2003). In addition, the continual evolution of computer technology inside and out-with the call centre operation has threatened levels of employment since the initial inception of call centre work. Technological advances in Computer-Telephony Integration (CTI), Predictive Dialling (PD) and Interactive Voice Response (IVR) systems¹ have improved the efficiency of many operations to the extent that less staff are now required². Bearing in mind these concerns, the following section considers the current state and profile of the call centre industry within Scotland and Glasgow. This is followed by a review of the three case centres used throughout the discussion chapters of the thesis.

5.3 The growth and composition of the call centre sector in Scotland

While the UK as a whole has maintained a high volume of call centre jobs, Scotland in particular has developed a niche role for this contemporary form of service work. This point is confirmed by a recent audit on the call centre industry in Scotland conducted by Taylor and Anderson in 2008 (conducted on behalf of Scottish Enterprise and Scottish Development International³) which suggests that several of the more negative understandings of call centre work may be in need of review. Of particular interest, the audit argues that offshoring does not represent a threat to Scotland's call centre employment. Building on previous research on this subject, the authors maintain that cultural and linguistic differences - coupled with negative media coverage and customer responses - have limited the spread of offshoring outside of the 'most standardised and least risk laden of processes' (Taylor and Bain 2005: 277; Taylor and Anderson 2008; Taylor and Bain 2003; Thite and Russell 2009). In total, 37 companies chose to migrate activities between 2003 and 2008, whilst five companies that had previously chosen to move work offshore actually returned to Scotland (Taylor and Anderson 2008). During this period call centre employment grew by 53.4% across Scotland as a whole, thus contradicting all predictions of a declining sector. As of 2008 the call centre industry accounted for some 86,000 workers, spread across 400 centres throughout Scotland. These high numbers equate to 3.4% of Scotland's working population⁴, or one in thirty of all those employed (Taylor and Bain 2003; Taylor and Anderson 2008: 12).

Internally the growth and spread of call centres has remained a spatially uneven process, and the vast majority of operations are based within the central belt (86 per cent). Within this, Glasgow has assumed the status of a call centre 'hub' (interviews), containing over thirty per cent of Scotland's total call centre workforce (see Table 5-1). The spatial

concentration of call centre work in Glasgow has made a noticeable impact on the city's economic landscape, and in particular the types of jobs available to those looking for work in Glasgow. In 2008 Glasgow contained 111 call centres, employing over 25,000 workers. This represents a striking 9.7% of Glasgow's total employment. Perhaps more significantly – due to the flat structures involved in most operations – it is understood that 8.4% of all those employed in Glasgow do so specifically as call centre *agents* on the telephone (Taylor and Anderson 2008: 17).

Table 5-1: Call centre employment (agents and totals) by location

Location	No. of centres	Employment No. of agents	Total Employment	% Agents	% Total
Glasgow	111	21,913	25,387	30.3	30.3
Lanarkshire	35	10,245	12,315	14.2	14.7
Edinburgh & Lothians	56	7,761	9,218	10.7	11.0
Fife	21	6,702	7,648	9.3	9.1
Tayside	36	6,063	6,868	8.4	8.2

Source: Taylor and Anderson (2008: 15)⁵

There are several 'generic' factors that explain Glasgow's emergence as a call centre hub. As mentioned, it is important for large call centre operations to source a local labour market which contains an abundance of adequately skilled and adequately priced labour. Labour costs typically account for 60-80% of call centre operating expenses (Richardson and Gillespie 2003), and therefore minimising this expenditure provides an obvious cost saving for firms. Likewise, areas with large populations are important for providing additional labour during busy periods or in times of heavy 'churn' (i.e. peaks in labour turnover). These factors in particular have made Glasgow – marked as it is by high unemployment and low wage expectations – an attractive location for investment. The average hourly pay in Glasgow was just £10.19 in 2006, compared to the British average of £11.26 (Scottish Enterprise 2007). In addition, the availability of suitable and affordable office space in Glasgow's refurbished city centre has further underlined Glasgow's case as

an ideal location for many firms. Office rents in Glasgow equated to just £27 per sq.ft/yr compared to £33 in Birmingham or £65 in London City as of March 2007 (ibid). Like other major cities, Glasgow also contains an extensive public transport network which expands the ‘travel-to-work’ area of potential workers throughout much of the central belt (Richardson and Belt 2001; Richardson et al. 2000).

The concentration of call centre work in Glasgow also reflects the conscious strategy of development agencies (in particular Scottish Enterprise Glasgow) and the Scottish Executive, which has identified call centre work as a means of plugging the employment ‘gap’ caused by deindustrialisation. Between 2002 and 2006, £36 million of public money was spent encouraging call centre investment throughout Scotland (The Scotsman, 13th February 2007), with Glasgow benefiting more than most through the large Dell and O2 operations (at a cost of £7 million and £7.5 million respectively)⁶. Scottish Enterprise Glasgow also offers a range of ‘after care’ support functions (such as team leader and manager training courses) in collaboration with the industry’s own professional body – the Contact Centre Association – which was founded in Glasgow in 1996. As a result of these factors Glasgow has continued to develop and attract a diverse call centre industry which represents several industrial sectors. This spread in activity reflects the marked ambivalence on the part of government towards specific segments of the call centre market. Call centre work is essentially seen as a ‘generic’ employment solution for the Glasgow labour market, as an interview with Scottish Enterprise revealed:

‘Now in terms of call centres, we’re not overly concerned whether they’re outsourcers or whether they’re in the insurance field, because we think largely the call centre role is a generic one. The whole point of call centres is you get a lot of people with a breadth of knowledge who can turn over a high volume of their sales, their customer service, their credit control, or enquiries - whatever you need to do. So the nature of the role is quite generic...’

Account Manager for Business Growth, Scottish Enterprise

This open policy towards all forms of call centre work comes in tandem with the dominant government policy of ‘getting people into work’ and off benefits, regardless of the quality of work on offer (Cumbers et al. 2009; Helms and Cumbers 2006). Far from performing an

industry specific trade or craft, call centre workers are seen to utilise service skills which are wholly transferable from one operation to another (a flexibility which may be required in the event of closures).

While it was not possible to present figures for the distribution of call centres by industrial sector for Glasgow⁷, the figures for Scotland as a whole are shown in Table 5-2.

Table 5-2: Distribution of call centres and employment by industrial sector (including outsourcing)

Sector	Total numbers employed	Percentage of cc workforce
Financial services	31,485	37.5
Public sector	12,339	14.7
Media/communications	11,530	13.7
Telecommunications	9,545	11.4
Utilities	6,642	7.9
Travel/transport/holidays	3,734	4.4
Computers/IT	3,727	4.4
Retail	1,142	1.3
Charity/not-for-profit	877	1
Food and drink	536	0.6
Healthcare	363	0.4
Miscellaneous	1,996	2.4

Source: Taylor and Anderson (2008: 27)

Despite hosting a variety of sectors, the financial services industry (e.g. banks, credit card companies, insurance companies) dominates Scotland's call centre market: representing more than one third of all call centre work in Scotland (37.5% of the total call centre workforce; more than 31,000 workers). The second largest call centre employer is that of the public sector, which employs more than 12,000 workers (14.7% of the call centre work force). The public sector is the fastest growing segment of the call centre market, and its

share of operations has increased from just 1.3% of the total workforce in 2000 to 12.5% in 2008. This comes in tandem with the expansion of e-government and Lord Varney's recommendation that centralised call centres should meet the public service needs of local residents (Schönauer 2008). Subsequent to financial services and the public sector, operations within the media-communications and telecommunications industries account for 13.7% and 11.4% of the total call centre workforce respectively.

It is also important to note that the figures present in Table 5-2 include outsourcer call centres that perform services on behalf of third party clients within these sectors. Outsourcers typically perform non-core functions, and may or may not specialise in a particular sector or service (for example sales or customer service). The outsourcing market has grown steadily in the last decade, rising from just 18 centres employing 2,905 workers in 1997 to 108 centres employing 23,935 workers as of 2008. As a result, outsourcing now accounts for close to one third of the Scottish call centre workforce (28.5%). This rise is particularly surprising given the susceptibility of these breakaway functions to offshoring. Conversely, twenty-seven foreign-owned firms (whose headquarters are based abroad) have chosen Scotland as a base for operations; often to provide multi-lingual services to a pan-European market. In doing so companies have sought to benefit from the abundance of skilled multi-lingual and low cost workers in the Glasgow labour market (bolstered by the presence of foreign graduate students in particular; see Breathnach (2000) regarding Dublin). Coupled with the presence of over 3,700 computer/IT call centre roles, it is evident that Scotland has accrued at least a moderate proportion of higher-end call centre roles (unlike the North-East of England; see Richardson et al. 2000).

5.3.1 Changing employment relations within Scotland's call centre industry

In filling the positions created in these centres, Taylor and Anderson's (2008) report also details several unanticipated effects with regards to call centre staffing policies and the utilization of flexible employment strategies (see Table 5-3). As has been shown in Chapter 4, the expansion of service work in general has come in tandem with the growth of part time and casualised working arrangements (Allen and Henry 1997). Within the service landscape, call centres in particular have relied upon a high reserve of part time workers to help fill anti-social shift patterns, and to respond to peaks and troughs in business demand. Furthermore recruitment agencies have often allowed management to

trial staff within roles for several months prior to offering a permanent contract (Coe et al. 2009; Peck and Theodore 2007; Peck and Theodore 2002).

Table 5-3: Proportion of workforce on full-time, part-time and temporary contracts, 1997-2008

Year	% on full-time contracts	% on part-time contracts	% on temporary contracts
2008	72.8	27.2	6.7
2003	68.6	31.4	13.5
2000	63.0	37.0	20.1
1997	63.5	35.5	27.4

Source: Taylor and Anderson (2008: 30)

Unexpectedly, Scotland's call centres are reversing this general trend towards flexible staffing, as evident by the falling share of part-time workers. The proportion of workers on full-time contracts has increased from 63.5 % in 1997 to 72.8% in 2008, and this proportion is set to grow to a further 73.8% by 2010 (Taylor and Anderson 2008: 30-31). Similarly, expectations that call centres will continue to rely upon high volumes of temporary staff have proved wide of the mark; with the share dropping from 27.4% in 1997 to as little as 6.7% in 2008. In explaining this trend, Taylor and Anderson (2008) note:

‘...as the (call centre) sector has matured and the rate of growth has declined and, as customer demand has been more predictable, there has been less need for sharp, unplanned fluctuations in headcount’ (ibid: 31-32).

These findings may also reflect attempts by call centre management to garner consent from a larger group of ‘core’ workers than before, through the use of permanent contracts (Cumbers and Atterton 2000). Contrary to their ‘footloose’ image, such a shift may also indicate that centres are attempting to embed themselves more fully in the local labour market, by offering greater levels of commitment to the local staff they employ. With this

in mind several managers reported a move away from a ‘bums on seats’ approach to staffing (interviews), as organisations have turned to a more committed and permanent workforce capable of delivering a high standard of customer service⁸. In turn, this trend indicates that call centre work may now be gathering acceptance as something of a ‘proper job’, as opposed to a more stop gap or casualised form of work (Allen and Henry 1997; Klein 2000; Ritzer 2000). Such trends could potentially usher in a belief that customer service is an important role worth doing well.

A related understanding of call centre work – that it is predominantly staffed by women – also requires review. Taylor and Anderson’s report conveys a shifting balance in the gender division of labour, with more men than ever before choosing call centre work in Scotland. In 1997 women represented 67.4% of the call centre workforce, yet today the proportion employed is more balanced at 57.5%. These figures suggest that call centre work may now be a viable option for many men who may previously not have considered a ‘feminised’ form of service work. However, it is important to unpack this general trend, as this statistic masks a continued segmentation in specific sectors. Segments of the call centre market understood as ‘high end’ tend to be staffed by more men than women, and conversely the lower end customer service roles show greater levels of female employment. For example, 68.5% of the staff in IT/computer sectors are male, while higher end positions in financial service centres also employ a greater proportion of men over women. Conversely, women comprise 70% of the workforce in the travel/holiday call centre market as well as 69% of the public sector workforce (Taylor and Anderson 2008: 32).

5.4 Three case studies: work organisation and the labour process within Gov-Tel; Game-Tel; and Sales-Com

Having established the importance of call centres to Glasgow’s post-industrial labour market - and the composition of this industry within Scotland as a whole - the remainder of the chapter focuses upon the empirical case study organisations which form the basis of the empirical discussion. As mentioned in Chapter 3, the case study selection process was impacted by the different terms of access on offer across seven initial settings⁹. Subsequent to this, contrasting types of call centre were deliberately chosen to help explore how different operations are used and experienced by their workers (see Table 5-4).

Table 5-4: The three case study organisations

	Industry sector	Main activities	Pay (per annum)	Union	Size	Hours open	Churn
Sales-Com	Outsourcer: Various sales functions	Outbound sales (various)	£12,500-24,000 (inc. bonus)	No	100	9am-7pm Mon-Fri	40%
Gov-Tel	Public sector	Inbound customer service	£15,000	Yes	130	24 hrs/7 days	14%
Game-Tel	Outsourcer: Computer games and IT	Inbound technical support	£15,500-20,000	No	35	7am-8pm Mon-Fri	26%

Three distinct case centres were chosen from contrasting sectors of Scotland's call centre market: the now prominent public sector (Gov-Tel); the 'high end' sector of computers/IT ('Game-Tel') and a telesales operation supporting a variety of industrial sectors (Sales-Com). Notably both Sales-Com and Game-Tel operated as outsourcer call centres, providing services on behalf of several third party clients (discussed shortly). In terms of activities, both Gov-Tel and Game-Tel specialised in the provision of in-bound customer support for residential customers, whilst agents within Sales-Com performed outbound sales calls to both residential customers and (small and large) business organisations. It is also worth noting that all three centres were relatively small in size. More than three-quarters of Scotland's call centre workforce are employed in centres of 250 staff or more; although 38 per cent of call centres in Scotland employ less than 50 workers (Taylor and Anderson 2008: 30). The low numbers of staff employed in each case study (in particular at Game-Tel) suggest that these operations are less likely to subscribe to a 'mass production' call centre model. At the time of the research, none of the centres employed

staff on a part-time basis, although Sales-Com did employ around 30% of its workforce through a number of recruitment agencies.

5.4.1 Work organisation and the labour process

Despite the ubiquity of their ‘sweatshop’ image, it is now well acknowledged that the call centre model (and subsequent work experience) can and does vary between operations. This variation reflects the twin imperatives of cost minimisation and customer orientation that all organisations must attempt to balance. With this in mind Batt and Moynihan (2002) have identified three models of organisation; that of Taylorised mass-production, professional services, and hybrid mass-customisation (ibid; Taylor and Bain 2005: 263). Similarly Kinnie et al. (2000) have contrasted more routine and tightly-controlled ‘transactional’ forms of work to those centres which afford workers autonomy in the customer interaction (termed ‘relational’ work). In a useful paper, Taylor et al. (2002) suggest that call centre diversity is best understood through a range of quantitative and qualitative characteristics present within different operations (see Table 5-5).

Table 5-5: Ideal characteristics of the quantity/quality dichotomy¹⁰

Quantity	Quality
Simple customer interaction Routinization Targets hard Strict script adherence Tight call-handling times Tight ‘wrap-up times’ High percentage of time on phone/ready Statistics driven Task cycle time short High call volumes Low value of calls Low level of operator discretion Nature of calls – simple Mass service delivery	Complex customer interaction Individualization/customization Targets soft Flexible or no scripts Relaxed call-handling times Customer satisfaction a priority Possibility of off-phone task completion Statistics modified by quality criteria Task cycle time long Low call volumes High value of calls High level of operator discretion Nature of call – complex Customization

(Taylor et al. 2002: 136)

In practice the above quantitative-qualitative dichotomy is more accurately understood as a continuum between these poles, which may influence the work organisation on the call centre floor. It should also be stressed that both quantitative and qualitative elements of this dichotomy are not necessarily exclusive, and that both sides may exist in a given operation (a point particularly relevant for outsourcers hosting different clients; see Kinnie et al. 2008). Many centres – particularly outsourcers - cater for different types of calls and customers bases, which in turn are channelled into distinct ‘workflows’. A workflow represents a structured set of tasks, designed to produce specified outputs which are oriented towards particular markets (Taylor et al. 2002: 135). To take the example of offshoring, the ‘low-value, low-skill’ operations which have migrated overseas have tended to involve standardised and tightly scripted workflows involving high volumes of calls each day (Taylor and Bain 2005: 269). Bearing in mind the different imperatives for quality and quantity, the following section provides a brief overview of each organisation and a review of the workflows each centre utilised to handle calls (a discussion on the use of targets is reserved for Chapter 6).

5.4.2 *Sales-Com*

Sales-Com was a multi-business outsourcer that provided sales services for both high and low-value customer markets. At the time of the research the centre met the needs of four clients from a number of different sectors, via five separate workflows (summarized in Table 5-6). The centre’s most lucrative account came through a computer firm (‘Antrax’), who contracted the outsourcer for two sales functions (each organised into a corresponding workflow). In addition Sales-Com also met the selling needs for a printer wholesaler (‘PrintEx’), a telephone service provider (‘QuickCall’), and a leading broadsheet newspaper (‘The Bugle’). This latter campaign is not considered in the following overview, as no workers from this campaign were interviewed or observed.

Due to the diversity of Sales-Com’s client base, the quality of work (together with the pay and status of the role) varied considerably from one workflow to another. At the extreme quality end of the spectrum, agents on the ‘Antrax Core’¹¹ workflow sold server insurance to large businesses and government organisations, whilst agents on the PrintEx campaign specialised in the bulk sale of printers to leading high street resellers. These sales were generally conducted with business clients over the course of several weeks and months,

and thus required high levels of discretion on the agent's part: both for choosing when to call and what to say in the customer interaction. As a result, calls within both workflows took place free from a dialler, with agents manually phoning customers at an average of 15-20 calls per day. In the case of Antrax Core, an individual sale could generate between £2,000 and £1.5 million, and subsequently agents received a large bonus in reflection of the high figures involved. To further indicate the high-end nature of this role, agents in the Antrax Core and PrintEx campaigns operated under the title of 'Account Manager' and often generated an annual income in excess of £24,000 per annum (including bonus).

Table 5-6: Sales-Com workflows, orientation and numbers employed.

Workflow campaign	Orientation	Numbers employed
Antrax Core	Quality	10
PrintEx	Quality	7
Antrax Residential ('Res')	Quantity	46
QuickCall Business	Quantity	27
The Bugle	Quantity	10

In contrast to these elite campaigns, the other workflows in Sales-Com were structured around a lower value customer base. Antrax Res specialised in the sale of laptop warranty insurance to residential customers throughout the UK, Spain, Germany, France and Italy (at a rate of £50-£450 per sale). As with Game-Tel, the centre tended to employ a foreign workforce for sales campaigns reaching out to customers in continental Europe. As opposed to the relationship sales within Antrax Core and PrintEx, these sales were transactional in nature, with agents looking to obtain card payment details 'there and then'¹². Subsequently agents experienced a lack of control in making these calls, which were continually fed through a predictive dialler (Richardson et al. 2000: 366). Through this technology, agents typically interacted with 50-60 customers per day. These calls were also subject to a high degree of scripting not found in the higher end workflows, and as such the role involved a distinct lack of staff autonomy/discretion. The lowest quality workflow was the QuickCall campaign, and this involved the sale of telephone contracts¹³ to small business organisations. In addition to the use of a predictive dialler, calls in this workflow involved the most auto-queue scripting: which plied agents with opening

questions at the start of the customer interaction, together with continual on-screen prompts throughout the course of a given call. Customers within this workflow held no prior connection to QuickCall, and subsequently interactions often involved hang ups and relatively high levels of customer abuse. Bearing these difficulties in mind, agents were expected to make around five sales a week (one per day) despite speaking to more than 100 customers per day. The stress induced within this role resulted in high levels of staff ‘burnout’; culminating in disproportionately high rates of sickness and turnover (which one agent posited at 80% a year; interviews). In both Antrax Res and QuickCall campaigns, agents who hit their targets could earn up to £16,000 per annum including bonus.

5.4.3 *Game-Tel*

Game-Tel represented by far the most skilled and high-end call centre of the three case studies: due largely to the technical nature of the products under support, the language skills required, and the autonomy workers experienced in performing their role both on and off the phones. The centre specialised in providing in-bound technical support in a range of languages¹⁴ for the customers of high value IT and computer firms. At the time of research this included two multinational technology firms for whom the centre supported (in the main) computer tape drives and video-conferencing equipment. As well as this, Game-Tel met the technical support needs of ten computer game clients. Clients were charged a flat rate on a monthly basis, together with a ‘pay as you go’ arrangement whereby the company was charged additionally for the time agents spent speaking to customers on the phone.

As opposed to dividing workers into client-by-client workflows, agents in Game-Tel answered calls on behalf of multiple clients and customer bases. This functional flexibility was summarised by the operations manager during my opening visit:

‘...you might be an English-French speaker, and sometimes you’re speaking in English and sometimes you’re speaking in French and sometimes you’re speaking to multiple customers. We don’t have a dedicated model where you only speak one or two languages to one client...(pauses)...I mean I’ve got one guy on the floor called Thierry and he speaks 4 languages to 5 clients. So he just flits backwards and forwards.’

Margaret, operations manager, Game-Tel (October 2007)

Clearly, the ability to speak different languages and to understand and elaborate on technical issues (also within these language sets) requires a rarer set of skills than those typically expected of call centre workers. Correspondingly, none of the workflows in the centre operated through use of a Predictive Dialler, and all staff experienced a higher degree of autonomy in responding to customer queries than staff in 'quantitative' operations (a situation not un-common in 'high-end' technical support centres; see D'Cruz and Noronha 2007). After identifying a customer problem through a series of troubleshooting questions, agents ideally prescribed 'resolutions' to the issue at hand. Many of these resolutions were stored in the CRM's 'knowledge base' which formed a comprehensive database of known solutions. In addition the centre contained facilities to help improve worker understandings of the products under support. This included access to both games and computer consoles under support, which agents could practice in-between calls and during quiet periods. At the time of the research, agents within Game-Tel were receiving between 10 and 15 calls a day. Agents in the centre were paid between £15-20,000 a year, which depended upon the technical skills and experience held by the worker in question.

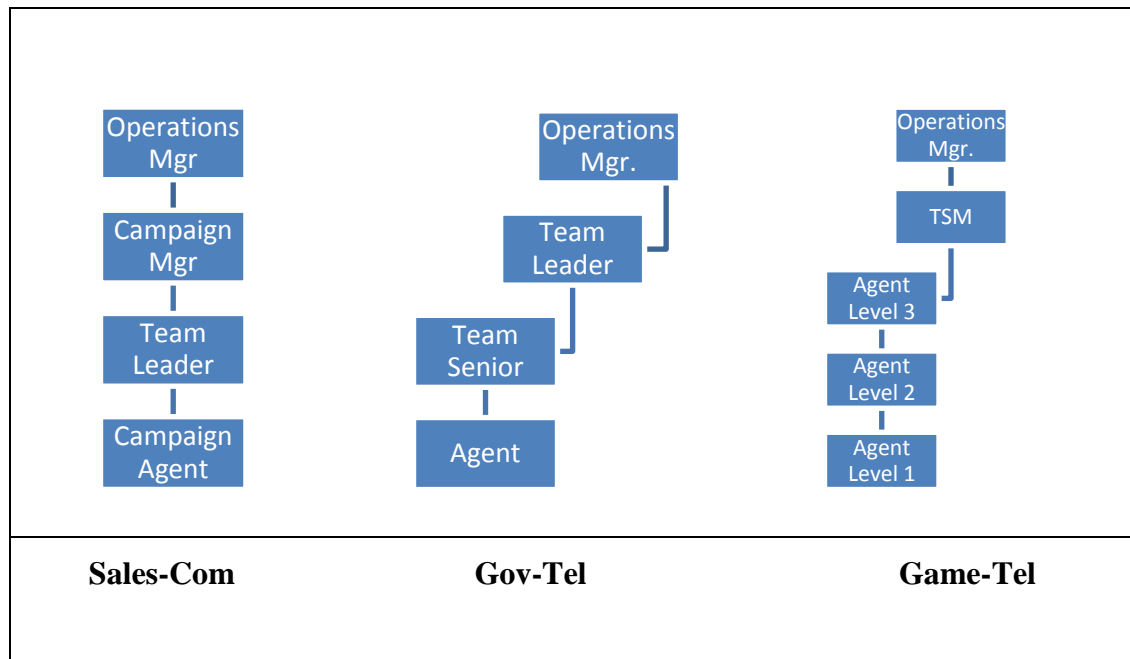
5.4.4 *Gov-Tel*

Gov-Tel maintained a position broadly in the 'middle' of the quantitative and qualitative spectrum (Table 5-6), and specialised in a range of inbound customer support functions. This centre met the service needs of Glasgow residents across a range of civic issues by performing an intermediary role linking customers (i.e. citizens) with the different back-office departments/depots of the council. The majority of calls within the centre were understood as 'low complex', and fell into categories of 'information', 'request', and 'complaint'. In creating workflows to match these needs, call types within the centre corresponded with the major depots/council departments under support; thus creating workflows for 'Council Tax', 'Environmental Services' and 'Road and Lighting Faults' (RALF). Due to the unpredictable nature of customer enquiries within the majority of these workflows, agents performed with a high degree of discretion (i.e. free from scripting). In turn calls tended to vary in length, ranging from the simplest of transaction call types (such as the payment of council tax) to more complex complaints and enquiries regarding refuge uplifts, faulty street lights, and all manner of civic enquiries.

In matching call types with the appropriate agents, the organisation (like Game-Tel) trained agents to perform a host of different workflows through a ‘multi-skill’ arrangement. Thus, whilst staff were initially trained with the skills necessary for a single workflow, over time agents received training to handle several additional workflows/call types. Most agents – particularly those who had been there for 6 months or more – thus performed a variety of workflows even though they officially operated in specialist teams on the call centre floor (under such banners as ‘Council Tax’ or the ‘Environmental Cleansing’ team). Importantly, the number of calls an agent answered – and also the average length of these calls - varied greatly depending upon the number of workflows/call types the agent was trained to receive (this could vary between 30 and 70 calls per day; interviews). Like Game-Tel, agents within the centre were paid a flat yearly rate without the possibility of bonus improvements.

5.5 Organising work: technical and social divisions of labour

Internally each of the case centres utilised a relatively flat hierarchy, wherein the bulk of workers occupied telephone agent roles on the bottom rung of the ladder (see Figure 5-1). Subsequent to this each organisation employed a small number of team leaders to oversee performance levels, followed by a thin layer of senior management at the campaign and operational levels. Management within these roles formulated and oversaw organisation-wide targets (such as cost, market share and so on; see Taylor and Bain 2007: 356). In addition, each of the centres also contained a small number of workers within monitoring and training positions, although in Game-Tel this position was also combined with work on the telephones.

Figure 5-1: The technical division of labour in Sales-Com, Gov-Tel and Game-Tel

Notwithstanding this basic division of labour, important variations to the model were also present within Gov-Tel and in particular Game-Tel (see Figure 5-1). Gov-Tel operated with an additional tier between the agent and team leader roles, known as ‘team senior’; who effectively assisted the team leaders as well as performing the primary role on the telephones. Alternatively the division of labour within Game-Tel deviated greatly from the archetypical call centre model (i.e. that of Sales-Com: Figure 5-1) and contained several structural variations and additional roles. During a recent period of internal restructuring Game-Tel had opted to dissolve the operational tier of management and to expand the team leader role to include several of the functions previously held within this (in doing so team leaders became ‘Technical Support Managers’ or TSMs). As part of their expanded role, the TSMs effectively became the first point of contact for all third party clients; providing progress updates, statistical feedback, and updates on any issues a client should be aware of (in addition to their role supporting agents). Furthermore the agent role in Game-Tel was also fractured to create a vertical division of labour in itself, via a series of promotional ‘Levels’. The majority of staff worked at Level 1, but those with more technical knowledge and capabilities could be promoted to Levels 2 and 3 over time and through annual reviews. These positions allowed agents to take escalated calls, and held a corresponding increase in pay (negotiated individually with management) and status.

Finally the centre also employed a ‘Knowledge Base Administrator’ to oversee and update the centre’s database of support resolutions.

5.5.1 *The social division of labour*

Few studies have comprehensively explored the social division of labour which call centres rely upon; and those which have tend to focus upon the disproportionate number of (often young) women employed within centres (Belt 2002; Mullholland 2002). This literature ‘gap’ is particularly surprising given the different ages, nationalities and class backgrounds of the staff present within each of the three cases. In order to fill the above positions, each centre drew upon a social division of labour in different ways; and in contrast to their feminine typecast each of the case centres employed a relatively high proportion of men. Gender ratios varied between centres, and internally within each case. Importantly, different sorts of people tended to prosper and attain the better roles in each of the three centres, further impacting the social relations between different groups of workers (a point discussed at greater depth in Chapter 8). As Sayer and Walker (1992: 18) note:

‘...the division of labour provides a material axis around which people not only develop capabilities and knowledge, but also positions of power over others, associations that enhance their collective leverage, and even means of exploitation of the labour of others’

Of the three centres Sales-Com employed the highest proportion of men (at around sixty per cent), and internally men tended to occupy the higher-end positions in the centre. Out of the seventeen agents employed within the quality oriented Antrax Core and PrintEx workflows (see Table 5-6), only one of these workers was female; while the low-end/quantitative workflows maintained a roughly even split between men and women. Similarly the team leaders for both Antrax Core and PrintEx were male, while women occupied the team leader roles on the Antrax Res and QuickCall teams. The majority of senior management within the centre were also male (bar my initial operations manager contact). A similar gender bias was also present in the upper echelons of Game-Tel, despite the centre holding a roughly even balance between men and women overall. All three TSM positions were filled by men, and following restructuring (wherein two female senior managers left the centre) the sole operations manager was also male.

These findings lend weight to the earlier suggestion that higher-end and quality oriented call centre roles are more likely to be staffed by men, whilst more standard customer support centres are likely to rely on the ‘emotional skills’ of women in particular (Taylor and Anderson 2008; McDowell 1997). Of the three operations it was only Gov-Tel – the low complex, customer service centre – which held a majority female workforce (of sixty per cent). Women in this centre also benefited most from team leader and managerial positions, a point acknowledged by a Team Senior on the floor:

‘Interestingly enough, there is a very high proportion of women in here...and I see that in the style of management as well. The top positions are filled, basically, by women...I think with anything to do with customer service women have a natural ability (and) I don’t know if its proven or not, but maybe men have to *learn* to do it more...Perhaps that’s why women are there, because it’s customer care, it’s that nurturing, that whole thing that women do...’

Victoria, team senior, Gov-Tel (March 2008)

Thus, whilst ostensibly performing a ‘generic’ employment function, it is clear that different types of call centre draw upon men and women differently. Inadvertently these findings also support the view that women may struggle to forge careers through the call centre industry (Belt 2002), at least outside of the ‘lower end’, less technically demanding forms of call centre work. Explanations for this trend are discussed more fully from a managerial perspective in Chapter 6, and from an agent perspective in Chapter 8. Ostensibly this trend also suggests that call centre work may be gathering acceptance from males within the traditionally masculine Glasgow labour market.

The average age of each centre’s workforce varied from a median of twenty-eight in Sales-Com (the average age for a call centre worker according to the DTI audit of 2004; CM Insight et al. 2004) to thirty-two and thirty-three for Gov-Tel and Game-Tel respectively. This lower average in Sales-Com is reflective of the quantitative workflows in particular, which contained a number of agents in their late teens. Conversely, Gov-Tel employed a high number of older workers in their forties and fifties. Several of these workers held long histories of council employment (such as Eddie), and many had been transferred to Gov-Tel during the restructuring of their former department role.

Eddie was a fifty year old Glaswegian who left school at 16 and became an apprentice book binder for a printing firm, prior to a short stint in a wallpaper and paint store in Newcastle. After moving back to Glasgow – and following a year of unemployment and benefits - Eddie took up a role as a landscape gardener within the council via a 1980s ‘Parks Project’ back to work scheme. Several years later a back injury restricted Eddie from outdoor/manual forms of work, and he subsequently accepted a role in the administration department of land services. This experience of office work eventually encouraged Eddie to take a role in Gov-Tel from 2001 onwards. In total Eddie has worked for the council for more than twenty years.

In addition to these older categories of worker, Gov-Tel employed a large number of agents in the mid-late twenties range, and notably no teenage staff at the time of the research. Of the three centres Game-Tel employed the least diverse age bracket; relying largely upon a mainstay of workers in their late twenties – mid thirties. This potentially reflects the higher-end nature of the Game-Tel role, wherein workers were prepared to invest the pertinent ‘career building’ years of their life earning work experience within the centre.

Underneath these age differentials each of the centres employed a large proportion of skilled and highly qualified workers. Approximately half of the interviewees in Gov-Tel and Game-Tel, and around one-third of the staff I spoke to in Sales-Com held university degrees. As Cumbers et al. (2009) note, the high number of graduates occupying call centre roles may be indicative of a general scarcity of graduate-level jobs available through the Glasgow labour market at this time. Certainly, the majority of university graduates in Gov-Tel and Sales-Com held social science or arts degrees in subjects such as English, Cinema, and French; and so call centre work represented a clear break from these academic trajectories. However, several workers in Game-Tel held degrees in IT and Engineering related subjects that were loosely relevant for their technical support role in the call centre (such as Jeff, below).

Jeff was a 37 year old Dutch national, who arrived at Game-Tel after completing an Electronics and Electro Engineering Masters degree in Glasgow. Prior to this, he spent five years working in the Middle East and three years working in London as a Telecommunications Engineer. Subsequently he moved to Largs on the West coast of Scotland as his Scottish girlfriend (who he met working in Saudi Arabia) wanted to return home, after the couple grew tired of a busy and impersonal London. Having seen an advert in the newspaper, Jeff sent in his CV to Game-Tel and started his career in the centre as a technical support agent. After occupying a number of roles within Game-Tel, he is now responsible for a team of agents and is the chief point of contact to a major computer client.

All three centres employed a high proportion of college graduates, although Sales-Com and Gov-Tel also contained a sizable proportion of workers without a post-high school qualification. Interestingly this did not seem to affect the prospects of workers inside of either Gov-Tel or Sales-Com. Many of the workers in the quantitative Sales-Com campaigns held university degrees, while those I spoke with on the PrintEx and Antrax Core campaigns rarely held qualifications past college level. This pattern arguably reflects the commitment of call centre management in Sales-Com to develop and internally promote the top sales performers in the centre regardless of educational merit. Alternatively all three TSM workers in Game-Tel held a university degree, further demonstrating the value placed in IT knowledge and technical acumen within this centre.

Judging from the previous roles that workers held, and in tandem with anecdotal evidence of childhood upbringings, it is also apparent that the different centres employed workers from a wide range of class backgrounds (see Appendix D). Several interviewees across all of the centres held previous call centre experience, although this was highest within Game-Tel where nine out of thirteen interviewees had worked in a rival centre prior to their role in Game-Tel. Other Game-Tel workers I spoke with held experience in related forms of white-collar service work, or else 'knowledge' roles in the field of IT and electronic engineering (two interviewees). Notably both Game-Tel and Sales-Com relied heavily upon non-British nationals for their pan-European campaigns; and in particular the influx

of continental Europeans who were capable of speaking two or more languages. In addition to holding university degrees, several of these workers (such as Anya) also held experience in white collar roles such as teaching at high school and university level:

Anya was a thirty year old university educated Polish national, fluent in both German and English languages as well as her native Polish. Before working in Sales-Com, she worked as a teacher in a Polish High School, as well as acting as a qualified interpreter. After moving to the East End of Glasgow, Anna serendipitously saw an advert for Sales-Com in a recruitment agency window and applied the same day. She started work in Sales-Com the following week.

This unexpected finding suggests that call centres serving pan-European markets – at least within old industrial labour markets such as Glasgow – are often forced to rely upon a migrant division of labour. It appears the case that too few Scottish workers hold the necessary language skills; or at least those that do are not drawn to work in the call centre sector. Just prior to my research, Sales-Com had required a number of multi-lingual workers for an out-bound sales-campaign targeting customers throughout Continental Europe. Although this campaign was subsequently closed, many of the migrant workers employed had maintained a place in the centre through the Antrax Res campaign. As such, call centre employment has come to form an unexpected route for both skilled and unskilled foreign nationals looking to connect with the Glasgow labour market for different reasons (discussed in Chapter 8). Several of the foreign workers within Sales-Com were middle class gap-students who had opted to travel around Scotland and had subsequently ‘stumbled’ into call centre work as a means of financing this venture. Alternatively many of the graduates in Game-Tel had studied within Glasgow, and were now utilising the centre as a means of financing a continued stay within the city.

In addition to this migrant division of labour, Sales-Com’s workforce differed from Game-Tel in that only five out of thirteen of the interviewees held prior call centre experience. Within both Sales-Com and Gov-Tel, many workers held previous work experience in *low-end* service roles; including customer facing service roles within bars (for three interviewees), butchers, restaurants, shops and hotels. Unlike the other two centres, the

vast majority of workers within Gov-Tel were Scottish, and many originated from traditionally working class areas such as Springburn, Airdrie, and Clydebank (see Map 4-1; Chapter 4). Subsequently, several of the male workers from these areas held blue collar working histories within branch plant manufacturing factories (i.e. the previous layer of inward investment in Glasgow, coming prior to call centres). Additionally I also interviewed a former navy officer and a former gardener's labourer (each in their fifties). As mentioned, many of the workers here also held long histories of council employment (throughout various departments), and this staffing legacy differentiated the Gov-Tel centre from the other 'stand alone' call centre operations based in the private sector.

5.6 Conclusion

This chapter has introduced call centres - both conceptually and empirically - into Glasgow's labour market narrative, and in doing so several developments have been brought to light. Notably, Glasgow has maintained its position as a call centre 'hub' despite fears over offshoring and the all-round sustainability of the call centre sector. It should be noted, however, that the full effects of the economic downturn are yet to be recorded and that the sustained prosperity of call centre employment is not yet 'guaranteed' (if this were ever possible). Nevertheless Glasgow has maintained a particular niche for this form of work, which has continued to evolve internally in several unpredicted ways. In particular call centres are moving away from flexible recruitment practices, and commonly employ a greater proportion of men than was previously the case. This may suggest that call centres are looking to generate greater levels of consent from a 'core' group of workers, and may also indicate that centres are attempting to embed themselves more fully in the local labour market.

From the above discussion it is also evident that call centre roles are far from 'generic' employment solutions (interview with Scottish Enterprise). Call centres specialise in particular functions (Glucksmann 2004) and their labour process varies along a qualitative-quantitative continuum (Taylor and Bain 2001; Taylor et al. 2002). In turn, different social segments of the local population are drawn to work in different centres; and segments of the social division of labour have also been shown to climb and adapt differently within the internal hierarchy of the three case study organisations. In gender terms, male workers tended to dominate the qualitative workflows and team leader roles in Sales-Com, whilst women held the premium of managerial and team leader roles within Gov-Tel. Bearing

this in mind, the following chapter begins by exploring the recruitment *strategies* of management to help provide an explanation for this pattern of employment.

Notes

¹ For example Predictive Dialling (which is largely used by sales and marketing firms) has dramatically reduced the time agents spend 'idle' in-between calls by automatically connecting agents with a pre-programmed list of customers (thus increasing productivity by around 200% according to sources: Richardson et al. 2000: 366). Relatedly, the rise in internet shopping, e-banking and digital TV has led to a further growth in customer self service: which has adversely affected the need for customer service or sales through the medium of telephone. IVR systems have reduced the need for staff by allowing customers to access information and services independently through tree-based routing.

² This threat is well demonstrated by the 2006 closure of the Thompsons Holiday call centre (employing 450 workers), due to the rise in internet shopping which rendered the centre unprofitable.

³ Unlike the CM Insight et al. (2004) study, Taylor and Anderson's (2008) report was conducted independent from industry consultants. In addition, the call centre numbers generated in Taylor and Anderson's audit were based upon actual contact with operations as opposed to sampling and extrapolation.

⁴ To put these figures another way, by 2008 1 in 30 of Scotland's workforce were employed in the call centre industry compared to 1 in 43 back in 2003 (Taylor and Anderson 2008: 12).

⁵ In most locations throughout Scotland (and within all of the locations in Table 5-1), call centre employment increased between 2003 and 2008. Throughout this growth, Glasgow has maintained a 30 per cent proportion of total employment while areas such as Edinburgh and the Lothians have seen a relative decline, despite an overall growth in those employed (Taylor and Anderson 2008: 16-17). This exemplifies the sustained strategic role that call centres have come to play in Glasgow's labour market in contrast to other Scottish cities.

⁶ This included Dell (£7 million); O2 (£7.5 million); First Data International (£2.3 million); ACE INA Services (£2.8 million); and Response Handling Ltd (£2 million).

⁷ At time of writing, there is no study which specifically explores the growth or profile of call centre jobs specifically within the Glasgow labour market. Data of this kind is notoriously difficult to source, as call centres host a range of activities that take place across a number of industries. As a result, call centres do not fit neatly within Standard Industrial Classification (SIC; see Richardson et al. 2000).

⁸ Indeed, it is noted that 'organisations have reduced their reliance on temps for several reasons including the conviction that permanent workers deliver higher levels of customer service' (Taylor and Anderson 2008: 32).

⁹ It is for this reason that two financial services call centres were ruled out. Each of these organisations placed limits on observational access, due to data protection laws regarding customer bank details and other personal information.

¹⁰ Certain elements of the labour process are easier to target and quantify than others (such as length of call, number of sales and so on), but human interaction may also be quantified through subjective grading and scoring of recorded calls.

¹¹ While I did not specifically interview anyone on Antrax-Core, I did observe the team in action and held informal discussions with those within it.

¹² All customers had previously purchased an Antrax laptop.

¹³ This product was deemed a 'hard sell' due to the length of contract; which alternated between 24 and 36 month periods.

¹⁴ These included the mainland European languages (such as French, German, Spanish and Italian) in tandem with Scandinavian language sets (Swedish, Norwegian, and Finnish).

CHAPTER 6**MANAGERIAL CONTROL AND SOCIAL RELATIONS WITHIN THE LABOUR PROCESS: INCORPORATING AND REGULATING WORKERS****6.1 Introduction**

Chapter 5 has been used to introduce call centres into the labour market narrative for Glasgow, and provided a contextual overview of the three case study organisations that inform the research. This chapter returns to the underlying tension between labour and capital, and the different control regimes that management invoked to help maximise worker productivity (Burawoy 1985; Castree et al. 2004). Due to labour's social and unpredictable nature (Peck 1996; Storper and Walker 1989), capital faces three basic difficulties: firstly in incorporating workers into the production process; secondly in exercising control over worker time within production; and thirdly, in exploiting workers 'as part of the process of commodification to realise surplus value' (Cumbers et al. 2008: 370). The following chapter explores how management in the three case study organisations responded to these difficulties, by detailing the specific forms of control present in each of the three case centres. In line with a materialist approach to LPT, the chapter critically appraises the work organisation and the labour process of each case centre.

With regards to this focus, it is important to stress that the chapter speaks largely from the perspective of management, and of the agency of capital over and above that of workers. Linking back to contemporary debates within labour geography, Tufts and Savage (2009) have recently argued that such perspectives are necessary in order to understand the 'diverse processes which both limit and build' labour's ability to act for itself (Tufts and Savage 2009: 946). In turn, Chapters 7 and 8 speak directly from the perspective of workers, and convey the lived experience and the coping strategies of workers in each setting (effectively 'testing' the efficacy of each centre's control regime). At the same time, this chapter broadly argues that workers at least influenced the forms of control adopted by the management of each centre (similarly, see Paulet. 2008). With this in mind, the chapter draws upon a relational perspective of power, based on the understanding that each centre utilised different modalities of power in a bid to secure

consent from a socially variable workforce (Allen 2003). Rather than coercing workers to perform via the direct threat of force, each centre sought to encourage and persuade workers to realise their potential through ‘softer’ forms of control.

The chapter is broadly divided into four sections, beginning with a discussion of the recruitment practices of each centre. In doing so this opening section helps to explain the social division of labour that each centre drew upon, from a managerial perspective. As each case centre required distinct emotional and technical capabilities in staff, different sorts of workers were sought and acquired in each instance. The following section then turns to the maligned issue of training and development within each of the case centres, and the ways in which each organisation sought to incentivise staff commitment beyond the short-term. The chapter then analyses the more familiar forms of technical and bureaucratic control present within each setting, which involved several strategies for garnering worker consent. The chapter finishes with a discussion of normative control and the broader discourse running through each centre.

6.2 Staff recruitment: the measuring and screening of staff

While concerns over the labour process and control have tended to dominate call centre research foci (Taylor et al. 2002; Taylor and Bain 2001; Bain et al. 2002), several studies have also explored the recruitment and selection processes within call centre organisations (Callaghan and Thompson 2002; Van Den Broek et al. 2004; Belt et al. 2002; Townsend 2007; Hampson et al. 2009). Outside of the labour process, it is through the initial recruitment stage that management *attempt* to instil a workforce capable of producing the required service, and as such this is a logical place to begin. As Callaghan and Thompson (2002: 234) note:

‘...in the language of labour process theory, recruitment and training may be used to address aspects of the indeterminacy of labour – the gap between purchased potential and profitable outcomes – normally addressed through rules and control structures in situations of routine work.’

Thus, before any *internal* controls (technical, normative or otherwise – see Edwards 1979) are placed upon labour, organisations often target specific types of worker to fill positions.

The following section considers the skills and traits each centre targeted in workers, before turning to the recruitment compromise each centre made in practice. In doing so, the section provides an explanation for the social divisions of labour outlined in Chapter 5.

6.2.1 *Identifying ideal workers: 'we recruit attitude'*

The management of each call centre held contrasting views as to the suitability of different work histories and levels of education within potential employees. While Game-Tel looked primarily for IT degree/work backgrounds together with the specialist language skills¹ in those applying, Sales-Com and Gov-Tel placed little emphasis upon formal qualifications. Gov-Tel argued that any form of customer facing experience could be adapted and harnessed over the telephone, and so placed little emphasis on call centre experience, whilst management at Sales-Com held a fierce cynicism towards candidates with intermittent call centre histories (and dubbed such workers call centre 'hoppers'). This category of worker, it was argued, wasted the time and money of larger call centres and commonly flitted from centre to centre after training was complete (interviews).

In line with their need to deliver emotional labour over the phone, management at Gov-Tel and Sales-Com voiced a general preference for 'attitude' and 'enthusiasm' over more technical abilities in staff (similarly see Van Den Broek et al. 2004; Mullholland 2002; Callaghan and Thompson 2002; Belt et al. 2002). Conversely, management at Game-Tel saw the customer-agent interaction as a relatively straight forward and emotionally 'neutral' process requiring fewer people skills or emotional adjustments². To reiterate, emotional labour is a form of self regulation whereby employees are expected to display certain emotions (in this case over the phone) in order to produce desirable reactions in customers (Hochschild 1983). In turn, the ideal worker in both Gov-Tel and Sales-Com was put forward as 'bubbly' and high spirited: as a positive and energetic personality helped in building customer rapport and in handling spontaneous interactions over the telephone. Furthermore, agents were said to require a high degree of patience and empathy for handling difficult customers, complaints, and rejections. I was told on numerous occasions that the technical skills needed to perform the role (for example using a computer system or keyboard) could be easily taught, while personalities and intangible social traits could not:

‘...for me it just comes down to if they understand the importance of the customer, and giving good customer service, then you can give them the rest of the skills – you can give them all of the technical skills that they need. They might not have, you know, they might not be familiar with speaking to people across the phone, but if they can demonstrate to you that they really... (pauses)...are passionate about making a difference to people, then you can get around that.’

Gemma, service development manager, Gov-Tel (March 2008)

‘...in terms of recruitment, what I’m looking for is someone to walk through the door, who’s got bags of personality, who wants to turn up to work on time, who wants to work as part of a team, who *hates failing*, and is also prepared to play by the rules. And if they’ve got those kind of characteristics, we can teach them – we really can!’

Sheila, manager, Sales-Com (November 2007)

The key point here is that management at both Gov-Tel and Sales-Com sought to employ categories of worker who held particular *passions* for each respective service. More specifically, Gov-Tel required a workforce apt in the ‘feminine’ capacity to *care* (Belt et al. 2002), and management sought workers who were internally driven towards ‘making a difference’ to the lives of citizens. Sales-Com, on the other hand, hoped to employ and foster a workforce armed with the colder, more masculine drive to vehemently *sell*. Ideal candidates were here driven by the incentive of commission based sales over and above customer wellbeing, and the best sellers were typically extroverted and ‘street wise’ candidates equipped with emotional intelligence³ (Hughes 2005) and the ability to ‘bullshit’ (interviews).

Various selection procedures were used to help identify candidates rich in the above desires and capacities, thereby minimising the ‘risk’ each company faced in employing ill-suited and especially ineffective workers⁴. With regards to this risk (and despite the general shift from flexible recruitment practices outlined in Chapter 5) it is notable that both Game-Tel and Sales-Com utilised recruitment agencies for the initial hiring of staff. Both centres justified this move as necessary in responding to the fluctuating demand of third party clients. In addition, management also saw agency arrangements as a useful

means of trialling staff (typically over a three month period) prior to the offer of a permanent contract. In doing so, both outsourcers minimised the risk of contracting inefficient or unsatisfactory workers who failed to ‘fit in’:

‘It is expensive doing it through agencies, but the benefit that you have using the agencies is that – providing you have the processes in place - you can identify someone that isn’t going to fit into the role very early on, and you can send it (the worker) back to them. And the agency either replace them, or you get some money back...’

Kate, manager, Game-Tel (October 2007)

On top of these agency arrangements, all three centres utilised a selection of tests and procedures, which were designed to filter through the most appropriate workers for a role on the phones. In Game-Tel, job interviews included various ‘stages’ largely designed to test the technical capacities of applicants, which began with an interview and written examination⁵. Alternatively Gov-Tel and Sales-Com focussed more specifically on the speaking skills of applicants, and utilised telephone interviews and role playing games over the phone. Gov-Tel followed this up through a series of psychometric, verbal, and numeric reasoning tests, which provided an indication of the candidate’s ability to organise language as well as their ability to understand and interpret information (interviews). Thus, despite the existence of a routine and heavily surveyed labour process, each centre expended considerable effort into hiring the right sorts of workers for the role (i.e. those which promised the greatest return within the ‘effort bargain’⁶; see Behrend 1957; Baldamus 1961).

6.2.2 *Labour market realities and the difficulties of staffing*

In spite of these selection methods, the management of each centre experienced continual difficulties in maintaining a settled workforce, largely as a result of labour’s social and unpredictable nature.

‘...in the main we really want to recruit people who have a passion for travel, because that then comes across on the floor – but some of them don’t work out either. Really, in honesty, it’s a lottery actually.’

Each centre faced three basic difficulties with regards to staffing. Firstly, there existed a basic supply side problem in sourcing *enough* adequately qualified and/or ‘passionate’ candidates to sustain the call centre floor. Secondly, many of the candidates who *appeared* perfect for the role (based on tests and interview procedures) ultimately did not work out, thus demonstrating the frequent gap between labour’s *capacity* to work and what was actually delivered in practice (i.e. Kerry’s quote above; see Littler and Salaman 1982). Finally, skilled categories of labour – both emotionally and/or technically – may have been perfect in theory, but the same groups would often return to the job market in search of more lucrative careers. Thus, even ‘ideal’ candidates were a ‘lottery’ to each organisation, in turn fuelling the problem of turnover and raising questions over which sorts of applicant were *truly* ideal to employ (interview with manager, Ire-Tel). As a result, management were often forced to rely upon ‘unintended’ segments of the local population – thus utilising the social division of labour (Sayer and Walker 1992) – in a bid to make their operation ‘work’.

Sales-Com in particular faced considerable staffing difficulties within the Glasgow labour market due to the high levels of churn in the quantitative workflows in particular. Subsequently the centre adopted several ad hoc solutions – and compromises – in order to tackle this staffing problem. As the centre consistently required new members of staff, the earlier rejection of the call centre ‘hopper’ proved untenable in practice. Invariably former call centre workers were the sorts of people that looked to work in a place like Sales-Com, and the centre in fact took many of these applicants on. Furthermore, while the centre ideally required personalities rich in ‘emotional intelligence’ (Hughes 2005), management were well aware of the difficulties staffing a call centre floor with outgoing and extroverted personalities. Many of these agents were difficult to manage and in turn those with a ‘passion’ for selling and making money were often uncommitted to routine careers in call centres. As a result, Sales-Com came to rely upon a core of ‘steady’ and introverted workers, stereotyped as ‘mothers’ and older categories of labour (Taylor and Bain 1999: 111). In addition management also placed a high degree of faith in school leavers and younger segments of the labour market:

‘You’ll hear generally in call centres ‘Ohhh! Never take a school leaver!’ – Cobblers! If you’ve got a school leaver who’s actually quite mature in their outlook, then yeah, you can train them just the same as anyone else.’

Sheila, manager, Sales-Com (November 2007)

Thus, certain segments of the labour market held different qualities in the eyes of management. School leavers in particular offered ‘adaptability’ to the organisation, and offered the *potential* to develop into effective staff members. These workers were also untainted by previous call centre experiences. Older workers, on the other hand, offered maturity and reliability – if not ‘passion’ – to the operation.

Elsewhere Gov-Tel was forced to consider social groups not typically aligned to forms of customer service work. Management here were restricted in their quest for staff by a social recruitment mandate imposed through a council-wide equality agenda. In part this resulted in a workforce not typical to white-collar office work; and certainly not typical to more ‘feminine’ forms of emotional labour. This included a number of older workers, and often males with manual or factory backgrounds. Many came from working class families, on the back of several years (at times decades) of council employment⁷. Despite the imposition of equality agendas, management here were also proud of this fact; and indeed there is a valid argument that the centre *relied upon* many of the qualities this eclectic social mix brought to the centre.

‘...there are people here that would never, *never* survive over there (in a private call centre)...but they can deliver the service that we need...sometimes they’re a wee bit tricky and they’re a wee bit difficult to manage, but they provide the service we need, and that’s it.’

Grace, manager, Gov-Tel (October 2007)

‘...a lot of our customers will take particularly to that, they like to be spoken like that, they feel they’re on the same level and the person they’re speaking to understand who it is their talking to and (they) understand their problem’

Jim, trainer, Gov-Tel (March 2008)

Many of the citizens (‘customers’) phoning in to Gov-Tel were from similar (or the same) working class areas as these staff. Relatedly, many did not treat the Council as a private

company equipped with false smiles and in-genuine propriety, and instead preferred to be spoken to on a first name basis by people of a similar standing. Workers originating from Glasgow and its hinterland (e.g. Clydebank or Airdrie; see Map 4-1) boasted a local knowledge that helped the customer interaction, not least through the use of colloquialisms and informal ‘patter’. Linking back to earlier debates within the labour process tradition, this finding demonstrates the unexpected ways in which firms can benefit from labour’s unpredictability and subjective creativity within a given role (Cressey and MacInnes 1980; Manwaring and Wood 1984). As a result of these benefits, the call centre grew to rely upon a core group of workers who were local and heavily embedded within working class areas of Glasgow (Maguire 1989). Nevertheless, this reliance on working class segments of the labour market caused considerable tensions with several of the middle class workers on the floor, who held different attitudes to customer service and office work decorum (a point discussed in Chapter 8).

Conversely, Game-Tel’s language requirements resulted in the opposite effect on the categories of labour brought into the centre. Despite the high number of graduates in the Glasgow labour market, the centre struggled to recruit suitable British workers equipped with the necessary language skills, and overwhelmingly the centre turned to an eclectic mix of continental Europeans (Sales-Com faced the same scenario vis-à-vis former clients that required language skills)⁸. Inadvertently this produced a multi-cultural hodgepodge of contrasting nationalities on the call centre floor; including French, Spanish, German, Italian, Turkish, and various Scandinavian workers. Only a handful of British workers were employed within the centre. Many of these workers were only loosely embedded in the Glasgow labour market, and several had spontaneously arrived in Glasgow as part of a life adventure or following on from university. Unlike other centres I spoke to (notably Travel 2 or Sales-Com), Game-Tel saw little need to recruit spontaneous or extroverted workers with interesting life stories. This trend was therefore quite incidental and unintended, and also posed the centre a further control problem in monitoring workers of varied nationality, native language and culture.

6.3 Training and the division of labour

After identifying and hiring the chosen candidates (whether permanently or via an agency contract), each centre set about training and developing staff for their role as a telephone

agent. It is during the initial training period that workers were introduced, for the first time, to the call centre labour process and to the control apparatus of each centre. As mentioned in Chapter 5, call centres have been criticised for failing to develop skills in both new and longer term employees, and for incorporating flat structures that offer limited scope for progression (Belt 2002; Richardson et al. 2000). This lack of development has contributed to the image of call centre work as low skill and ‘dead end’, and is seen as a key contributor to the high rates of turnover that are endemic to the industry as whole⁹. Bearing this in mind, the following sections explore the initial and ongoing training of workers, and the ways that management attempted to secure the long term consent of a productive workforce.

In line with several studies into call centre training, the initial induction and training that agents received varied greatly between operations¹⁰ (Callaghan and Thompson 2002; Belt 2002; Russell 2008). Of the three centres Sales-Com provided the least training, which covered basic product information and sales techniques only. Management justified this limited investment in direct relation to labour’s unpredictable nature:

‘...its very much on the job training – but its also real. Because what you’ll sometimes find is people can perform brilliantly in the interview, they can display every good behaviour in training, and then for an inexplicable reason, you put them on the phone and they freeze. So I want to find that out early doors, rather than when I’ve invested a couple of grand in training...’

Sheila, manager, Sales-Com (November 2007)

This reluctance to invest in training is indicative of the tight margins present within Sales-Com, and the fact that unproductive workers literally *cost* the organisation and threatened the long term stability of the centre as a whole (i.e. through a failure to generate revenue). Despite the earlier assertion that management could train and develop raw talent, there existed a contradictory belief that people ‘could or couldn’t’ sell (interviews). Alternatively, Gov-Tel and Game-Tel were prepared to invest greater time, effort and resources into equipping workers with the necessary skills to perform their role on the phone. Game-Tel’s training length and intensity varied according to clients, and tended to focus heavily upon product knowledge¹¹ and more minimally upon phone specific

customer skills (similarly see Belt et al. 2002). The intricacies of many products took several weeks to explain, and this generated a significant cost to the operation:

‘...it is a cost, because you really need to look at it from the point of view that every new recruit really... 85% of their first year salary is what you invest in them from recruitment, training, and getting them familiar with what they’re doing.’

Frances, recruitment consultant and former client manager at Game-Tel (May 2008)

Gov-Tel were also prepared to spend a minimum of two weeks training staff for a role on the phones. Their programme included a day course in customer care and theory training, as well as a prolonged practical based training module detailing computer systems and the CRM. Based on the variable investment placed in skilling and embedding new workers into the respective operation, Gov-Tel and Game-Tel clearly faced more to lose from a high rate of attrition than was the case in Sales-Com. This latter centre adopted a ‘sacrificial’ policy to staffing – in tandem with the use of temporary contracts – geared towards identifying and weeding out unproductive and/or unpromising sales agents (see Wallace et al. 2000).

6.3.1 *Learning through ‘doing’*

The main commonality in training across all settings came in the use of ‘buddying up’ as a means of teaching. Much like my participant observation, new workers spent time listening in to agents in order to learn both processing techniques on the CRM and to experience the sorts of interaction they could expect when speaking on the phone. The majority of this took place during the role itself and chiefly through the arrangement of agents into teams. Centres relied upon agents speaking to one another and coming up with their own explanations for how systems work or how best to solve a customer problem.

‘Training? The training for PrintEx is basically...they tell you about the systems, what’s the best system to go through selling...but you basically pick the majority up yourself. Suzy, the girl on my right, I taught her the majority that she knows on the systems, James as well, I helped him throughout the whole system as well...’

Matthew, PrintEx agent, Sales-Com (May 2008)

Each centre utilised team arrangements to foster the informal and tacit transfer of knowledge between agents, which included ‘sharing information about problems with customers and software systems’¹² (Van Den Broek et al. 2004: 198; Holman et al. 2001). Thus, despite the existence of a technically controlled labour process, it was not desirable to simply or arbitrarily ‘plug’ workers into the ACD system, and in turn, personality often played a key role in determining team dynamics. In doing so each centre (again) acknowledged labour’s social nature (Peck 1996) by attempting to harness and combine different personalities on the call centre floor. For example, Sales-Com pooled multiple layers of management (especially team leaders) to discuss and plot the dynamics of groups so that personalities – typically a mixture of introverted and extroverted workers - could bounce off one another. In Game-Tel, teams were arranged by language so that agents could converse at ease on how best to fix arising problems on or off the phone. With this in mind I also observed busy periods within the role itself, where staff would put customers on hold to ask nearby team members for obscure answers to unpredictable questions. While such arrangements held clear cost-saving benefits for the centres concerned – by helping to provide the quickest solutions to customer calls - this interaction also boosted the inter-personal skills of agents who effectively learnt from and taught one another. In this way the call centres not only accepted the unpredictable personalities of workers: they positively harnessed labour’s social nature as a means of training and task completion.

This tacit form of learning was especially evident in Game-Tel, and indeed the setup of the centre was largely geared towards group and individual forms of knowledge building. To foster a more tangible understanding of the products under support, Game-Tel provided two laboratories whereby staff could test and experiment with video-conferencing and tape drive equipment off the phone. The call centre floor itself also contained games consoles which agents could (with permission) use in-between calls or on break periods. Depending on the client, agents were further plied with various training materials to read through, and staff were also expected to trawl client websites and online technical forums (between calls) in pursuit of new and up-to-date solutions. Notably, this process would never end – products were always developing ‘hundreds’ of problems and solutions – which in turn required constant ‘study’ in keeping up to date (interviews). While known resolutions were commonly stored in the CRM’s Knowledge Base, agents could contribute to this through either adding to the database directly or through a knowledge ‘wiki’; whereby

agent research was documented and published online for the use of others. This also serves as a reminder that call centre technologies are not always intended as a technocratic form of control, and can in fact facilitate group learning, staff development and potential challenges and satisfaction within the role (Russell 2007; Russell 2008). Far from the perfunctory training and development which Belt (2002) and others depict (e.g. Houlihan 2000), Game-Tel ostensibly encouraged the constant development of knowledge sharing in what Richard Sennett depicts as a rare forum for social 'craftsmanship' in a flexible age (Sennett 2008¹³).

Each centre had also taken steps to enhance the credibility and transferability of worker skills, with a view to career development either within or out-with the call centre sector. In doing so management took steps to relieve alienation in the role, or, at least, to demonstrate that progress through the centre was *possible* over time. One means of achieving this was to offer a range of pseudo-qualifications for staff to take on. In Gov-Tel this came in the form of a Performance Development Plan ('PDP') which formally documented the competency based skills learned and developed in the centre. I also spoke to workers within Sales-Com who had completed business and management NVQs through the centre, whilst the IT manager at Game-Tel enrolled in a core programming course (Cisco CCNA) at a local university as part of his on-the-job training. Whether this is interpreted as a socially responsible PR exercise or as a genuine attempt to ply workers with transferable skills may be something of a moot point. However, at the very least this demonstrates that call centres – as with supermarkets and fast food chains – are at least paying lip service to skills secretary John Denham's call to 'make learning new skills and, where possible, gaining relevant qualifications, an integral part of work' (Daily Telegraph, December 2008).

As detailed in Chapter 5, internally each centre also made clear efforts to accommodate more ambitious and/or able staff members through a modified division of labour. As opposed to the simplistic 'Agent-Team Leader-Management' model – paralleling the traditional factory floor (Taylor and Bain 1999) - each centre expanded opportunities within or out-with the 'agent' role. Game-Tel performed a yearly appraisal of staff at all levels, and agents that demonstrated a higher than average technical expertise (often through wiki publication) could rise up to 'Tier 2' and 'Tier 3' agent levels. Higher Tiered

agents could in turn negotiate a better rate of pay, and took on additional responsibilities such as escalated calls and the grading of Tier 1 agent calls. Whilst Gov-Tel did not formally expand the agent role in this way, the progressive training in this centre did suggest a linear development within the role: as long term workers acquired additional skill sets allowing them to answer a wider variety of calls. Although this carried no monetary reward, multi-skilling did imply enhanced status (and/or usefulness) on the call centre floor. Gov-Tel also offered secondment opportunities in the majority of positions; and this way agents looking to climb could gain valuable experience in different roles throughout the operation¹⁴. Furthermore, agents could also apply for roles throughout the broader body of the city council as a whole.

Alternatively Sales-Com harnessed its various campaigns and workflows as an internal labour market of roles with matching complexity, status and pay. Successful agents in the lower quality workflows of QuickCall or Antrax Res were often moved onto other workflows as a form of promotion:

‘Now from my point of view as an outsourcer, it’s actually good to have varying levels of complexity (between workflows), because it means I can bring someone through the door and train them on The Bugle or Antrax residential, for example. I then accept that they may well get either burnt out, or very very good at doing that campaign, and *aspire* to do something more – and then I can say ‘alright, let’s move you up notch of complexity, and have you working on QuickCall business, because that’s a tougher sale’...So it means that one of the most common gripes of in-sourced staff who say ‘I’ve got no development, there’s nowhere for me to go within the organisation’ – well in here they do.’

Sheila, manager, Sales-Com (November 2007)

Sales-Com also offered an out of hours ‘Apprentice’ contest (much like the popular television series) to staff in all campaigns: a contest that pitched willing applicants against one another in a bid to identify the hidden skill of ‘leadership’ and/or ‘team skills’¹⁵. After various stages the winner of this contest gained an off the phone project manager¹⁶ role within the centre. While this reward was very much a ‘one off’, the Apprentice helped

to convince agents of to the expansive development/promotion opportunities out with the standard agent role.

With this in mind, it is important to state that the bulk of these internal openings (in Gov-Tel and Sales-Com in particular) stopped short of providing a formal promotion or a substantial pay rise for workers to attain. As one manager at Sales-Com remarked in reference to incentives ‘...there’s nowhere to go once you start raising the pay...after you do it once, all you can do is keep on raising’ (Frank, industry consultant, Sales-Com; November 2007). Secondments at Gov-Tel seldom translated into a permanent transition away from the phones in the medium-long term, and agents within Sales-Com were also ‘demoted’ from quality driven workflows into the routine and low skill quantitative campaigns (often on the back of poor performances, and in response to the ebb and flow of client demand). Accordingly, these efforts effectively represent management’s attempt to seduce workers into offering long (or at least medium) term consent, without the offer of corresponding material benefits or actual progression. As Allen (2003: 31) notes, methods of seduction are ‘intended to act upon those who have the ability to opt out’; and are designed to *encourage* certain kinds of behaviour (in this instance commitment to a role), in a context where reflection and choice remain present. Management could not coerce workers into staying longer in a give role; instead they hoped to persuade workers that channels of progression and development were clearly visible and worth pursuing. Out-with these structural inducements, the following section interrogates the call centre labour process and more technical forms of control running through each centre.

6.4 The call centre labour process: technical control, Taylorism and deskilling

Inside each operation, management sought a high degree of control and surveillance over the labour process, in order to maximise worker potential and to rule out inefficient acts and behaviours. However, despite the use of an open floor plan - and the presence of various ‘team leaders’ to oversee and monitor staff and team performance - forms of direct control alone were undesirable for several reasons. As Ritzer (2000) notes:

‘...direct, personal control is difficult, costly, and likely to engender personal hostility among those being controlled. Subordinates will likely strike out at an

immediate supervisor or an owner who exercises excessively tight control over their activities.’ (Ritzer 2000: 102).

As opposed to relying solely upon direct and overt forms of control, call centres utilise a raft of non-human technologies¹⁷ and forms of technical control to help govern the labour process. In particular, technologies such as the ACD system, electronic monitoring systems, and the extensive use of targets have worked to contain conflict by making control a ‘product of the system’ (Callaghan and Thompson 2001). In this sense, management have sought to quell staff resistance to control by maintaining authority over workers by *proxy* (i.e. control is easier to accept when it is built in to the role, as opposed to when it is administered by a human manager). Nevertheless, a reliance on non-human technologies has also created fresh problems for management. In particular, the intensive monitoring and pacing of work has acted to stultify and stress workers, in what is often a highly demanding yet repetitious and deskilled labour process (Taylor and Bain 1999). This represents a particular concern for centres such as Gov-Tel and Sales-Com which rely so heavily on the ‘energy’ and ‘enthusiasm’ of staff. Bearing this dilemma in mind, the following section will consider the systems of technical control used to control work activity, before considering the additional technologies of targets and the use of electronic surveillance across each of the three cases.

6.4.1 *Technical control*

It is first worth considering the technical control (Edwards 1979) each call centre utilised over its workforce, as it was often technology and not a person which controlled the pace and direction of work (Ritzer 2000; Callaghan and Thompson 2001). By definition call centres integrate telephone and computer technologies to restructure service provision, and all three centres utilised ACD technology to automatically channel the flow of calls through to agents¹⁸. As such, the pacing and direction of work was technically controlled across the majority of the cases – as in a factory production line – and this heavily impacted upon the autonomy of agents within each centre. Only the agents in Sales-Com’s PrintEx and Antrax Core campaigns held the discretionary power to manually make calls at a time of their choosing. In this sense, workers at the ‘top end’ of Sales-Com acted as relative self managers (Batt 2000; Flecker and Hofbauer 1998), deciding when and how to

perform their role. All other agents were ‘force-fed’ calls automatically as in factory assembly lines (Taylor and Bain 1999).

Non-human technology was also used to direct work tasks within the calls themselves through a CRM interface designed to channel complex customer requests into a series of more simplified online actions for agents to follow (Russell 2007). This exemplifies Ritzer’s (2000) ‘McDonaldization’ thesis, whereby technology restricts the possibility for worker deviance away from a limited set of predefined tasks. Customer requests were commonly processed through a limited set of onscreen options - termed ‘resolutions’ or ‘actions’ in centre parlance - across all three cases. To further limit the range of options available to agents within each centre, staff were commonly taught to accept their function as a service mediator; i.e. that of a ‘middle-man’ within a larger production chain (Glucksman 2004). Both Gov and Game-Tel trained staff to accept their limited scope for discretion; in particular agents in both settings were taught to ‘escalate’ calls at the correct moment. This commonly meant more complex or demanding tasks were passed on to a specialist department or individual within or out-with the centre. Agents were taught to accept the limitations of what they could or could not achieve in their role on the phone:

‘...I know it’s not my job, I know we are considered Tier 1 precisely for that reason – if we can’t help any further, we need to transfer. That’s one thing they told us in the training – it’s better to escalate sooner rather than later, so I’m trying to keep that in mind.’

Penelope, agent, Game-Tel (June 2008)

‘...I don’t think you could consider it a challenge, because I don’t think you can achieve anything, you know, everything eventually will get passed to a senior advisor or a manager, and its maybe a challenge to them, but at CSA level, its just a headache.’

Tim, agent, Gov-Tel (March 2008)

Furthermore, aside from the ‘quality’ workflows in Sales-Com none of the agents held the autonomy to plan shift patterns or breaks, which were commonly assigned through electronic forecasting reports¹⁹. Therefore, due to the pervasiveness of technical control

each centre offered little autonomy to workers, and only agents in the Antrax Core and PrintEx campaigns of Sales-Com held the discretionary power to plan their working days. As one agent in Gov-Tel put it ‘the computer tells me when to eat and shit’.

6.4.2 *Taylorism and surveillance*

In tandem with the technical pacing and control of work, each centre utilised its own brand of surveillance software to monitor and assess agent performance. This facilitated both hard quantitative grading of worker performance (such as time logged in, lateness etc) in tandem with more subjective qualitative evaluations of the agent-customer interaction (in particular through call recordings). As a result of this surveillance technology, workers performed under the (potentially) constant gaze of management, and, so the argument goes, workers were inclined to internally regulate their performance in line with management objectives (i.e. the ‘panoptic’ effect of call centre control; see Sewell and Wilkinson 1992). However each centre also faced a dilemma regarding the extent and the frequency which monitoring surveillance and target setting was utilised, bearing in mind its proclivity to stress and de-motivate workers performing an already intensive and alienating role (Taylor and Bain 1999). In the past, call centres have been criticised for placing punitive time constraints placed upon staff, which often include the measurement of all non-call activity including toilet breaks (Taylor et al. 2003). Several team leaders were keen to stress that these and other targets were kept to a minimum, in a bid to garner staff consent:

‘I would be very lax about bathroom breaks and things like that because I don’t think its gonna get you anywhere – its not gonna get your agents to, you know, *stand with you on anything* if you’re going to micromanage them that closely. Its not going to get their *buy in* on anything if you micromanage them...and then you come out of your bosses office and you tell them that the (sales) targets have doubled, you’re not going to win anything by doing that...

Abbey, team leader, Ire-Tel (December 2007)

Thus, while each centre held the capability to ‘micro-manage’ workers through the use of statistic outputs, management and team leaders alike were aware of the adverse affect that targets and surveillance practices could have on staff productivity. In all of the centres,

management required the ‘buy in’²⁰ of those working on the phones: and targets were not always conducive to securing this consent (Cumbers and Atterton 2000).

To help secure a willing workforce, each centre approached the use of targets differently. Gov-Tel’s quantitative monitoring came in the form of a ‘Balanced Score Card’ which assessed agents on their quantitative performance across a range of criteria. Rather than pre-defining target figures, Gov-Tel assessed agent performance through percentage scores against the floor’s *average* work time for each aspect of performance. The fundamental criterion across Gov-Tel was that of agent ‘availability’ which was set at average benchmark of 85%. Agents were thus targeted on categories which could affect this mark, and measured against the average ‘after call work’ or ‘personal time’ figures for the centre as a whole. In this way Gov-Tel sought to instil an ‘equality’ motif to the targets and assessment. Agents were also expected to maintain high percentage scores in the fields of Dropped calls (95-99% not dropped); adherence to log-in and break times (97% adherence); and somewhat unusually a ‘First Time Resolutions’ target (at 90% adherence) for satisfying customer requests without the need for repeat or follow-up calls. This latter category encouraged a potentially lengthily but productive use of agent time. As such, Gov-Tel chose not to utilise a raft of other (more typical) quantitative measurements at its disposal, placing no emphasis on the number of calls an agent should take or on the length of time agents were expected to spend handling calls; i.e. ‘Call Handling Time’ (‘CHT’). Management at Gov-Tel justified this approach as a means of attaining ‘quality’ performance from agents, in contrast to the private sector’s preoccupation with profit:

‘The private sector is all about churning through high volumes – because the callers are potential revenue. That’s not really the case in here. So the way we look at it is...if we resolve it first time then we actually reduce the volumes coming through, so actually we save money as opposed to acquiring money. And that’s really where we’re coming from...’

Grace, manager, Gov-Tel (October 2007)

However, it is also notable that neither Sales-Com nor Game-Tel placed emphasis on the time spent handling calls. Sales-Com’s main quantitative target came in the sales figures themselves – i.e. the revenue generating purpose of the centre - which were targeted

differently for each respective campaign. Across each workflow, it was widely understood that agents could take as long as they wanted on calls if this meant securing sales. This cross-comparison demonstrates that both customer service and sales centres – despite their conflicting qualitative and quantitative needs and interests - were both inclined to provide agents with a largely unrestricted time period to successfully complete calls.

Of the three cases, Game-Tel presented itself as the least target driven centre; and one reliant upon autonomous and self-regulating agents (Flecker and Hofbauer 1998). In reality Game-Tel faced difficulties introducing measurements outside of the most basic Service Level Agreements (SLAs) due to the low call volume present in the centre.

‘Well they should aim for 75, 80% utilisation – that percentage of your day should be covered by bill-able time. So if an agent picks up the phone on a case, then obviously a timer is run and that’s for the client...but we can also see how the agents are doing, their average call length and stuff like that, so basically that’s what we’re aiming for – but at the moment the call volume is not there to do it, so its not really the agents fault if they don’t get to that 75% utilisation mark...’

Robin, IT manager, Game-Tel (June 2008)

‘There are stats you need to respect – you know, to get you to answer the call as quickly as you can, and so you don’t avoid answering the calls, but I’m not really aware of that, you’d need to check with a team leader...’

Penelope, agent, Game-Tel (June 2008)

SLAs for various clients did stipulate quantitative benchmarks - such as agent availability and the time within which an agent was expected to answer a call – however the low volume of calls processed at the time meant agents rarely felt the need to regulate their performance to satisfy these needs. As a result, both management and workers talked vaguely of evaluation benchmarks.

6.4.3 *Qualitative monitoring*

Call centres have typically faced a greater challenge controlling and quantifying the service interaction itself. The need for spontaneous interactions with each customer base requires

more flexible decision making from agents than rigid scripting can typically allow (Russell 2008; Frenkel et al. 1998). As a result, only the lower end campaigns in Sales-Com operated with a high degree of call scripting, and most agents across all three cases were assessed more loosely around conversation ‘themes’. Agents for the most part held the discretionary power to speak and act as they saw fit, on the understanding that they should ‘touch base’ on different sets of call criteria (see Table 6-1).

Table 6-1: Qualitative call grading criteria

Gov-Tel	Game-Tel	Sales-Com
1. Performance Gateways (data protection procedure)	1. Opening	1. Introduction
2. Opening and the greeting	2. Attempt to gather all customer/product information	2. Probe
3. System and Service Knowledge	3. Identifying customer needs	3. Match
4. Soft Skills	4. Provide applicable knowledge	4. Close
5. Closing	5. Effective communication	5. Objection Handling
	6. Closing	6. Compliance

Each centre’s guide prescribed ‘openings’ and ‘closings’ – commonly focussing upon introductory greetings, the use of the customer’s name, and the adherence to data protection procedures. The crux of each service guideline assessed agents on their identification of the customer’s need, the communication of a solution, and their efficacy in utilising the CRM to ‘action’ and record the customer’s request. Thus, the *words* staff selected were largely of their own choosing, although Gov-Tel and Game-Tel did assess agents on the appropriate ‘tone’ and ‘pitch’ utilised in this interaction. Sales-Com’s grading criteria varied significantly from the above accounts, and dissected the call into a series of tactical stages specifically designed for selling²¹. These guidelines ultimately

translated into percentage scores (with a 90% target) at Gov and Game-Tel, whilst Sales-Com assigned a mark of 1-4 for each aspect of the call. As a result, whilst the customer interaction was atomised into discrete 'stages' for assessment (and so Taylorised), agents held the discretion to fill the content of most 'stages' with dialogue of their own choosing. This use of call guides as opposed to scripting also allowed management to present qualitative assessment as a form of coaching and development rather than coercive control (discussed further in Section 6.5). Fundamentally the centres were pressed to concede this control not only from a customer perspective (who required spontaneous agent dialogue); but also because intense monitoring and tight scripting acts as a key contributor to staff dissatisfaction, stress, and high rates of sickness (Holman 2003; Deery et al. 2002; Taylor et al. 2003).

In sum, the above findings indicate a less intensive and more trusting relationship existed in each of the three case centres²² in contrast to the earlier depictions of call centre work (i.e. that of the 'dark satanic mill' and the 'electronic sweatshop'; see Fernie and Metcalf 1998; Garson 1988). In 1999 Taylor and Bain remarked that many centres were rescinding their use of scripting, in a bid to combat staff dissatisfaction, fatigue and turnover. This represented, they felt, an attempt by management to ameliorate worker tensions. Similarly, I found that each centre (bar the quantitative Sales-Com workflows) relied upon flexible guidelines over and above specific scripts to assess and steer the service interaction. Moreover, despite holding the technical *capacity* to monitor and evaluate workers to a higher degree, each centre recognised a self-interest in providing workers with a less intensive work environment, or at least one which could be sold to staff that way. Thus, all of the centres expressed a priority focus upon attendance and timekeeping as the vital quantitative measures over and above the micro-management of staff through CHTs (and other more obscure targets) which have come to notarise the call centre labour process (Fernie and Metcalf 1998; Bain and Taylor 2000). Building upon this 'soft' approach to staff governance, the following section unpacks the bureaucratic and normative forms of control each centre utilised in tandem with the above.

6.5 Bureaucratic and normative control: seducing, manipulating and coercing workers.

While the technical pacing and surveillance of work seemingly made control a ‘product of the system’, it is important to note that direct human control was still required in each setting. Most clearly, team leaders, trainers and management were needed to interpret the statistics generated on workers, and team leaders in particular were also called upon to restrict and confront unsolicited staff behaviour off the phones (such as inappropriate chatting or the reading of magazines). As a result, the human hand of management was always ‘on show’ in one form or another (at the very least for administering target feedback; see Callaghan and Thompson 2001). To reduce the potential for conflict, each centre combined the above technical control with additional forms of bureaucratic and normative control, designed to encourage *self-governance* and the willing application of staff (Van Den Broek et al. 2008, 2004; McCabe 2004). In doing so, and in tandem with Foucauldian understanding of power and knowledge, each centre produced a discourse designed to align workers with shared organisational goals, values and traditions (these were often ‘aspirational’, see Du Gay 1996¹; Foucault 1977; Rose 1990; Fleming and Stablein 1999). The following section unpacks these additional forms of control, which were again aimed at garnering staff consent.

6.5.1 Bureaucratic control and shifting modalities of power: forms of seduction, manipulation and coercion.

Bureaucratic control typically worked through the medium of team meetings and individual staff appraisals, whereby each agent received statistical feedback on their performance in relation to pre-defined targets on both qualitative and quantitative aspects of the role (in particular the targets and guidelines outlined in section 6.4). In doing so the organisations made the clearest use of the monitoring and evaluation software available, again with the intention of presenting these statistics as the ‘objective’ product of the system (thus reducing the likelihood of conflict). Workers were encouraged to perform well in these appraisals through a range of incentives which, as shall be shown, varied from centre to centre. Generally speaking, agents hoping to climb the internal labour market were expected to consistently meet performance targets and it is this incentive that gave bureaucratic control its greatest impact (see section 6.2; Callaghan and Thompson 2001; Edwards 1979).

Across all three cases the main forum for administering worker feedback (via appraisals and performance scores) came through monthly 'one-to-one' sessions led by team leaders or trainers (Russell 2008)²³. Ideally management sought to present one-to-one's as an interactive forum whereby agents could understand and even appreciate where they had gone wrong, without the negative connotation of overt control or discipline (in doing so the centres also hoped to reduce and not increase levels of stress and sickness – see Holman 2003: 126). Those who met target benchmarks were complimented and reassured as to their progress and development (a form of 'stroking'; see Schlosser 2001), whilst agents found lacking in certain elements of the appraisal were coached to improve upon these areas²⁴. As opposed to dampening enthusiasm through discipline and direct control, one-to-one's represented the *caring* development of staff. Team Leaders were often charged with motivating and supporting agents to perform their role better²⁵, as well as counselling staff on any difficulties they had experienced on the floor. In doing so the line between coaching and controlling frequently blurred (Van den Broek et al. 2004).

One-to-one's also administered more 'info-normative' forms of control, whereby workers were socialised to imagine themselves as customers on the other end of the line (Axtell et al. 2007). This encouraged the emulation of imagined customer ideals and a corresponding self-regulation (Korczynski 2002; Russell 2008). Thus, agents in Gov-Tel were consistently reminded of what it was like to be a customer phoning in to the centre, which often parodied older citizens whose lives were made difficult by changes in refuge collection or through faulty street lights outside their homes. Management deliberately chose such (particularly) mundane examples in a bid to turn these around, and to show how *important* these services were to certain types of people. This tied in to the broader theme of 'difference making' which agents could aspire to. At the other extreme, agents in Sales-Com were trained to provoke specific fears in groups of customers (big businesses in the case of Antrax Core) by hypothesising as to how much time and money could be lost or saved thanks to expensive insurance policies²⁶. This form of training again added importance to the role itself – agents were not just hawking products, but making a real impact in the outside world - thus making the role more tangible and worthwhile (Russell 2008: 201). In doing so, Gov-Tel and Sales-Com in particular spent considerable effort encouraging staff to take their role seriously on the phones. Management recognised a

vested interest in coaxing enthusiasm and commitment out of staff, which required close proximity in the form of one-to-one attention between team leaders, trainers and agents on the phone (Allen 2003).

In addition to ‘developmental’ one-to-one attention, both Gov-Tel and Sales-Com utilised team meetings as a group forum for discussion off the phones. For Gov-Tel meetings represented a (largely tokenistic) monthly event, used to dispense news and information and to reiterate a sense of unity/togetherness off the phone (Van Den Broek 2008; Van Den Broek 2004). However, team meetings within Sales-Com took on a more pervasive and manipulative role, and were conducted at the frequent rate of twice per day (first thing in the morning and in the afternoon). As Allen (2003) notes, manipulation typically involves the concealment of intent (in this case from management) in order to bring about desired outcomes. Thus:

‘...management may conceal their actual intentions regarding productivity from a workforce, or they may selectively restrict the kinds of information that they receive about what was suggested within quality teams or through informal feedback mechanisms. In so far as management are successful in manipulating employees, the simulation of choice and fulfilment may well flourish.’ (ibid: 145-146).

Control of this sort is well demonstrated by the shifting sales targets that Sales-Com agents were expected to meet in order for the centre to ‘break even’. As the following quote illustrates, certain staff were well aware that targets were wholly artificial figures, designed to extract the greatest effort and return from agents through the effort bargain (a point revisited in Chapter 7).

‘They’ll always tell you a higher target than what you need to break even, that’s an old tactic... it’s a bit like mushrooms at a party – they say ‘keep them in the dark and feed them shit’....But for me personally I think that works two ways. You either end up de-motivated because you’re barely hitting target...(or) you’re exceeding your targets, and that spurs you on to do even more.’

Leon, QuickCall agent, Sales-Com (June 2008)

Accordingly, management utilised meetings to gauge agent reactions and to help ascertain the sales targets most likely to extract maximum effort and enthusiasm for the task at hand. This experimentation again demonstrates the unpredictability of the labour commodity; and the fact that Sales-Com management sought to seduce and manipulate workers rather than dictate the terms behind sales. As well as relaying the sales targets that workers were expected to hit, meetings were also used to quiz agents on their current form, and figures were publicly displayed upon adjacent whiteboards. This in itself was designed to ‘self-motivate’ agents, by drawing upon a competitive worker edge (the ‘hatred of failure’ referred to in Section 6.1); and the will of agents to better colleagues. As well as pushing agents to compete on an individual basis – and for an individual sales bonus – Sales-Com also pitted teams against one another to attain a quarterly team prize. This was clearly designed to stoke peer pressure amongst agents; urging a self-regulation and inner drive so as not to ‘let the team down’.

In tandem with this peer pressure, team leaders in Sales-Com also played a more hands on role in motivating and incentivising staff to sell. On the one hand, meetings - and the routine practices these involved - were used to stoke pressure upon the agents to sell, yet in a somewhat contradictory sense Team Leaders were also asked to ‘wipe the slate clean’ and to reinvigorate agents for the next sale. Incentives ranged from milder forms of verbal encouragement – ‘well done guys, keep getting those sales on the board’ – to the more aggressive call to ‘close’; ‘push’; ‘pump’; or ‘nail’ sales when productivity had slowed. In addition, agents were also rewarded with non-monetary prizes for hitting targets early; such as time off the phone to play games (e.g. cards or buckaroo), whilst prizes of alcohol were also commonplace on all teams. Several interviewees with experience on the QuickCall workflow also spoke of routine theatrical displays such as ‘hand circles’, which placed a particular emphasise on the notion of ‘team’ and ‘togetherness’. Such initiatives illustrate the lengths that Sales-Com (in particular) took towards persuading and seducing workers to maintain a high level of energy and enthusiasm over the phone (Callaghan and Thompson 2002; Townsend 2004).

Despite these efforts to encourage and indoctrinate a committed workforce, it is necessary to acknowledge what management already knew: these methods of seduction and manipulation frequently failed. For all of the softer developmental approaches to control,

labour's opposition and unpredictability often drew the 'stick' of discipline in all three case settings. In these instances management turned to methods of coercion – i.e. the influence of conduct by threat of negative sanctions (Allen 2003: 31) - as a final tactic to push workers into towing the company line. The extent of this coercion varied from centre to centre, often depending upon the structural constraints of each operation.

'The stick, and I use that term loosely and I don't like to use it, but we are a contact centre after all! If, on an on-going basis, it (target performance) is continually below par then yeah we need to look at giving them extra coaching or support. Or, maybe...we would look at a performance improvement plan, where they actually don't meet the requirement and the competencies that are agreed upon'

Gemma, manager, Gov-Tel (March 2008)

Both Gov-Tel and Game-Tel utilised 'Performance Improvement Plans' ('PIPs') as a means of disciplining staff. These worked to isolate a persistent target failure, and placed an extra emphasis upon the coaching and surveillance of this problem area. While both centres maintained this (ostensibly) lenient approach as deliberate, it was equally true that the guiding principles behind the council (coupled with its union and its status as 'employer of choice') restricted Gov-Tel from wielding the axe on inefficient workers. Very few members of staff were formally sacked from Gov-Tel as a result, whilst Game-Tel could not afford to let staff go for a different reason.

'It is (difficult), because at the moment it's a trade-off because we've got the people here now, and they're working, and even if they're pretty poor at what they're doing, the fact that we need the language – they've got the job. If we had to replace them, we then have to pay a recruitment fee, train them up and whatever, so there's that short term cost of recruitment and training time - and probably we'd rather save that and just put up with people being...sick.'

Robert, manager, Game-Tel (June 2008)

Conversely, Sales-Com overtly *drove* high rates of turnover through disciplinary action. In a Darwinian sense appraisals and one-to-one's were often used to weed out ineffective and unprofitable agents which the centre could not rely upon to sell (a 'sacrificial' HR strategy;

see Wallace et al. 2000)²⁷. Agents who were not staffed through an agency were often handed warnings for not meeting the requisite sales targets. Those employed through an agency were simply released. Several agents depicted a two-tier status of employment in Sales-Com which constituted a more established group of ‘winner’ agents who could sell, in contrast to an instable and ever recycling category of ‘loser’ worker who struggled to hit base-line sales targets. Agents in this latter band were often ‘pulled up’ on dubious pretexts²⁸ - including off the phone behaviours and failure to hit more obscure targets - while agents who sold enjoyed a far less target-driven experience than that typical of other centres.

In practice all three centres (Gov-Tel in particular) relied upon the continual form of direct control whereby team leaders ‘pulled’ agents to one side for unscheduled chats on their performance. This form of coercion required a close proximity and presence between figures of authority (i.e. team leaders, managers and trainers) and workers on the phone, in order to place these individuals back in line (Allen 2003: 11). Thus, agents found in ‘after call work’ for extended periods were often called upon ‘as and when’ this was happening for explanations as to why they had slowed the rate of service or broken a basic rule. One team leader remarked that supervising staff was akin to ‘childminding’ at times, and this theme pervaded both Sales-Com and Gov-Tel (a point discussed further in Chapter 8). Such direct and overt forms of control potentially hampered the subtler, more developmental methods of control (such as one-to-one coaching and the encouragement of ‘correct’ behaviours). This further exemplifies the fact control was far from perfect across and within each setting (Taylor and Bain 1999; Bain and Taylor 2000). Nevertheless, this coercive form of power is also testimony to the reactive agency of management (Houlihan 2006). Rather than passively observing the ‘gaps’ in technical or bureaucratic control, management recognised a need for direct intervention with disruptive and/or unproductive workers.²⁹

6.5.2 *Discourse and normative control: broader cultures of fun and excitement*

In a bid to smooth the potential tensions caused by this coercion (i.e. the punitive sanctions for non-performance) it is notable that each centre invoked a broader cultural discourse, primarily based around teamworking and notions of ‘fun’. In doing so, management once again placed emphasis on methods of seduction and manipulation as a primary means of

attaining effort and commitment from their workers. Unlike direct forms of control – which necessarily took place at close range – normative control boasted considerable spatial reach through an all-round environment geared towards self-motivation and internal regulation. This was achieved not least through a series of ceremonies and rituals (McCabe 2004: 832), which sought to inspire workers and demonstrated a clear appreciation of worker efforts. This in turn encouraged workers to deliver high standards on their own accord, without the need for direct intervention. Crucially, the internal discourse of each centre was voluntarily altered in accordance with the types of worker (and their perceived characteristics) drawn upon. In this sense, external factors within labour's reproductive sphere 'rubbed off' on the internal relations of each centre (Maguire 1989).

Before detailing these differences, it is important to note that both Sales-Com and Gov-Tel utilised several similar forums for engaging worker interests. Both centres utilised newsletters, themed days, special events, and centre-wide celebrations to garner the 'buy in' of agents (interviews) and to relieve the monotony and stress implicit within the role (i.e. 'high commitment management practices'; see Kinnie et al. 2000). The themed days in both centres tended to parody any stereotype of a dowdy office environment (similarly, see Fleming and Spicer 2004):

'Halloween! Its not usually like that out there! We had a Mexican day once upon a time... They've got their own social club, and what they do is they'll hold raffles and things like that, and they'll do their own buffet, so people bring in bits and pieces of food and things like that, it all goes down into the canteen, they pay £2, they can eat whatever they like, have raffles and prizes and things like that. They build up a lot of money, (and) have a huge raffle at Christmas, with loads of prizes from televisions to cameras to I-pods...so its theirs, they deal with it, I'm not involved in that at all.'

Lucy, manager, Gov-Tel (October 2007)

Gov-Tel felt particularly proud of the voluntary aspect of themed day events, and the fact agents themselves organised and participated in their running. As the above quotes demonstrate, the fact Gov-Tel was a public and not private operation made these efforts all the more genuine and participatory in the eyes of management. This comes in direct

opposition to McCabe (2004) and other commentators who depict the fallacy of ‘top-down’ cultural engineering. Any prizes which agents won – the above mentioned i-pods and so forth – were indeed paid for by the staff at large. As mentioned, Gov-Tel also boasted a social club/committee whereby staff planned and paid for trips away outside of work (such as bowling; karaoke; or trips on the Waverly) together with the buffet days; raffles; fancy dress and themed events which the centre held on a regular basis.

In addition, the centre also ran an online newsletter which relied upon agent contributions across the floor. This publication combined information on centre-wide performance figures with competitions, restaurant and film reviews, interviews with staff, a spoof dating column and a variety of other features. This forum was designed not only to make statistics ‘fun’, but to encourage staff to project a part of themselves (in particular through a 60 second interview) into the culture of the centre. Through these mediums Gov-Tel hoped to produce a fun, exciting and *egalitarian* discourse – never directly tied to productivity – intent on lifting the mood of the centre. In doing so management hoped to encourage agents to perform, contribute, and self-manage to the best of their ability. The perceived wealth and razzmatazz of the private sector further underlined the modesty and self-sacrifice behind such forums and events, which also served to bond different personalities and age groups.

These forums and displays came in contrast to the flamboyant awards ceremony which Sales-Com held each quarter, via a themed fancy-dress party. Unlike Gov-Tel this celebration linked directly to the productivity of agents and the revenue agents brought in through sales. The top performing agents received shields, trophies and a variety of ‘top prizes’ which commonly included a holiday for two abroad (the last example being Florida); games consoles; gift vouchers; and various smaller gifts such as bottles of wine. The best performing teams also received trips away and funded nights out. This ritual held multiple benefits to management; most obviously by providing an incentive for agents to perform and sell both for themselves and for their team. Primarily the awards demonstrated the tangible gains to be had from succeeding within the centre, and so fostered a discourse of ‘winning’.

Like Gov-Tel, management lauded the participation of volunteer workers who organised and ran each quarterly ceremony from start to finish. In turn, the centre also demonstrated a caring and thoughtful touch, by rewarding staff with personal as well as ‘generic’ gifts during ceremonies and other events such as birthdays³⁰. Longer term staff in particular benefited from these gestures, as a reward for proving their value and commitment to the centre. In doing so Sales-Com projected an unlikely dual-discourse of ‘family’ unity on the one hand, as a make-weight to the cold and unrelenting pressure to accrue sales. It is also important to note that while the major ceremonial events were quarterly, space within the centre was physically arranged to reify and to celebrate staff success on a *continual* basis. As Allen (2003:11) notes:

‘Spaces may be laid out for temptation in a seductive way through a combination of suggestive practices, inclusive designs and enticing layouts, or they may be subject to manipulation by groups constructing them in their own likeness, which conceal or disguise their true motives...’

At the top of the stairwell stood framed pictures of prize events – such as falconry and bowling - whilst a glass cabinet (positioned at the top of the office) housed all ceremony shields and trophies. Ceremonial photographs also littered the notice boards and team pods of successful agents, while opposite the reception stood a framed display – a ‘wall of fame’ - of all the long standing members of the Sales-Com team. This latter display was fundamentally designed to foster a sense of stability within the centre, and to demonstrate to staff that Sales-Com valued commitment from its workers. The message through-out Sales-Com was clear: hard work was celebrated through personal recognition.

Alternatively, Game-Tel possessed very little top down cultural or normative strategy for seducing and manipulating agents: precisely due to the sorts of workers the centre had come to rely upon. Management did not feel power could be exercised through one set culture, largely because different nationalities held different understandings of working life.

‘There is a thing with this type of call centre which I think people don’t take to. I think maybe, this is quite weird, but I think British people do better than foreigners...’

this whole thing about being ‘seller of the week’ and getting some booze for it, or a little medal – I think foreigners are not receptive to that... I think we take that as a little bit patronising, and I think British people probably less so. Do you know what I mean? And I think, for example, in Game-Tel, its kind of an incentive they wouldn’t do, they (the agents) would have run away thinking ‘what the hell is this?!’

Frances, recruitment consultant and former client manager at Game-Tel (May 2008)

As Frances’ comment shows, many at Game-Tel regarded prizes and awards as something of a cliché more suited to younger British workers (i.e. those more typically employed within the industry). Game-Tel’s reliance upon a multi-national workforce was also used to explain why the centre as a whole was laid back and consistently ‘dressed down’. While Gov-Tel and Sales-Com held one off ‘dress down’ days³¹, staff in Game-Tel consistently wore whatever they chose. Accordingly, management generally stood back to allow a ‘bottom-up’ and largely individualised culture on the floor with little sense of ‘team’. Continental European workers – with ‘mature’ and ‘professional’ outlooks (interviews) - were trusted to perform without gimmicks or incentives.

Taken as a whole, the internal discourses of each case centre effectively worked to ‘blur’ the boundaries between work and leisure, although in contrasting ways. On the one hand, Gov-Tel and Sales-Com brought consumption and leisure practices into the site of production by replicating ‘party’ atmospheres on a periodic basis (Fleming and Spicer 2004). Conversely, Game-Tel invoked social relations reminiscent of Massey’s (1995) research into high-tech science workers. Game-Tel workers often held a ‘natural’ enthusiasm and interest in the products under support, to the extent many spent break and lunch times practicing the games under support. Several dedicated agents in the centre stayed behind at the end of their shift, in order to finish wiki publications in their own time. Massey ties such work related passion to a specific form of masculinity, linked to progress and transcendence; wherein male workers dedicate both private and working time spheres to the penetration of scientific and technical frontiers. The fact that staff here took enjoyment from work related tasks – without the injection of ‘fun’ or pecuniary incentives - marked a clear contrast to life in the other two centres.

Based on these understandings it would appear that each centre altered its normative culture depending upon the options available to management, and, crucially, to the perceived characteristics of its workforce (Maguire 1989; Paulet 2008; Russell 2002b). This point is significant, as it indicates that capital – even in a ‘routine’ forms such as call centres – is responsive to the traits workers bring in from the ‘outside’ (i.e. the reproductive sphere). As Massey (1984: 69) notes:

‘There is an unfortunate tendency to assume that the form of organisation identified in a particular study is replicated in all other parts of the economy, or if it is not, then it soon will be, for the tendency is in that direction.’

While the discourse produced invariably came ‘top-down’ from management in Gov-Tel and Sales-Com, the culture and the values were inherently tailored to the sorts of people employed. Thus, Gov-Tel worked an egalitarian theme so as to integrate the different backgrounds present on the floor, whilst Sales-Com catered for a material culture of younger workers, whom it tried to ‘wow’ into feeling special and supported. Game-Tel, on the other hand, adopted a passive and hands off approach to culture on the understanding that professional continental Europeans already held the self-standards and motivation needed to perform. Each of these cultural offerings acted to displace conflict from supervisors, by aligning agents with aspirational centre-wide values to encourage self-control and discipline.

6.6 Conclusion

To conclude, each centre invested time and money formulating distinct control arrangements in direct response to labour’s social and unpredictable nature (Peck 1996). This commonly involved the use of control typologies - and modalities of power - based upon seduction and manipulation over and above coercion and the threat of force. As opposed to ‘total control’, each of the above sections has demonstrated the concessions management made to ameliorate worker tensions. In the first instance each centre was forced to ‘compromise’ by recruiting different sorts of people than their ideal would permit. Due to the specificities of each service requirement, each centre in turn developed an ad hoc reliance upon *different* segments of the local population, who traditionally hold a weak attachment to the sphere of work (i.e. in particular women and working class

candidates in Gov-Tel; younger and older segments of the labour market in Sales-Com, and the heavy reliance of migrant workers in Game-Tel). Rather than plugging these workers into the ACD system, each centre in turn relied upon the social interaction of these staff to learn and perform the job well. Whatever the motives behind this, management often accepted that a degree of labour autonomy and informal interaction held potential *benefits* worth harnessing (Thompson and Smith 2000).

Each centre also demonstrated a waning reliance on targets as a means of governing the labour process (Fernie and Metcalf 1998; Bain and Taylor 2000). In doing so, management recognised that softer and less coercive techniques of control were vital to reducing monotony, stress, and turnover. This acknowledgment is bolstered by the strong use of normative control and cultural discourse as a means of encouraging workers to self-regulate and perform. Both Gov-Tel and Sales-Com in particular saw a need to camouflage and disguise the individualist work design and surveillance through the discourse of ‘fun’ and ‘unity’. Whilst this cultural engineering was overwhelmingly ‘top-down’ (McCabe 2004), management also fashioned a culture deemed congruent to the sorts of people employed in each setting. This once again demonstrates the fact management were inclined to respond to the social characteristics of workers. Each centre attempted to seduce and persuade workers into offering their consent to the task at hand: the labour commodity could not be *forced* into action.

This chapter has drawn specifically on managerial discourse, and in doing so has presented a largely optimistic view of call centre control from the perspective of those in charge. In the following chapter I adopt a materialist approach in line with the labour process tradition, to explore the *worker* responses to the above control arrangements.

Notes

¹ For its European campaigns, Sales-Com similarly made language skills a priority.

² However, it was understood that agents did require an adaptive capacity to discuss technical matters with customers of varying computer know-how.

³ Goleman defines Emotional Intelligence as consisting of a 'set of core skills: namely, the intrapersonal competencies of knowing one's emotions, managing emotions, motivating oneself; and the interpersonal competencies of recognising emotions in others and handling relationships' (Hughes 2005: 604).

⁴ Although the identification process is always flawed, as the behavioural traits that candidates possess are always, to an extent, unknowable.

⁵ Wherein candidates wrote email responses in at least one European language to assess for multi-lingual literacy. This was followed by an IT questionnaire, covering questions on non-Microsoft based PC operating systems such as MacOs, Linux and Unix.

⁶ The effort bargain represents the amount of effort workers are prepared to invest in a given task, bearing in mind the pay and incentive schemes on offer; see Behrend (1957).

⁷ In this sense Gov-Tel's workforce directly related back to the distinctiveness of the Glasgow labour market; and in particular the rich civic pride and high council employment figures discussed in the previous labour market chapter.

⁸ In practice the centre also recruited workers who had left the larger Dell and IBM call centres located close by - and as such Game-Tel benefited from the turnover of rival technical support centres. These centres hired directly across Europe to meet their multi-lingual staffing needs.

⁹ This problem of turnover is testimony to the fact that, while most individuals are forced into seeking employment *somewhere*, labour's commitment to a given employer is often conditional and subject to change (Peck 1996; Castree et al. 2004).

¹⁰ While Callaghan and Thompson (2002) have detailed the extensive training that can exist, involving forms of role play and group interaction, Belt et al. (2002) witnessed an 'overwhelming' focus upon product knowledge and a lack of skill development outside of this.

¹¹ In particular training detailed what the product physically was; how it worked; and which parts made up its whole. This was coupled with training into the common problems and the answers to Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) which tended to arise from customers.

¹² Similarly, Batt (2000) and Becker (2003) make a case for knowledge sharing in call centres

¹³ Sennett (2008) cites open programming as a modern day forum for technological *craftsmanship* (i.e. the perfection of work). Open programming (which includes Wikipedia) is designed to continually solve and to find new problems through experimentation and group learning, and is not driven by competition or individualism. Subsequently this encourages craftsmanship through the mutual exchange of ideas and a shared commitment from people working together.

¹⁴ Gov-Tel also held structural advantages over the other two centres, as staff could also negotiate the internal labour market of the city council as a whole.

¹⁵ Two teams with rotating project managers arranged and conducted events week on week.

¹⁶ This role varied depending on the needs at the current time. At the time of the research the role included survey and report work (often questioning agent satisfaction), as part of a centre-wide drive for Investors In People accreditation.

¹⁷ As Ritzer (2000: 101) notes, non-human technologies include ‘...not only the obvious, such as robots, computers, and the assembly line, but also the less obvious, such as bureaucratic rules and manuals prescribing accepted procedures and techniques’.

¹⁸ Sales-Com’s Antrax Res and QuickCall workflows essentially operated using ACD technology ‘in reverse’; through a predictive dialling system which progressed through a database of customer phone numbers to automatically connect the operator to the customer (Taylor and Bain 1999: 108).

¹⁹ In the case of Gov-Tel, this was a ‘traffic light’ system which informed agents of break times. Similarly, requests for time off were also submitted electronically and accepted or rejected on such forums.

²⁰ I.e. a general willingness of staff to *volunteer* their efforts.

²¹ This began with a ‘probe’ to identify the customer’s need for the sales product in question. The agent would then be expected to ‘match’ this alleged need with correct and accurate information promoting the sale, followed by a ‘close’ whereby agents urged the customer to buy. Crucially, this attempt was commonly met with customer resistance in the form of various excuses as to why the sale could not take place. Upon this prompt, agents were expected to ‘objection handle’ – i.e. to convince the customer each problem could and indeed *should* be overcome. Finally, the ‘compliance’ aspect of this evaluation assessed whether the information (including terms and conditions) given was indeed factually accurate so as to constitute a legal sale.

²² At times this was not always deliberate; Game-Tel favoured a greater use of targets as a means of assessing staff, and had the centre channelled a higher volume of calls it may have pursued this more fervently. Certain managers expressed regret that agents were not pushed harder in their current climate. Nevertheless, the centre had historically trusted staff to perform at a desired level without the extensive use of quantitative targets during busier periods.

²³ In this sense, *all* call centre employees – from those in their first week to those who had been working several years on the phone - were constantly ‘in training’.

²⁴ Ideally this took place through a conversation over ‘x’ or ‘y’ element of the appraisal, whereby agents could recognise their shortfalls and learn to improve on this for ‘next time’. Thus, agents would often receive feedback on the number of times they had been late back from lunch or for the start of a shift in a bid to induce better time-keeping. In terms of quality, agents who failed to use a customer’s name or to administer the correct ‘closing’ were reminded of ‘theme criteria’ to rectify (and help standardise) their future performance. In the case of Gov-Tel, this coaching was often linked to PDPs and the identification of core competencies in need of improvement.

²⁵ In Gov-Tel in particular, one-to-one’s were also a forum for exploring agent satisfaction in the role and to flag any extra ‘opportunities’ on the call centre floor which agents might be interested in. As such, team leaders also played the role of ‘facilitator’ or career advisor on the floor.

²⁶ This helped to put vast figures into perspective; for example an insurance policy which cost £10,000 could save a company many times that amount in the event of an accident. Agents were trained to understand the *favour* they provided businesses in urging the upkeep of such policies.

²⁷ Paradoxically I was advised that while *anyone* (even myself) could flourish with the right call guideline and attitude, certain people just did not have ‘what it takes’ to sell over the phone.

²⁸ Harry for example was ‘suspended pending a disciplinary’ for the over-use of the internet whilst working, although he protested that he merely had ‘Google Earth’ minimised in the backdrop of his computer.

²⁹ By the same token this exemplifies the indeterminate nature of labour; Gov-Tel and Sales-Com utilised a combination of control strategies including technical, bureaucratic, and normative control - and yet reactive and direct control on a day-to-day basis was still deemed necessary.

³⁰ For example, Dr Who merchandise was purchased for ‘Billy’ who was the ‘biggest, biggest’ fan of the programme (interview with Director, Sales-Com).

³¹ These centres expected staff to dress ‘smart-casual’ on a day-to-day basis (i.e. a shirt but no tie), although again Gov-Tel alluded to its participatory ethos by insisting that staff themselves ‘designed’ and opted for this arrangement through consultation with management.

CHAPTER 7**WORKING REALITIES AND LABOUR AGENCIES: RESILIENCE,
REWORKING AND RESISTANCE WITHIN GLASGOW CALL CENTRES****7.1 Introduction**

Chapter 6 was used to explore strategies for controlling workers, which largely conveyed top-down attempts by management to seduce and persuade workers into lending their consent (over and above methods of coercion; Allen 2003). This chapter moves beyond the perspective of management, by exploring the perception and experience of call centre workers performing on the phones. In doing so the chapter effectively ‘tests’ the efficacy of managerial control from a materialist labour process perspective. As Thompson and Smith note:

‘A core concern of the UK (labour process) debate has been materialist critique of management and its rhetoric. That typically involves using empirical case studies of actual labour processes and the concrete experiences of workers...to undermine ideal-type forecasts’ (Thompson and Smith 2000: 58).

After detailing the reality of worker experience, the chapter turns to the multiple forms of labour agency on show within each call centre setting. This discussion differs from the majority of work in labour geography, by steering clear of more overt (and at times dramatic) instances of worker resistance. Linking back to Chapter 2, the chapter applies the concepts of Cindi Katz (2004) and James C. Scott (1985; 1990) to provide a more nuanced understanding of what labour agency and ‘resistance’ may more accurately entail. In particular, Katz’s conceptual distinction between ‘resistance’ and less confrontational forms of ‘resilience’ and ‘reworking’ is used as a lens for interpreting the different coping strategies of call centre staff. These concepts are applied in a critical fashion, and with a view to testing their appropriateness within each of the empirical contexts. In doing so the chapter makes a direct contribution to labour geography, by responding to Castree’s (2007: 858) call for a more ‘discriminating grasp’ on understandings of labour agency and resistance (Cumbers et al. 2010; Coe and Jordhus-Lier 2010).

To reiterate, Katz (2004) presents ‘resilience’ and ‘reworking’ as two related forms of coping – in addition to resistance - that stop short of formally contesting hegemonic power. Resilience is here described as those ‘small acts of getting by’ within the existing order of capitalist social relations, and of discovering new and creative ways of doing so. To this end Katz cites social networks and networks of care – often witnessed through proactive neighbouring – as key to autonomous recuperation (Coe and Jordhus-Lier 2010: 6). Importantly this recuperation comes *in spite* of the circumstances in which people live/work, and stops short of challenging the root cause of difficult conditions. Strategies of reworking, on the other hand, involve a different type of consciousness. Rather than merely ‘getting by’, reworking involves a recalibration of power relations and often a redistribution of resources, with a view to redressing the inequalities that systems create (Katz 2004: 247). As Coe and Jordhus-Lier (2010: 6-7) note, it is this form of coping which most clearly resonates with existing labour geography projects (i.e. those geared towards a more equitable distribution of capitalist gains at specific places and times). Finally, acts of resistance differ from both of the above by resting on a strong oppositional consciousness that is geared towards *formally contesting* existing social relations and hegemonic power.

Before applying these terms to the empirical findings, it is important to stress several related points. Whilst distinct, the essence of both resilience and reworking is a form of coping which stops short of formally contesting hegemonic power. So as to avoid the arbitrary assignment of one term over another, it was necessary to think reflexively as to what resilience and reworking meant within a call centre context. Subsequently I tended to reduce resilience to those acts of agency geared towards ‘surviving’ the role without changing it; whilst reworking was understood as ways of adjusting the role into one more pleasurable and worthwhile (i.e. worth turning up to). In addition, whilst I have applied specific coping strategies to particular problems workers faced, a fluid relationship exists between all three forms of coping. In reality staff utilised a mixture of all three ‘Rs’ (to varying degrees) in response to different day-to-day occurrences, and this is also reflected in the text. To this end a clear gradation exists between the terms, with one form of coping often paving the way for another. As Katz notes, strategies of resilience which enable people to ‘get by’ often form the ‘underpinnings of projects to rework or resist the

oppressive circumstances that call them forth' (Katz 2004: 246; Coe and Jordhus-Lier 2010: 6).

The chapter is structurally divided into three main sections, with each tackling specific aspects of the call centre work experience. Whilst acknowledging the fluidity of the '3 R' terms, each section *primarily* focuses on one form of agency in response to aspects of the role. Links to additional forms of coping (which often took place simultaneously) are also brought through where appropriate. The first section begins with a discussion of the stress and pressure evident in the role, which (in the main) drew a resilient brand of coping. Pressure in the role was often linked with Taylorism and technical aspects of the control frame, and tended to produce individual forms of getting by rather than collective efforts. Subsequent to this, the chapter turns to the issue of deskilling and repetition which is endemic to the call centre role. Workers coped with tedium and alienation through more proactive strategies that affectively *reworked* their role in the centre to a greater extent than when faced with pressures to perform. Many of these responses were also collective in nature, and tended to draw upon informal interactions and camaraderie. The chapter finishes with a discussion on staff reactions to the normative control outlined at the end of the Chapter 6. These contained the most oppositional and conflict laden responses from the agency repertoire: i.e. those associated with *resistance*.

7.2 Targets and work intensity

As has been noted in Chapter 6, several studies have pinpointed the use of targets, high call volumes and repetition in the call centre role as factors leading to a pressurized work experience (Taylor et al. 2003; Holman 2003). These traits in particular have culminated in a lack of autonomy for the average call centre employee, leading to an increase in work-related stress. Given that management within each centre downplayed the importance of staff control – notably through a restrained use of targets – it is first worth establishing whether staff saw targets, monitoring and performance management as a cause for concern. With this in mind, many of the agents in Game-Tel spoke favourably of the centre as a relaxed and lenient work environment, particularly in contrast to (either prior experience or imaginings of) the call centre industry per se. However, agents within Gov-Tel and Sales-Com voiced contrasting feelings towards targets, rules and regulations, and other pressures to perform on the phones.

Numerous workers in Gov-Tel experienced a pressure to log in and out on time, to consistently maintain high rates of availability, and to record and process calls with the correct categories and terminologies (i.e. control through non-human technology; Ritzer 2000). In addition, agents within Sales-Com often expressed stress and frustration at the distinct pressure to *make sales*. As one agent remarked ‘if we don’t hit target, we could be sacked’ (interview with Helena, Antrax Res agent, Sales-Com, April 2008). Clearly target pressure varied from centre to centre; be that the pressure to maintain a level of service through availability in Gov-Tel, or the demands placed upon agents to hit sales figures in Sales-Com. To help combat the resulting stress, many agents found ways of *breaking* rules so as to enjoy an easier and more relaxed work experience. An obvious means of coping in either centre came through ‘cheating’ the system via a variety of techniques typically termed ‘resistance’ within LPT literature (Taylor and Bain 1999; Bain and Taylor 2000; Hodson 1995).

‘That’s what the target does, when it’s too high it makes people *cheat*. So the target needs to be set kind of fair.’

Anya, Antrax Res agent, Sales-Com (May 2008)

‘I think in life, it’s *human nature* to break rules to a certain extent. I don’t think we’re all squeaky clean and we all adhere 100% to rules; people will break rules in various ways and it’s ridiculous to believe that they won’t or don’t...’

Victoria, team senior, Gov-Tel (March 2008)

Cheating the system came in various guises, and staff within each centre mused over the more extreme examples – the desperate and foolhardy acts of agency also known as ‘gross misconduct’ - which pre-empted dismissal from the role. In Gov-Tel this included agents who terminated difficult calls through premature hang ups, while agents in Sales-Com talked of ‘cheaters’ (as Anya refers to) who falsely processed sales or mis-sold products out of desperation or greed (effectively a form of pilfering once bonuses are factored in; see Mullholland 2004, Terris and Jones 1982). As the above Team Senior indicates, management required an awareness to identify and respond to such blatant rule breaks. Indeed it was mainly through these acts that realistic and achievable targets and rules were established; the agents who pushed the boundaries of acceptable practice ‘rubbed off’ on

the centres by helping to bring about more achievable targets for those they left behind (Harvey 1999).

Crucially, these acts of ‘resistance’ – i.e. actions that directly challenged managerial rules and authority - were not a frequent occurrence in any of the three centres. More commonly the above tales of gross misconduct adopted the form of an ‘urban myth’, which served to remind staff of the consequences born from extreme/overt rule breaks. In the interests of self-preservation, it was far more common for workers to *bend* rather than break the rules of employment. As such, the term ‘resistance’ is overly simplistic as a means of describing typical responses to stress and pressure in the role. Rather, staff primarily harnessed ‘resilient’ forms of coping as a means of getting by. These included both minor and mundane transgressions that management were forced to overlook – and effectively accommodate - in the interests of productivity.

7.2.1 *Non-human technology and agent resilience*

‘You know sometimes, when the dialler is too fast - (impersonates a beep) – I stay in the wrap-up time for a break. The dialler speeds up all the time, so I try and slow it down – I just stop. I go on strike for a bit! I’m in ‘after call work’ all the time, I don’t care...’

Jean, project leader, Sales-Com (March 2008)

It is first worth beginning with a discussion of how workers coped with the technical control of each setting, not least as call centres are defined by their use of an Automatic Call Distribution (ACD) system (Taylor and Bain 1999; Bain and Taylor 2000). For agents who experienced stress through the intensity of calls, a common day-to-day response came through exploiting gaps within the systems and technology (i.e. the technical control of each setting). It was common for agents in each centre to stop and slow the ‘assembly line’ (Taylor and Bain 1999) of calls via the use of ‘personal’ or ‘after call work’ codes on the telephone system (or ‘turret’; see Meegan 1996 for comparable factory conditions). These codes effectively placed a temporary block upon the flow of calls (as Jean describes to good effect), and in this sense workers flexed ‘control over their own machines instead of being controlled by them’ (Burawoy 1979: 81; Meegan 1996). Whilst such tactics were common, their success depended greatly upon the discretion of

those in charge. Consequently, agent relations with lower management proved pivotal in ‘getting away’ with unsolicited breaks from the dialler and minor acts of subversion. Much of the LPT literature seemingly neglects the fact that workers in positions of authority are also ‘labour’ (Sayer and Walker 1992), and in practice many team leaders were sympathetic to the agent’s needs to relax and re-charge. Accordingly several agents in Sales-Com made informal ‘deals’ with their team leaders, who endorsed ‘slow periods’ and breaks from work in return for concerted efforts at other times (observation at Sales-Com, April 2008).

Agents in each centre also found other ways of subverting the systems and technology to their own ends. Whilst listening in to calls in Sales-Com I sometimes heard long periods of silence whereby the dialler had failed to queue a subsequent call¹. As opposed to manually queuing the next call, agents tended to profit from such lapses in the system by seizing the chance for reprieve. Elsewhere, in the less intensive Game-Tel, staff had long utilised an illicit ‘work around’ on the Customer Relationship Management system (CRM) to reduce the call handling time (CHT). This tactic was developed for one former client in particular that held a ‘pay as you go’ arrangement with the centre (thus shorter calls were understood as more cost effective). Many agents began processing cases through an ‘Add to Knowledge base’ resolution rather than trawling through the recorded/appropriate resolutions. In doing so agents closed and processed cases at a quicker rate, thus alleviating the pressure to lower handling times. This workaround created problems for management further down the line, by creating a back-log of duplicated or inappropriate resolutions which clogged up the CRM database:

‘If it’s not straight away there, they were clicking ‘Add to KB’ – bang! We don’t really want that. That is a fall-out from one of our previous clients which we lost, where they were banging on about the average handling time. It was just so intensive, so agents were encouraged to close the calls quickly just to get to the next call...’

Robert, Manager, Game-Tel (June 2008)

Whilst staff (in this instance) were encouraged to close calls at a fast rate, this solution was never suggested by management. Nevertheless the practice (which was passed tacitly from

agent to agent; see Santino 1989) became widespread; and was occasionally used by agents in each client workflow as a means of processing time-consuming callers. In exploiting these gaps in the technical control frame, staff generated free time outside of calls for rest and recuperation. Such ‘spaces of relief’ (Cumbers et al. 2010: 60) within busy or aggravating periods of the role formed a small resource for ‘getting by’. Building on these examples, the following section demonstrates further acts of resilience within the customer interaction itself.

7.2.2 *Abusive callers and coping with emotional abuse*

‘Everyone loses it now and again. You get some nasty people on the phone.’

William, trainer/agent, Gov-Tel (March 2008)

In addition to stress linked to technical control, for many workers the customer interaction itself formed a major source of anxiety². This point is significant, as up until now management alone has been presented as the sole judge and governor of staff performance. The importance of the customer interaction makes for an interesting contrast to the factory case studies of the LPT tradition, as the concept of emotional labour (Hochschild 1983) is largely absent from traditional manufacturing and factory case studies (e.g. Beynon 1984; Burawoy 1979). Call centre workers not only suffer from a lack of control via the ‘assembly line’ (Taylor and Bain 1999): they are also encouraged to deliver emotionally pleasing performances at the same time. Importantly, the customers of each centre were often responding to problems (or else had not solicited the call in the first place) which in turn drew fractious and impatient attitudes. As a result, agents frequently felt abused and belittled by callers, who often regarded the operator as unskilled or stupid (various interviews).

The most obvious reaction to overt and damaging customer abuse came through reversing the calm, professional and polite performance which management encouraged within staff. To this end, trainers in Gov-Tel reflected upon new starts who ‘completely lost it’ within calls, resulting in angry shouting matches across the phone. Once again such acts of ‘resistance’ – which directly challenged both managerial *and* customer expectations for polite service - proved unsustainable in the long term. These calls were typically ‘rescued’ by a team leader, or else met by one-on-one coaching which prescribed a calm voice and

deep breaths³. Staff that consistently responded this way incurred disciplinary action. Nevertheless, several workers continued to ‘clip’ and shout over customers as a means of ‘self-defence’ (interview with Team Senior, Gov-Tel). Management did not appreciate these methods as a way of dealing with abuse over the phone, but certain staff invariably responded this way from time to time.

In addition to these more obvious responses to abuse, the mediating effects of the call centre technology (and in particular the use of the telephone) created several advantages for staff in contrast to traditional face-to-face shop work. With this in mind, it is worth invoking the work of Goffman (1990) and his concept of ‘front’ and ‘back’ regions. ‘Front regions’ are here understood as areas where performance is enacted for a set audience, whilst ‘back regions’ are those areas blocked off from the gaze of these observers (ibid: 115; also see Crang 1994). Call centre workers effectively perform within a ‘front region’ when engaged on a customer call; as the agents are here forced to suppress inner feelings to deliver a polite and pleasant *vocal performance* for the benefit of the customer. Subsequently, many agents who suppressed their anger within the call itself (‘front stage’) frequently reacted in a more explosive manner ‘back stage’ once the call had ceased:

‘...afterwards I was like ‘fuck off’ and banged down the phone. I couldn’t stop calling her names...’

Anya, Antrax Res agent, Sales-Com (May 2008)

‘...chances are they’ll maybe fling their headset onto the desk ‘fucking rah rah rah’, have a wee rant. Once or twice I’ve seen somebody storm out, and come back with their tail between their legs a wee bit later having cooled down, you know, it does happen. But in general, it’ll just be a wee rant – and everyone’ll go ‘aye I know - its crap and that. Back to work!’

Tim, Agent, Gov-Tel (March 2008)

Unlike traditional face-to-face service work where employees physically relocate to back regions⁴, call centre workers are *immediately* transposed into a ‘back region’ after each call ends. This, in many cases, facilitated near instantaneous back-stage ranting as a means of de-stressing and preparing for the next call. It was normal for Team Leaders and

management – particularly within Sales-Com and Gov-Tel – to accept these somewhat volatile displays as a way of coping with the trauma of day-to-day calls. Indeed, one agent in Gov-Tel was even rewarded with a miniature ‘incredible hulk’ action figure which made light of his explosive post-call displays.

In addition, the mediating effects of the telephone provided extra scope for agent reprieve. During the customer interaction itself, agents could be seen to operate within a simultaneous ‘front’ and ‘back’ region; as unlike conventional service interactions - where customers observe the facial and other physical expressions of the worker - call centre workers are only required to regulate their *voice* for the customer’s benefit. During the call itself agents would often perform passive aggressive acts such as slouching, rolling eyes, shaking heads, frowning and other subtle behaviours which detracted from an otherwise polite and proper *vocal* display. Coupled with the ability to ‘mute’ callers and to place customers on hold, agent’s utilised technology to enjoy ‘back stage’ reprieves which mocked the customer *during the call itself*. Such practice limited the harrowing effects of emotional labour, and drew an ambivalent response from management:

‘...When one person makes faces at the table (pulls facial expression), then another person does it and then before you know it the whole teams pulling faces and shouting over themselves and going ‘ahh that was that! And blah blah blah!’.’

Victoria, team senior, Gov-Tel (March 2008)

Certain managers accepted face pulling and ‘bawdy’ impersonations of customers as a light-hearted means of relief, although others (such as Victoria, above) felt the centre, at times, descended into a childish state of disorder. Crucially, these behaviours were context dependent. Whilst particular agents within Gov-Tel and Sales-Com displayed off-stage theatrics, it was unheard of for agents within Game-Tel to respond to customers in this way. This further helped to sustain the centre as a ‘professional’ workplace whilst cracks in the *performed* professionalism within Gov-Tel and Sales-Com were at times blown open via impersonations, face-pulling, post-call rants and blaspheming.

7.2.3 *Autonomous coping; thick skin, bad service and 'own back'*

The above acts of agency represent strategies for coping with difficult callers and of making light of these in a covert sense. In doing so, customers were rarely aware of the tacit 'back' and 'front' stage indiscretions which agents used to lighten the mood and alleviate stress. However, many agents went a stage further than this, combining these methods with additional strategies for blocking out or even reversing the fire of customer abuse. Importantly, workers within each centre voiced the need for a thick skin in defence against verbal attacks and the general day to day grind – the 'moans and groans' - of customer service and sales.

'The minute you start to take it personal in a place like that – just get out of it! You cannae...its no' there for you, because the amount of moans and groans you can get on a daily basis working in customer service, you've just got to get used to it...'

Steven, agent, Gov-Tel (February 2008)

'Miserable people – you should feel sorry for them! Why should you be bothered? It (the abuse) wasn't meant personally to you, you know, they're not offending *you*. It's because they are pissed off and they know there is this chick in customer service – 'she is there to listen to you'. I'm not offended at all.'

Anya, Antrax Res agent, Sales-Com (May 2008)

In combination with this thick skin, several workers reconceptualised their role in order to cope with routine abuse. As opposed to a role of helping, caring and supporting, one Gov-Tel agent summed the role up as 'taking crap from customers and not reacting to it...'. Agents understood that abuse was rarely personal, as the customers knew nothing of them as individuals. Accordingly, several workers redefined their role as one of processing and moving on angry and frustrated customers over and above a role of passionate displays (observations). This trend is undoubtedly a common one for workers throughout the new service economy. For example, Ehrenreich (2002) has spoken of her frustration at customers who consistently befouled her efforts to maintain pristine and ordered clothing isles at Wal-Mart. In coping with this disturbance, Ehrenreich reconceptualised her customer facing role as one of an 'anti-shopper, whose goal is to make it look as if they'd (the customer) never been in the store' (ibid: 165). Nevertheless abuse remained an

inconvenience for many of the workers I spoke to, and this bothered some more than others. In an ironic twist on the training agents received – which invariably preached the importance of customer lives and needs – workers instead likened abusive callers to ‘sad’ and ‘pathetic’ individuals (hence Anya above; see Mirchandani 2004). Elsewhere, sales agents imagined how annoying cold calls could be in their own private lives as a means to accepting rejections and refusals to talk over the phone. Neither response was directly taught by trainers or team leaders within Sales-Com; these were bottom-up understandings of the customer-agent relation which made abuse a little easier to take.

In tandem with this approach, agents strategically utilised their performance on the phone as a tacit means to securing a little ‘own back’ and revenge upon the customer. Agents often met angry and frustrated customers with placid and carefree tones which served to intensify caller rage. In a petty sense, winding up customers could provide a modicum of satisfaction. In Gov-Tel and Sales-Com especially, certain customers grew more and more angry at this behaviour or else gave up on calls altogether. Staff secretly pushed customers to such reactions - and got away with it – without breaking rules or providing *ostensibly* bad service. This form of ‘own back’ was secured through opportunities unique to each centre. In Gov-Tel agents seized the chance to lecture angry customers as and when such moments arose:

‘Like see with the final reminders, that can get you a bit of that (own back). People are phoning up shouting at you – and you can say things that you’re quite entitled to say...and you hear them shutting up. I mean...they’ll phone up and say ‘I’m fuckin’ ragin’ - I’ve just got this final reminder’. I tell them - ‘You don’t have any rights to complain, you were late with your council tax, you have no complaint....’ And that’s it.’

Steven, agent, Gov-Tel (February 2008)

Conversely, in Sales-Com many QuickCall agents coped with a cycle of rejection through sarcastic and mocking retorts – ‘You’re not interested in free broadband? That’s *interesting*, I’ve not heard that one before...’. At times, baiting angry customers (who were in no way interested in buying the products) with upbeat tones and poor humour provided agents with a vengeful satisfaction. Far from landing the agents in trouble, this tactic was

in part authorised by the centre. Agents often communicated their exploits to friends on the monitoring department who saved a back-log of especially ‘classic’ calls for the gratification of agents who wanted to relive small victories (observation, Sales-Com). It was through this department that I experienced some of the more explosive and humorous interactions on record. Elsewhere, agents in Game-Tel were well aware of the buttons to push in choleric customers struggling with flawed games; the ‘innocent’ questioning of the speed and specification of the caller’s computer often drew an enraged customer response. As one agent put it ‘customers can be very sensitive about their computer, it can be like criticising a member of their family’ (observation, Game-Tel, October 2007).

Such strategies demonstrate the tacit *skill* involved in coping with stressful interactions. While many (often new) agents shouted back or ‘clipped’ callers - which sometimes drew reproach from management - the more savvy and experienced seized opportune, almost hidden, moments to put the customer down. This often came through a calm and legitimate front stage performance. In doing so staff were not merely the victims of emotional labour (Hochschild 1983); they performed it in such a way as to exact petty revenge and light satisfaction over the callers who threatened their mental wellbeing. These actions also exemplify the fact that labour’s agency is not always ‘positive’ (at least from the perspective of service consumers and management). Rather than blithely accepting routine forms of abuse, staff developed their own informal and often *mundane* reprisals. These often went undetected by management precisely due to the fact that put downs and cynical responses were ‘everyday’ and unspectacular. Consequently staff were able to ‘get away’ with a less than pleasant – and more personally satisfying - performance without reproach.

These practices resonate strongly with Katz’s (2004) understanding of human *resilience*, as each formed a creative (if small) means of alleviating stress and pressure in relation to customer abuse. Workers found ways of ‘getting by’ and of tolerating their call centre role in ways that were quite separate from anything that management suggested. At the same time there are also clear elements of *re-working* taking place as well. Rather than challenging managerial power – e.g. by hanging up on customers or refusing to take further calls – agents altered the inequities of the customer interaction ‘on the very grounds on which they are cast’ (Katz 2004: 247) by undermining customers, and doing so

successfully. This represents a subtle and unspectacular re-calibration of the worker-customer power relation between the caller and the agent; and effectively a re-working of the role. Crucially, these day-to-day acts for getting by were never openly endorsed by those in charge: although figures of authority undoubtedly noticed and accepted many of the above behaviours (Taylor and Bain 1999: 113).

7.3 Deskilling and repetition in the role: Coping with boredom and alienation

Whilst stress was clearly an issue for many staff within Gov-Tel and Sales-Com, the following section turns to another hallmark of the call centre job design: the issue of deskilling, repetition and *boredom* for agents working on the phones. Despite managerial efforts to play up the importance and variety of work at each centre, agents (and indeed team leaders) frequently lamented a tedious, meaningless and morale-sapping work experience. This point relates directly back to the central problem of Taylorism and repetition in the call centre labour process: and namely its proclivity to alienate workers from the products of their own labour (thus denying both personal meaning and satisfaction from the role; Thompson 1989).

Workers often coped with these difficulties through a less benign form of agency than that outlined in the last section. Shifting from a primary reliance on resilient forms of coping – which essentially helped workers to *tolerate* the existing conditions – agents turned to more proactive strategies of ‘re-working’ to help combat alienation in the role. To reiterate, re-working strategies differ from those of resilience by attempting to re-calibrate power relations in a less ambiguous sense. This comes with a view to *improving* everyday life rather than just ‘getting by’, and effectively builds upon the survival platform that resilience provides. Reworking strategies here involved a recognition of the underlying conditions causing alienation (typically experienced as boredom), and accordingly, workers sought to re-calibrate (or ‘tweak’) call centre rules to stem estrangement in the role. Undoubtedly elements of resilience co-existed with this form of coping, and once again these practices stopped short of formally challenging the social relations of each centre. Similarly, agents utilised the centre-specific resources at their disposal in order to make these strategies work.

7.3.1 *Alienation and autonomy*

The fundamental problem for the agents of each centre arose from the simplicity of the role itself. Workers, for the most part, performed the same task again and again, processing customer requests through CRM systems designed to handle basic, non-complex tasks (classic McDonaldising systems; see Ritzer 2000; Sennett 1998). Staff also presented their role as that of a ‘go-between’ or ‘buffer zone’, requiring little thought or independent action on the part of agents. The following sentiment was echoed within each of the three centres:

‘You might think with the amount of services we do, and different types of call we take, and different people we speak to that it would be varied – but it’s not. It’s always boring...In here it’s mind numbing. You come in, you switch your brain off, you say the same things to most of the people most of the time (lowering voice).’

Steven, agent, Gov-Tel (February 2008)

Such outlooks reflect a near ubiquitous sense of alienation from any sense of worth or purpose in the role. The bulk of those I spoke to relayed a simple, ‘mindless’ and repetitive experience of work. In response, many agents seized what opportunities they saw for autonomy and individuality to combat this dehumanising trend.

In several instances the customer interaction itself was harnessed to ‘claim back’ a sense of autonomy and purpose within the role. In particular, the customer-agent interaction held many ambiguities which made scripting – or even more flexible ‘guidelines’ for calls - wholly impractical at times. While each centre trained agents to process simple requests and solutions (of one form or another), customers frequently sprang unpredictable questions which required instant and on-the-spot responses. Agents were forced to handle unorthodox questions and customer complaints ‘somehow’. These problematic moments were typically termed ‘grey areas’ by management and agents alike.

‘Some people cope with it (grey areas or problem calls) very well and they explain that its being recorded...I hear some people saying ‘we’re just the go between, I’m sorry, its nothing to do with me’ – and I think ‘What! Don’t speak like that! The

customer doesn't need to know certain things!'. So people deal with it in different ways, so they do...'

Morag, manager, Gov-Tel (March 2008)

In Gov-Tel, agents rarely knew the answer as to why bulk uplifts or other services had failed to materialise, and the CRM system seldom provided detailed or up-to-date information on this front (i.e. the computer software that workers use to process customer needs). In response, many relayed their feelings of helplessness (or uselessness) over the phone: 'It's nothing to do with me!'. Others agents responded to such problems⁵ through their own autonomous solutions, variously termed 'winging it'; 'guess work'; 'blagging'; and 'bullshitting the customer' (various interviews). The exact response to a given difficulty often hinged on the agent's own sense of ethics, and more to the point who the agent wanted to help more: management or the customer.

'I'm very good at bullshitting. Definitely...you need to, because a lot of the time you just don't have anything to tell them, (so you) just make stuff up. You know 'oh operational issues' or 'the van broke down', 'the tyres burst'....'

Jill, agent, Gov-Tel (February 2008)

'I would never ever promise a person, and I try to tell the customers that's coming on the truth about it, rather than making an excuse up. I'm like that... 'right no bother, its probably the lazy squad that's gone out...'

Eddie, agent, Gov-Tel (June 2008)

Both Jill and Eddie (above) are here referring to a common scenario; a customer has phoned up to complain and to enquire as to why a bulk uplift has failed to take place. Neither agent knows the official answer to this query, yet each has chosen an opposite response to the other. Such ambiguities in the role in effect stem from capital's original decision to dis-embed customer facing roles from the rest of the organisation (in a bid to reduce labour costs). This points to a critical element of the division of labour in advanced capitalist societies as a whole (Sayer and Walker 1992), wherein workers focus upon increasingly specialised tasks within broader production networks. Whilst cutting the cost of routine service encounters (Callaghan and Thompson 2001), call centre workers

typically hold little *overall* knowledge on the nature of a given product or service (Glucksmann 2004). In the case of Gov-Tel, agents were often forced to second guess the reasons behind a malfunctioning depot or council service (i.e. the ‘end point’ of the production network wherein the service is delivered). Whilst Jill typically resorted to ‘bullshitting’ by making up excuses and covering for the lethargic bin men, Eddie brazenly fingered the ‘lazy squad’ for missing uplifts. Management preferred agents to adopt the response which Jill chose, although it struggled to discipline Eddie for ‘making the council look bad’ as in all likelihood Eddie is telling the truth. As management required workers to improvise in such moments (see Crozier 1976), agents administered a large degree of freedom in choosing either answer. Such decisions often tied to the agent’s own social and moral code, which in Eddie’s case (who believed telling the truth was the best means of helping the customer) came at odds to the ‘professional’ image and imperatives of management (see Mayo 1933).

Similarly, agents within Sales-Com also provided autonomous solutions to ‘grey areas’ of a different nature. Despite immense pressure for agents to treat *all* calls as potential sales (especially in the cold calling campaigns of Antrax Res and QuickCall), many agents again turned to their own code of ethics in deciding how best to perform.

‘People will sell to anyone. Some of the top sellers, they’ll sell to a Granny; they’ll sell them something that’ll lose them money. Now I’m kind of on the cusp, because I kind of think ‘oh fuck it, it’s only a telephone package...’. If they get it and it doesn’t work out, well you’ve taught them a lesson, at least they didn’t put their whole fuckin’ mortgage on the line. So in a way you kind of think that, but on the other side of it, if I don’t think I’m gonna save people money I often pull out of the sale. But that’s not what you’re meant to do, like if the team managers and all that knew that you weren’t going for the sale then they wouldn’t like it at all, you’d be wasted. Wasted.’

Leon, QuickCall agent, Sales-Com (June 2008)

Agents here often wrestled with the rights and wrongs of selling, and in particular the impact this may have upon the elderly or disenfranchised. On this basis staff formed and acted upon their own *personal* codes of conduct. Where necessary they formed strategies

for ‘pulling out’ of sales, which typically came through feigning effort and tacitly dissuading customers on a given sale (the opposite of objection handling⁶). Such strategies – amid a generally positive performance and in the context of a sea of genuine customer rejections - were hard for management to spot. At the other end of the spectrum, it tended to be agents who were happy to ‘sell to anyone’ who would sometimes engage in unscrupulous ‘slamming’⁷ and mis-selling over the phone in a desperate attempt to process sales. These contrasting strategies – the ‘pulling out’ of sales on one hand, and ‘slamming’ on the other – demonstrate the tacit autonomy which staff held.

This section has demonstrated that, despite the deskilling endemic to each role, several gaps and ambiguities existed in the call centre labour process which staff ‘reworked’ to their own advantage. In many instances throughout the working day, gaps were converted into *opportunities* for self-expression in the role. This agency bore clear relation to the resilience outlined earlier, and in particular to interactive forms of ‘own back’ generated through the customer interaction. However, this self-expression went a stage further than just surviving in the role, by actively tackling one of the *root causes* of alienation: i.e. the attempts at limiting worker discretion in the role. Workers operated within call guidelines (outlined Chapter 6), but exploited vagaries within these in ways that management struggled to either spot or stop. In particular staff made their own judgements in deciding how best to proceed with centre specific dilemmas; certain agents did not mind ‘bullshitting’ customers or selling to the elderly, while others risked a self-estrangement in doing so and accordingly acted against the will of management⁸.

7.3.2 ‘Productive’ agency: *purpose, meaning, hard work and satisfaction*

‘Hard work is not necessarily reflected in feelings of discomfort only. It can also produce certain satisfactions. As a matter of fact, all work deprivations may be connected with what I shall call ‘relative satisfactions’.’

(Baldamus 1961: 53)

Building on this discretion, agents also identified and focussed upon more satisfying elements of their role. Baldamus (ibid) terms such satisfaction ‘*relative*’ in as much as it derives from deprivation in the labour process. Many agents in Gov and Game-Tel

described the inner satisfaction to be had from fixing problems and helping others. At its best, their role was *purposeful*.

‘It gives you a satisfaction when you see that you’re resolving a problem, you’re being helpful. You can hear especially in the customer’s voice, if the conversation ends the right way, that makes you feel satisfied – like you’ve done the job perfectly...’

Emre, agent, Game-Tel (June 2008)

‘It makes your day, it cheers you up! If you can laugh with people on the phone its good for you... in a weird way, you helping somebody makes you feel better inside you know?’

Steven, agent, Gov-Tel (February 2008)

Certain agents understood that hard work on the phone was not pointless, providing it made a difference to the lives of others. In tandem with commercial imperatives, such sentiments were precisely the sort that management idealised in staff. However, in many instances the centre’s rules and regulations constrained the possibility of *fully* helping customers. As mentioned, agents within Game-Tel continually faced pressure to escalate calls which took any length of time to fix, while agents in Gov-Tel were prohibited from contacting depots to explore and solve problems properly. As a result, agents at both centres likened their function to an alienating ‘middle man’ or ‘buffer’ role (various interviews). Certain Gov-Tel agents refused to accept this logic, and rebelled against management by contacting depots directly to explore and help remedy protracted customer complaints.

‘That (a complaint call) is one of the calls that makes your day! If you can get on to the depot and you yourself get it sorted, you know, you can turn around and say ‘well *I* done that...I got that person’s thing picked up’. And then if the customers happy with it, there has been occasions where the customer phones back in and gives you a commendation... that type of thing does give you a boost.’

Eddie, agent, Gov-Tel (June 2008)

Agents such as Eddie were prepared to *fight* for the philanthropic moments which ‘made his day’ (similarly see Ehrenreich 2002⁹). Such instances again exemplify the contradictions (Ritzer 2000) inherent within rational and simplified call centre work. Many agents wanted to help customers in more concrete and recognisable ways than taking notes and passing on requests; and yet rules, regulations and technologies (especially simplified and unyielding CRM systems) stifled the very urge to help which management desired.

These difficulties again relate to the central contention of Marx: that capitalist production – via the division of labour – strips the worker class from an active sense of ‘doing’ (i.e. the value to be had in performing independent work; see Holloway 2005). Call centres represent a particularly extreme case in this respect, due to their dis-embedded and ‘stand alone’ nature (spatially separate from the other organisation nodes/departments). To adopt a military metaphor, the majority of centre roles form something of an ‘outer-trench’ or ‘first line in defence’ for remotely absorbing initial customer queries and complaints. Most workers are not permitted to address the more challenging or demanding calls, which are in turn channelled down to team leaders or else specialist centres (as in the case of Game-Tel). In Eddie’s case, he was prepared to bend the rules in order to hew a greater satisfaction and a sense of worth within his role. He thought and acted above his station by reworking his role, regardless of his official capacity to do so. This form of reworking differed from previous examples, by positively attempting to re-shape the social relations of the role for the benefit of both workers *and* customers. Subsequently Eddie opened up a space for a more challenging and personally pleasing work experience.

In response to the same pressure to escalate, workers within Game-Tel located more fulfilling tasks and challenges *off* the phone. In particular the production of knowledge wikis – an optional work task which was never imposed on staff – was seen by many as a worthwhile pursuit.

‘This is another document I created... we collect information and create the documents; we look for the information, we collect it, and present it. I have to think ‘OK - do I need that?’. The works more challenging that way, you know?...’

Chloe, agent, Game-Tel (June 2008)

Both of these examples point to the need for purpose and recognition in day-to-day work. In modest ways, agents within each centre rebelled against their simple job description, by creating and exploiting more meaningful pursuits on or off the phone. As Le Man notes, even within repetitive and simplified tasks, labour finds scope for initiative and creativity.

‘(A worker) clings to the possibility of a last remnant of joy in his work....All activity, however much brutalised by mechanisation, offers a certain scope for initiative which can satisfy after a fashion the instinct for play and the creative impulse...’

(Le Man 1927, cited in Burawoy 1979: 77)

These examples suggest that labour’s desire and pursuit for more meaningful work and its recognition (consciously or not) may combat the underlying nature of service work (Allen and Du Gay 1994). Despite the absence of a bone-fide ‘product’ – i.e. the service interaction itself ‘produced’ mere meanings, not objects - these agents found ways of extracting something tangible within the role. Agents strived to produce moments which they could remember – moments which they could point to and say ‘I did that!’ (to quote Eddie again, similarly see Sennett 2008). These methods were closely related – and often intertwined - with previous examples of resilience, and as part of a *general* coping movement on the phone. To this end, resilience and reworking at times formed sides of the same coin (Mullings 1999). For example, initially abrasive callers were frequently quelled, before workers offered a genuine attempt to help and resolve the issue at hand. Moreover, appeasing difficult callers often offered the greatest challenge, and hence reward. In this sense, workers alleviated stress *and* created relative satisfactions in the course of a single interaction.

7.3.3 *Combating the clock: group interplay, banter and gameplay.*

These creative expressions in the role were also combined with less venerable tactics to slay the ‘beast of monotony’ (Roy 1973). As opposed to trying hard, a more ubiquitous and passive response to deskilling and monotony came in ‘switching off’ and ‘daydreaming’.

‘Ach! My brains away in a different world...you *are* paying attention to what the persons saying, you know, but in-between calls and other times, you’re away in a dream world. See when Gemma came to get me there, I was sitting staring out the window like that (smiles and draws a relaxing sigh) – ‘cos I’m going away for the weekend up to Ullapool.’

Steven, agent, Gov-Tel (February 2008)

This practice took place in all three centres, and was often accompanied by other time killing pursuits such as reading magazines, books, or (where available) browsing the internet in-between calls¹⁰. This represented a largely individual form of resilient coping, geared towards a mental ‘escape’ from day-to-day realities (rather than tackling the root *cause* of tedium within the role). Whilst ‘chained’ (Steven, Gov-Tel) to the phones, many agents drifted in and out of focus in a process described by one agent as ‘answering the phone mode’. As in monotonous factory work, certain agents were seemingly happy to sit and ponder the day away. To quote a fictional passage from Alan Sillitoe (2006: 39):

‘It was marvellous the things you remembered while you worked on the lathe, things that you thought were forgotten and would never come back into your mind... Like the corporal said about sitting on the lavatory: it was the only time you have to think, and to quote him further, you thought of some lovely and marvellous things.’

Certain agents in Gov-Tel selected later shifts to fully embrace this laid back approach to work. With less supervision after 5 o’clock, agents could often ‘get away’ with small rule breaks such as eating and drinking (tea or coffee) on the job; some even selected their shifts on this basis. Many agents stopped trying to turn the role into something it was not (i.e. one which was exciting or challenging) and so took idle pleasures from ostensibly tedious work (see Hodgkinson 2004). This practice was especially prevalent during quiet periods in Gov and Game-Tel, although certain agents in Sales-Com expressed a similar rolling back in efforts despite the relatively high pressure to perform. While team leaders called for continual ‘focus’ both between calls and within the interaction itself (interviews), many agents did not believe that effort translated into sales. With experience, agents ascertained in the first few seconds whether customers would buy or not, judging from their tone and pitch. In turn many (what management would term *bad*) sales agents

did what they were not supposed to do; they ‘switched off’ and gave up on customers before the call had ended. This response was difficult for team leaders to identify, and served as a logical tactic for reserving energy and easing the day away.

In tandem with this laid back approach to work, by far the most ubiquitous means of coping with monotony (at each centre) came through off the phone chatter, typically described as everyday ‘bleathering’. As with learning the role itself, management conceded that free expression was required in-between calls to stimulate agents and to encourage overall productivity (a nod towards the need for creativity and independent thought within the role; see Cressey and MacInnes 1980). In doing so, management opened the call centre floor up to a wealth of off-the-phone interaction that bore little relation to the subject of work itself.

‘Come on! What do you do in the call centre? We’re basically sitting next to each other, and making jokes. You’re not concentrating constantly on work, you’re trying to get your thoughts *off* work, so when you sit next to somebody 8 hours every single day, there is no possibility you won’t blend in with them really well...’

Anya, Antrax Res agent, Sales-Com (May 2008)

‘...You’re bleathering to whoever’s sitting beside you, you know talking about anything – football, holidays, the usual nonsense, having a laugh, slagging one of the lasses off or whatever – just to keep morale up, and you know, to alleviate the boredom. Because it does get boring: you’re chained down, you’re not up, you’re thinking to yourself...’

Steven, agent, Gov-Tel (February 2008)

The majority of agents treated moments off the phone as a ‘back-stage’ reprieve for light-hearted banter and fun (Goffman 1990). Due to the brevity and unpredictability of breaks off the phone (usually determined by customer demand), it was often difficult for agents to sustain elaborate or lengthy conversations. As Steven’s quote indicates, much of the conversation themes held nothing to do with the work itself; staff would talk about ‘anything’, which often equated to (somewhat trivial) jokes and gossip¹¹. Such dialogue bears relation to the interaction on factory assembly lines (Walker and Guest 1952; Beynon

1984). In general, conversation served a useful purpose of providing agents with some light relief in-between calls, together with a shared experience of agent life (Korcynski 2003; Russell 2002a). This is not to say that conversation patterns or themes did not emerge. As with Roy's (1973) account of factory life, group interplay and informal pecking orders in both Sales-Com and Gov-Tel helped to generate interest and amusement. In particular an informal pecking order on the Antrax Core team at Sales-Com (the quality orientated, and male dominated team) served as a springboard for teasing and clowning in-between calls:

‘While sitting with the Antrax Core team today I was asked if I wanted a McFlurry as one of the admin staff (Gary) who sits next to the team was apparently doing a ‘McDonalds run’... Gary performs such errands on a near daily basis for the team; he plays a broad ‘gopher’ role to the amusement of Paul (the floor manager) and the other Antrax Core agents. Yesterday he apparently bought flip-flops for Paul from Greaves Sports. The classic, though, was when he was sent out to buy a bubble for a spirit level – to which various shops humoured him and went along with the joke: ‘sorry mate, we’re all out of them at the moment, try Crockets up the road...’.

Sales-Com Observation (May 2008)

As this diary excerpt shows, the agent Gary assumed a clown-like role in the centre (and in particular towards the Antrax Core team); he was the butt of numerous jokes on the back of different ‘errands’. These antics captured the attention and held the interest of virtually the whole Antrax Core team, who revelled in the spirit-level goose chase and other escapades. In turn, the agents on this team would frequently speculate as to ‘where next’ to send Gary for their amusement – and for his own part Gary seemed happy to oblige. Sending Gary away in the afternoon (and in particular greeting his return) provided a consistent interruption to the day which carried an interest in much the same sense as the themed interruptions on Roy's machinist floor¹² (Roy 1973: 210).

Similarly, agents within Gov-Tel would joke and ‘slag’ one another; defeating time through themed teasing:

‘While I was sitting next to Ian today I began by asking what types of call he answered. This in itself spurred a bit of banter between him and two agents opposite him; Carol chipped in that he ‘only has 27’ while she had more than 40. Mockingly, she jibed that he was ‘catching up’ with her and that perhaps he would ‘get there one day’. Ian retorted ‘Not this again - most of your skills are defunct now anyway!’ to which the other team-mate laughed. I got the impression that this sort of banter was a frequent occurrence, which Ian later confirmed...’

Gov-Tel Observation (July 2008)

This feigned argument over worker usefulness exemplifies a broader ‘kidding theme’ which took place between older and younger workers within Gov-Tel. As the centre employed such a range of ages, it was inevitable that agents sat next to workers with different life experiences to their own. This in turn produced specific interplays and themes of banter; in particular experienced agents with long histories of council employment (like Carol, who had built up several skill sets) often teased younger, less experienced agents over their relative dearth of skills (such as Ian). In this sense, the broader life histories of workers played a role inside the centre, helping to constitute a particular subculture of joking on the floor¹³. Once again teasing of this kind - within the context of informal pecking orders - helped to entertain and engage workers, and so sped the passage of time.

Notably these themes and interplays did nothing to stymie productivity or to subvert the goals of management. If anything, the above served to boost productivity in the centres by relieving pressure and boredom within the role and making work more pleasurable on the whole (a ‘functionalist’ interpretation of humour and its benefits to management; see Hay 2000; Barsoux 1993; Deal and Kennedy 2000; Noon and Blyton 1997). Nevertheless, these were ‘bottom-up’ and day-to-day instances of workers using group interaction and horseplay as a means of self-coping with monotony and fatigue (similarly, see Taylor and Bain 2003). Subsequently, informal hierarchies were visible in Gov-Tel and Sales-Com in particular, where particular characters emerged to instigate jokes and acts of horseplay throughout the working day. Essentially these practices formed an autonomous space for workers to enjoy – i.e. a workplace culture from the ‘bottom-up’ - in contrast to the ‘top-down’ normative cultures outlined at the end of Chapter 6. This was not just surviving the

call centre role through resilience; workers adapted the environment (in mild and unspectacular ways) into one less tedious.

7.3.4 'Making out' and playing games

In addition to the above forms of humour, certain agents also interacted with one another in a competitive sense so as to create a day-to-day motivation within the role. This strategy draws direct parallels to the banter and game-play inherent to 'making out' on factory shop floors (Burawoy 1979)¹⁴.

'I used to get a bit of banter in-between calls – 'How many sales have you had today? Seven? Get it up ye - I've got ten!'. Someone sitting beside you like that is pushing you on, and at the end of the day if you've beaten them you're like 'yeah, I beat you again!'. You got a bit of banter that way...'

John, agent, Ire-Tel (December 2007)

Just as 'making out' turned seemingly mundane production into competitive game-play in 'Manufacturing Consent' (ibid), many agents in Sales-Com and Ire-Tel especially turned sales targets into a stimulating game rewarded through bragging rights. As in Burawoy's case, many agents competed not just for monetary incentives; agents utilised the target scores as testimonies to their selling acumen and ingenuity within the role. In a sense the attainment of targets served to reify the sales skills of agents, with adjacent scoreboards in Sales-Com and Ire-Tel acting as canvases for self-expression.

As Gov-Tel and Game-Tel held little emphasis on targets or rewards (and so little grounds for 'competition' between agents) staff here struggled to exploit competition as a means of stimulation. However certain agents set *personal* performance targets at higher rates than that set by management, and in doing so created private challenges and tests. Similarly groups of workers at times competed using fresh targets as a means of stimulation in Gov-Tel.

'...there is a certain element of that (competitive banter)...a couple of my mates'll say 'how many calls you had the day?' – I'll be like '75' – and they'll say 'I've got 85 and I've still got an hour to go...' – 'oh shut up!'.'

Rory, agent, Gov-Tel (February 2008)

As Burawoy understood it, any worthwhile factory game required a degree of difficulty and the worker ability to effect change and influence outcomes. Crucially, staff held (some) autonomy to speed up or to slowdown the number of calls taken, and this legitimised Rory's 'race' for the highest number of calls. By spending less time in 'after call work' or through processing customers at faster rates (through efficiency or bad practice) agents found an original way of competing¹⁵. Whilst it is true that such game play did little to subvert or to undermine managerial interests, this particular example was clearly out of touch with Gov-Tel's emphasis on 'quality not quantity'¹⁶.

Agent's in Sales-Com also invented their own interactive games which held little relation to management's preoccupation with sales.

'Erm... 'on the next call you have to use a word' – and someone picks a word for you. Like I had 'teacup' as a word I had to use in a conversation, (for) selling warranty... I remember that Rupert had '*Luftwaffe*' – so 'German airforce' as a word! (Starts laughing) – so he was like '...And we are going to be as quick as the *Luftwaffe* on the next business day, at your house!...' – and the guy on the phone was like 'What?!'. So, it was *good fun* you know! You did have a target and it was a pain in the ass obviously, but it was good fun working with the people...'

Petra, call moderator, Sales-Com (May 2008)

Many agents – particularly continental Europeans – rejected the idea of competing for sales within the role (hence the target was a 'pain in the ass') and instead utilised game-play which held little or no relation to productivity. Here the interjection of random words into conversation generated mirth for all those taking part. These examples reflect the autonomous reworking of the role in creative (and often contradictory) ways by agents. Through group interplay, workers in Gov-Tel created a competitive environment where before there was none; whilst agents in Sales-Com generated a fun environment quite separate from the use of target and revenue bonuses. This represents a potentially significant difference between forms of resilience and reworking in each of the case centres. Resilient strategies for getting by tended to focus upon *individual* practices and behaviours (such as combating monotony through personal 'triumphs' in the customer

interaction). Alternatively, reworking more commonly involved the *collective* interaction of workers, with a view to overcoming (in part) the individualised experience of alienation.

Taken as a whole, there were several different tactics for coping with alienation and tedium which involved both resilience and ‘reworking’ in the role (Katz 2004). In various instances staff utilised their (limited) scope for autonomy and discretion to create more interesting and worthwhile stimulations. Many of these strategies (such as working hard and competing) were inherently passive and covert, and also held clear productivity benefits for each centre (Burawoy 1979). As such, these responses rarely challenged management or the running of the centre; these were not acts of outright ‘resistance’. Nevertheless, staff at times acted against the will of management by helping (or at times exploiting) customers above and beyond their job description. Workers also veered towards counterproductive strategies, epitomised by counting down the clock and ‘switching off’ within the role (a clear means of *surviving* boredom). Ultimately this flux between ‘productive’ and ‘unproductive’ coping exemplifies the unpredictable and (at times) contradictory behaviour of labour, which management struggled to prescribe or contain. Here, Katz’s de-lineation between resilience and reworking is particularly hard to trace, although reworking certainly maintained a collective feel. Agents coped with the reality of tedious work by accepting this for what it was, on the one hand, but *also* manipulated – i.e. ‘reworked’ - bland aspects of the role into one’s more stimulating.

7.4 Normative control and oppositional cultures from the ‘bottom-up’

The last two sections have focused, largely, on forms of agency that helped workers to survive and improve the call centre work experience. Notably these strategies succeeded, at least in part, due to their non-confrontational nature. In addition, management sanctioned much of the above forms of coping, as productivity was often boosted by workers ‘getting by’ and adapting the role in their own ways. This final section focuses on more resistance based forms of coping that existed in each centre, which often resembled oppositional strains of resilience and reworking. Added to this, certain workers bent the stick back further still by overtly resisting management and the operation. To reiterate, worker resistance differs from these previous forms of coping, by providing an outright challenge to managerial authority and the overall running of the centre.

In unpacking this third form of agency, Scott's (1985) notion of 'passive resistance' is helpful. Far from dramatic acts of rebellion or 'machine wrecking' (Hodson 1995), oppositional forms of resilience equated to low-key acts of defiance. Specifically, contradictions within the 'official' discourse of each centre drew a variety of negative responses; many agents were intent on producing a separate identity from one endorsed by management. Agents also rebelled against the lack of promotion prospects and other broken promises through a number of counterproductive strategies. These actions formed a broader quest for dignity which undermined managerial control over the workforce.

7.4.1 *Hidden transcripts of opposition*

In particular, many (especially older and/or foreign) workers in Sales-Com felt patronised by the meetings, ceremonies, prizes and games that constituted Sales-Com's 'family' discourse. On the surface most workers went along with these forums as the easiest means of getting through the day – as one French agent put it 'I just play the game as best I can' (interview with Claris, Sales-Com). This deference was a deliberate tactic for making life easier within the centre. As Scott (1990) notes:

'...In the short run, it is in the interests of the subordinate to produce a more or less credible performance, speaking the lines and making the gestures he knows are expected of him. The result is that the public transcript is – barring a crisis – systematically skewed in the direction of the libretto, the discourse, represented by the dominant'

(ibid: 4).

The majority of agents in Sales-Com 'put on' a false show of conformity, by feigning enthusiasm during meetings and ceremonies which celebrated the achievements of the centre at large. At the same time agents also reproduced a covert and oppositional discourse – a 'hidden transcript'¹⁷ in Scott's (ibid) terms – which undermined managerial authority. Many workers coped with their role through (seemingly) unconstructive and negative 'moaning' outside the earshot of management. However, others made sense of their role through novel and coherent theories on management control.

'Sales-Com works just like a school. You have the headmaster – Sheila (the director) – and you have the rewards - 'OK you did something good, we'll give you

some gifts'. You then have the teacher in the team leaders as well. And myself, I could have another position as an *international* teacher who helps the organisation of the school! And then when you look at the agents - many agents really believe that they're kids, just have a look for yourself!

Jean, project leader, Sales-Com (March 2008)

Through conversations both inside and outside of work, a number of European agents reworked the 'family' metaphor which management espoused, preferring the analogy of a patronising and controlling school environment. This likeness to a school involved numerous 'butts' in a joke which parodied the different roles workers adopted; team leaders and managers were seen to play 'teacher' roles while agents adopted the position of grateful or disobedient 'pupils'. Unlike the previous examples of humour – the light hearted sort which eased the passage of time – this served to erode managerial authority and also attacked the 'yes people' who went along with obvious forms of manipulation (Taylor and Bain 2003).

Other workers – operating in distinct cliques – undermined management through emails containing nicknames and code words - 'daft little bits of lingo' (interview with Harry, Sales-Com, April 2008) - which relayed disdain for figures of authority:

'We gave nicknames to team leaders and things like that, so (for instance) if someone was getting sacked we could talk about who was responsible for it... it all sounds rather nonsensical but (for example) there was one girl that looked like Predator, like the actual monster Predator, so we called her 'Kevin', because the guy that played Predator was called 'Kevin Peter Hall'. It was me and another guy in particular that used these cryptic names for people, so that if we were monitored, management wouldn't know who we were on about....'

Harry, Antrax Res agent, Sales-Com (April 2008)

Through such covert humour (here Harry is referring to the 1987 action film 'Predator' starring Arnold Schwarzenegger) agents also 'undid' the official explanations for sackings, suspensions, and other forms of disciplinary action by conveying more accurate stories and depictions of events from the bottom up. Ultimately staff reconceptualised the centre as an instable and unfair place of work, where their performance and future in the role was

constantly under review. Off the phones staff also utilised backstage spaces – notably downstairs by the coffee machine, or else smoking outside on the street – to share grievances and fears for the future, often blaming certain individuals for ‘running the centre into the ground’ and making it a fearful place to work¹⁸ (observation).

Importantly, agents practiced these strategies via informal groups which often undermined and belittled *other groups* of workers or individual agents in the process. This point is significant, as agents within Sales-Com did not represent a unified class as studies into call centre resistance often imply (Taylor and Bain 2003). In particular certain agents within Sales-Com looked down on the ‘yes men’ who took part in managerial forums like the ‘Apprentice’. Many of the continental Europeans parodied these workers as obedient children, cowed into working hard for superficial rewards and hyped up ceremonies. These practices undermined the official reward/incentive programmes, and in doing so re-worked/re-calibrated the power relations of the centre. Rather than cash incentives, prizes, or the possibility of promotion, covert social rewards (e.g. friendship and support) were offered up to fellow non-consenters in the centre. Veering towards a darker sense of humour, once again the agent Harry utilised a covert ruse for undermining the ‘arse lickers’ (interview) who sought to climb the ranks:

‘...there was one guy who started at the same time as me, and he got into the Apprentice, and all of a sudden his attitude changed. He became a complete *brownosser*. What we did, me and a few other guys, was every time we saw him sucking up we had this little note book called the ‘brownosser book’ – and...we sort of logged the time and what the incident was in this little notebook. It was for personal amusement more than anything else, but you know there’s always things sort of going on, on the fly in places like that – behind people’s backs.’

Harry, Antrax Res agent, Sales-Com (April 2008)

Far from a unified attack on management or capital, such examples illustrate how divisive humour became for certain cliques of workers within Sales-Com. Notably I did not interpret such ‘in fighting’ amongst agents at Gov-Tel and Game-Tel, which is perhaps indicative of the acute pressure to perform within Sales-Com.

Ironically a lack of pressure induced its own problems for the agents in Gov-Tel, which impacted upon staff perceptions of management and control. One trainer described this dilemma as such:

‘Whether you’re good, bad, or indifferent – it doesn’t really make much of a difference. Here people get their salary irrespective, because there isn’t that monitoring, or there isn’t that ‘you’ve done a great job, so you’re going to get an increase or a bonus or whatever’. It’s just like ‘No it’s okay, because as long as you turn up every day and do your job then that’s enough.’

Mary, trainer, Gov-Tel (February 2008)

Unlike private sector agents, staff in Gov-Tel experienced less incentive to perform or indeed pressure to regulate their behaviour for fear of management. Many agents equated performance targets with a need to maintain good time-keeping and punctuality, and this in turn produced a factory style ‘turn up every day and do your job’ attitude to work (ibid; Torrington 1996). Coupled with the perception of job security, many agents were openly critical of management and life in general within the centre:

‘...I don’t have maybe the best idea of what goes on at other departments and stuff, but there’s guys in here that have had council jobs for 20 plus years, and their attitude stinks, and they moan and they bitch, but they don’t ever leave!...you don’t really get a job for life now, but it’s hard to get chucked out the council you know...’

Tim, agent, Gov-Tel (March 2008)

Unlike the ‘hidden’ transcripts of opposition in Sales-Com – which took place via codes behind the backs of management – many Gov-Tel agents openly vented their disdain for perceived hardships within the centre. In particular, inequalities in training, and the corresponding shift patterns (for only agents with certain skill sets could work late shifts) fuelled umbrage against the Forecasting department responsible for shift patterns. Management were well aware of this disquiet but seemingly condoned ‘bitching’, ‘moaning’ and overt fits of pique. Here there was less discrepancy between a ‘hidden’ transcript of opposition which agents sheltered from management, and the one which was public. The relative leniency of the council environment encouraged a more honest – if

insipid and trite – public transcript which more accurately matched the true feelings of agents towards rules, regulations and authority in general.

7.4.2 *Foot-dragging and refusal to work*

‘Within easy reach was the top of a cupboard where he had concealed a pint of beer in a bottle. To this he now applied himself. Having taken a long pull at the bottle, he tenderly replaced it on the top of the cupboard and proceeded to ‘hinjoy’ a quiet smoke, remarking to himself: *‘This is where we get some of our own back.’*’

(Tressell 2005: 38, emphasis added)

In addition to this rhetorical opposition, agents utilised a raft of other practices as a means of undermining management and extracting greater enjoyment from the role. This often came in response to particular grievances which provoked a range of trivial to more extreme reactions. In response to what many perceived to be strict and unyielding controls over agent timekeeping, workers who held contracts (in particular those within Gov and Game-Tel) often abused the system to take advantage of the maximum sick pay allowance, by ‘playing the system’ through patterns of cyclical absence¹⁹. Agents within Gov-Tel also pulled what was known as a ‘wee sneaky’ by building up overtime to secure days off, in tandem with holiday requests which – if timed correctly – could translate into extended leave during busy periods. Generally these practices formed a resilient means of getting by and coping with the role. However, they differ from previous acts of doing so by overtly damaging rates of productivity and profit in the centre.

This was especially the case in Sales-Com, where workers practiced more extreme examples of ‘false compliance’ (Scott 1990). Many agents – particularly those who worked in the more quantitative workflows – perceived an unfair system of reward, geared towards certain agents in the higher end campaigns. In response to this perceived bias numerous agents responded through a strategy of foot-dragging (Scott 1985: xvi). This tactic was more oppositional in nature than the instances of ‘switching off’ or ‘bleathering’ discussed previously, and often impacted the rates of productivity and profit within the centre.

‘I started getting really depressed on the phone, doing it over and over again – the same job – for like over a year, and I just stopped bothering about it....I was like ‘I

can't be arsed'. It was really upsetting for me – and at this point I basically decided to kill the campaign. So I started selling much much less and at some point Antrax basically said 'we're pulling the plug, we don't want to have it'... I killed the campaign.'

Petra, call moderator, Sales-Com (May 2008)

In the above remarks, Petra is reflecting back on her time on a small cold calling campaign within which she 'stopped bothering' about the role to such an extent that Antrax relinquished the campaign. This strategy demonstrates the power which agents held in a centre dependent upon agents *producing* (i.e. selling) within the call itself. It was not enough for agents to merely answer the phone; if staff did not sell, then clients quickly withdrew their business from the centre²⁰. Petra took this risk in the hope of manoeuvring into a role off the phones, yet other agents were far less strategic in the practice of 'non-work'. As a result many agents – particularly those in the quantitative QuickCall and Antrax Res campaigns - were disciplined and dismissed for a series of unprofessional attitudes and behaviours within the role.

'PrintEx and Antrax Core – those are professional roles....the cold calling sales and QuickCall area of it should be, and it tries to be, but it's very hard to be...because of its stature and because of what it is. People come in pissed, they do, I've seen it...And you'll sort that person out, and the next day someone else comes in a bit of a mess, or walks in late constantly and takes sick days off – so no, professionalism isn't there on a whole.'

James, PrintEx agent/former QuickCall manager, Sales-Com (May 2008)

Such anecdotes were common from agents and team leaders in Sales-Com (tellingly this former manager also remarked 'I understand why they do it'). Many agents seemingly refused to regulate their out of work lives for a 'dead end' (interview with Harry, Sales-Com) role on the phones and this inevitably resulted in disciplinary action (i.e. a refusal to become 'Fordised' workers both in and out of work; see Gramsci 1971). The same interviewee argued that countless workers treated their unrewarding (i.e. tedious and low paying) role with a distinct lack of respect or preparation, and seemingly these same agents recycled in and out of call centres on the back of poor attitudes to the work itself. Several

agents within Sales-Com reported a drugs culture which took place behind the backs of management, which at times culminated in dramatic outbursts and sackings. As with Charles Bukowski's alter ego Henry Chinaski – who churned in and out of a myriad of low end 'McJobs' (Klein 2000) - many agents ostensibly coped with their role through a 'refusal to work' strategy, openly embracing 'the sack' as a necessary hazard of getting by (Harrison 1994; Bukowski 1992). In these instances the boundary between resilience and resistance becomes frequently blurred.

7.4.3 *Losing work; retaining dignity*

It was through pushing management into bouts of direct confrontation that agents exposed those in charge as an oppositional force, at odds with the workforce at large. During moments of confrontation, agents at times responded by dropping their 'subordinate discourse' to convey their true feelings for the role. It was during these rare moments that workers performed unambiguous (and typically self-sacrificing) acts of resistance, by posing a direct challenge to managerial power. As Scott (1990) notes:

'When, suddenly, subservience evaporates and is replaced by open defiance we encounter one of those rare and dangerous moments in power relations' (ibid: 6).

On the back of numerous acts of satire and subversion – which management struggled to detect or act upon - Harry was ultimately suspended on the spurious grounds of 'excessive internet use' (interview). The vast majority of agents I spoke to agreed that during an instable climate management were looking to cull less productive agents in a bid to save money. However, rather than accepting this verdict Harry voluntarily resigned from his role:

'I was on full pay, according to a document they gave me on that afternoon. But yeah they just sort of sent me home – it was on a Thursday, so I was suspended for the Friday, and I had to come in on Monday for 9:30 for my disciplinary. I planned on resigning anyway, because I kind of had a feeling that they were gonna fire me, and I wasn't going to grovel for my job there when I knew I could get one exactly the same in a matter of days – it was no great loss really.'

Harry, Antrax Res agent, Sales-Com (April 2008)

Whilst Harry underplayed his resignation – ‘it was no great loss really’ – his actions held a lasting impact upon the centre. Various agents cited this example as evidence of the false promises behind the Sales-Com ‘family’. Many began to interpret Harry - who was previously seen as a harmless joker - as a serious martyr who had fought for a just cause (i.e. his dignity) in the face of humiliating and unjust treatment. This outcome raises questions vis-à-vis the intentions and consequences of worker agency (also raised by Coe and Jordhus-Lier 2010: 6) as this achievement was effectively accidental. Although Harry left out of *personal* pride, his departure held a lasting impact on centre morale, and numerous remaining agents took solace from his defiant act. Likewise, agents within Gov and Game-Tel also reminisced on former colleagues who had ‘said no’ to management’s (unreasonable) attempt to discipline and control. In leaving the centre many workers retained an oppositional dignity which fed back into the centre at large.

In summary, many agents utilised counterproductive variations of resilience, reworking and resistance in protest to managerial control and different aspects of their role. Acts of resilience and reworking rarely (if ever) challenged management in a profound or eye-catching sense, and for this reason these strategies are best described as ‘passive’ (Scott 1985). Nevertheless, staff confronted the conditions of the role through oppositional tactics which undermined and challenged management. Notably, agents within Sales-Com utilised more covert and underhand strategies of resistance than the service and support centres. Importantly workers in each centre rejected managerial discourse – designed to encourage hard work and togetherness – in favour of bottom-up (and often negative) understandings of the role.

7.5 Conclusion

Despite the efforts of management outlined in Chapter 6, this chapter has argued that workers often felt both stressed and stultified in their call centre role. Subsequently, I have argued that workers utilised independent thoughts and actions as agency, in order to cope with (often) negative work experiences. These strategies are usually termed ‘resistance’ in contemporary and traditional studies which explore labour’s relationship with capital (e.g. Taylor and Bain 1999; Bain and Taylor 2000; Callaghan and Thompson 2001; Hodson 1995). However, crude labelling of this sort fails to appreciate how nuanced and specific

certain forms of coping are. Here, call centre agents have been shown to invoke multiple and context dependent reactions to specific aspects of working life. The majority of this agency stopped short of formally contesting or challenging the power relations of the workplace. In applying the work of Katz (2004), the chapter has argued that agents coped with specific aspects of the role, in the main, through self-preserving and passive acts of 'resilience' and 'reworking'.

At this point it is worth making two main points of reflection on the Katz's terms. Firstly, the '3 R's' have been used as a heuristic device in the true sense of the term, to help distil and articulate the nuanced ways in which workers coped with different situations. In particular, the concepts of resilience and reworking have proved useful in elucidating the ways in which staff cope with routine and mundane work situations from the bottom up: as most forms of coping stop short of formally contesting or challenging managerial control. To this end the traditional binary of 'domination' and 'resistance' (Sharp et al. 2000) was often unhelpful in understanding worker responses to the power relations structuring each centre. Katz offers a useful way around this. In practice, workers were rarely 'dominated' and so formal resistance was seldom required in any of the three centres.

Secondly, it is also worth commenting on the fluidity of these terms. In most instances workers utilised a mixture of resilience and reworking, and at times resistance as well (to varying degrees) in response to different day-to-day occurrences. This overlap is undoubtedly a benefit of Katz's model, as it stops short of providing overly neat and/or reductionist explanations for the complex agencies at play. However, I also feel that presently these terms are potentially too similar in places as well. Essentially both resilience and reworking are forms of agency that stop short of *contesting* power. To eliminate the arbitrary assignment of one term over another (or the tendency to 'throw' both terms in together) it may be that researchers are required to take 'each case as it comes' and to think reflexively in order to determine - in their own minds - what non-resistance agency actually means in a given context. By creatively testing, applying, and *modifying* these terms, researchers are likely to make the best use of them. At the same time, through persistent modification, these terms may be in danger of losing their identity or coherence over time.

Notes

¹ This often happened in relation to answer-phones which tend to confuse call centre dialer systems; it is usually at the agent's discretion when choosing the time to hang up, the length of message etc.

² It was understood that Glaswegian customers formed a particularly intimidating category of caller who expected more from their local council than citizens elsewhere in the UK. As a non-Glaswegian operator attained:

'They'll phone you up and they'll give you dog's abuse. I think that's something maybe other call centres won't get so much of – its just blatant personal abuse and threats. You know, like if you phone up someone to sell them something and they don't want it, they might tell you to 'fuck off'. But they're not gonnae tell you to 'Fuck off or I'll rip your fucking bastard jaw off'. They will go mental at you, and then their pal will grab the phone and go mental at ye. Obviously you can hang up, but, we're supposed to give them 3 chances and stuff....'

Tim, agent, Gov-Tel (March 2008)

³ William, a trainer at Gov-Tel summarised a new agent's opening day trauma on the phone thus:

'...you'll hear the volume go up in their voice, and then you'll hear (deep intake impression/sigh) – that's the next one – and then the screaming match starts. And once you've got the customer going at it at the other end, you've got to get in there, calm them down – stop, deep breathes, that's the way I would do it: stop, deep breathes, sit down...this is while the calls happening, let them rant and rave – by this time, I'll plug in as well – and you'll guide them along.'

William, trainer/agent, Gov-Tel (March 2008)

⁴ Such as the kitchens or hallways of Crang's (1994) restaurant experience.

⁵ Alienated from a sense of purpose or usefulness.

⁶ Often through doubtful tones or through highlighting the pitfalls or difficulties in a given transaction.

⁷ Telephone slamming is essentially an illegal practice whereby subscribers of a service (e.g. a telephone contract) are switched service providers without their consent.

⁸ These examples again demonstrate how imperfect and problematic rational systems of control can be in meeting both organisational/customer needs and the mental needs of workers (Sennett 1998; Ritzer 2000).

⁹ In a similar vein, as a waitress Ehrenreich (2002) and her colleagues at times risked reproach from management by illicitly plying customers with extra portions of food or paying for their bills secretly. As the author notes 'At Hearthside, we utilise whatever bits of autonomy we have to ply our customers with the illicit calories that signal our love' (pgs 19-20).

¹⁰ A practice that was frowned upon in Sales-Com and Gov-Tel, but which still took place.

¹¹ Such as football, holidays, recent programmes on television and so on. In each centre staff also emailed jokes and messages to one another; agents in Game-Tel further utilised an online messaging service that allowed online ‘chats’ between agents across the centre floor.

¹² The machine work Roy (1973) observed was stimulated by a series of physical interruptions to trigger the mind. Roy notes that ‘...the physical interplay which momentarily halted work activity would initiate verbal exchanges and thought processes to occupy group members until the next interruption’ (pg 210). Breaks for snacks here formed platforms for patterned conversation and feigned arguments, which detracted from the monotony and repetition in the role.

¹³ For his own part, whilst Ian is principally the butt of this joke his retaliatory remark over ‘defunct’ skills was a thinly veiled jibe at Carol’s age. He implies that she is out of date.

¹⁴ Similarly, Michael Burawoy’s (1979) participant observation in a factory detailed working games, where repetitive and menial tasks were turned into a contest through the use of piece-work (which offered an economic incentive on production up to one hundred and forty per cent). The object of ‘making out’ was analogous to scoring highly in a game or race (as opposed to merely making of money) – with scores varying according to skill levels (e.g. when using equipment) as well as relations with other departments/workers.

¹⁵ Added to this, such a benchmark was potentially indicative of the agent’s value to the centre, as those with numerous skill sets were likely to receive more calls than those who held less.

¹⁶ Similarly, within Game-Tel higher ‘Tiered’ agents jostled over who had contributed more in terms of knowledge wikis, and which publications held more merit in the centre.

¹⁷ Scott (1990: 4-5) uses the term hidden transcript ‘to characterise discourse that takes place ‘offstage’, beyond direct observation by power holders’.

¹⁸ Similarly, in a more pro-active sense staff utilised back-stage spaces to plan for their next move in the event of losing work at the centre (observations at Sales-Com).

¹⁹ As the manager at Game-Tel remarked:

‘You’ve got warnings if you have various absence levels, so as long as you stay below prescriptive absence times within set time periods you can just stay below the radar, some people will – when you look in to it...They’ll make sure they never hit the limit that they’re noticed, but when you actually look at it over the year you’ll see...’

Robert, manager, Game-Tel (June 2008)

²⁰ Thanks to this strategy – which management did not detect - Petra achieved her objective of manoeuvring off the phones and into a role in admin support. Petra achieved this in part thanks to social connections which are discussed in greater depth in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 8

MOTIVATIONS, IDENTIFICATIONS AND NARRATIVES THROUGH WORK

8.1 Introduction

The previous two chapters have examined labour's relationship with capital by focussing upon the labour process and the internal geographies of the workplace. In doing so the discussion has shifted from the perspective of management control (i.e. the control strategies outlined in Chapter 6) to the corollary of this: worker agency inside the labour process. This chapter steps back from issues of production, to explore the reasons *why* different individuals adopted call centre work in Glasgow. In doing so the chapter responds to Castree's call for a labour geography that uses work as a window 'onto the wider questions of how people live and seek to live' (Castree 2007: 859). Invariably individuals held subjective and context specific reasons – relating to place and their socio-spatial lives more broadly – for choosing call centre employment. Broadly speaking, the chapter explores why workers 'chose' (where this word is applicable) to work in each of the case centres, and how their subjective selves carried over into the workplace. It also investigates how workers 'made sense' of their working lives, and the benefits this work provided outside the sphere of work.

The chapter is broadly divided into three sections. Linking back to Chapter 5, the first section unpacks the different reasons individuals held for working in each centre. Notably the social divisions and temporal life stages of individuals impacted the understandings of and uses for call centre work. Following this, the second section then explores how inherited identities were often carried over from the private sphere through informal practices (on and off the phone) within the workplace. In doing so this section 'personalises' many of the strategies and behaviours discussed in the last chapter, by illustrating the links between coping strategies and worker subjectivity. To varying extents labour and capital can be seen to 'rub off' and to shape one another. As part of this two-way dialectic, the practice of gendered power relations are also shown to affect the work experience and promotion prospects of different workers. The penultimate section of the chapter then explores the ways individuals 'made sense' of their lives more generally through call centre work. Notably, while many workers distanced themselves from any

notion of pride or identity as call centre workers, several embraced call centre work as a worthwhile career within a broader work-life history.

8.2 The motives and reasoning behind call centre work

In terms of recruitment – as shown in Chapters 5 and 6 – each centre drew upon the social division of labour in different ways. To reiterate, management in Gov-Tel spoke favourably of more ‘reliable’ older staff members, whilst Sales-Com heralded the exuberance and enthusiasm inherent in a younger workforce. While it is not the purpose of this chapter to ‘test’ these ascriptions, there is little doubt that different workers held contrasting perceptions of call centre work and uses for it. Preconceptions of the role itself were often informed by the social networks that workers fostered in the reproductive sphere, and as such, attitudes to call centre work were often contextualised in local places. As shall be shown, despite the formal recruitment channels each case centre enforced, pathways into call centre work often arose both informally and spontaneously. In several instances friends and family members played a significant part in shaping not only the initial perceptions of call centre work, but also the opportunity to work (in particular in Sales-Com; see Hanson and Pratt 1995; Maguire 1989).

Table 8-1 forms a heuristic device which is used to unpack three prevalent motivations and rationales for this choice of work. These categories have been drawn from McKenna and Richardson’s (2007) research into the motivations of mobile professional workers. While call centre staff engage in a relatively low status (and low paying) form of work, three motivational categories drawn from McKenna and Richardson’s study are apt for explaining interviewee rationales. Although these appear discrete in table form, in reality certain workers were aligned to more than one category and held cross-cutting rationales. This fluidity reflects the flexible (and often uncertain) approach that many workers held for call centre employment, and serves as a further notice of labour’s unpredictability (Peck 1996).

Table 8-1: Categorisation of worker motivations

(adapted from McKenna and Richardson 2007: 311)

Worker category	Motivation behind choice of work
‘Mercenaries’	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Individuals seeking short term rewards (e.g. money, status, lifestyle). - Role often selected to help further and organise ‘outside life’ and a desired work-life balance. - Often weak attachments/commitments to work.
‘Architects’	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Individuals who select work in order to build the architecture of a career, either inside or outside of call centres. - Typically a longer term strategy than Mercenary approaches to work.
‘Seekers’	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Individuals seeking to enrich their personal life; for example through meeting new people. - Many may seek new self-knowledge and self-awareness skills through work. - Those whose motivation is to experience the adventure of a new cultural and/or work environment. - Often willing and/or looking to socially embed in the operation.

Regardless of which category workers fell into, most individuals were not passive in their decision to choose call centre work. To this end workers demonstrated a marked agency in both identifying roles, and using them in *different ways* as a vehicle for a more satisfying life on the whole (i.e. outside the sphere of production). ‘Mercenary’ workers selected telephone work for distinct and often short term rewards both inside and outside of work. These included material benefits such as a decent wage, as well as the lifestyle benefits this work allowed. ‘Architects’, on the other hand, adopted call centre work with a longer term – and often career related - strategy in mind. Finally, ‘Seekers’ tended to view call centre employment in a different light to both of these categories. This category includes workers primarily looking to meet new people, and to realise new experiences within and through call centre work.

8.2.1 *Older and younger segments of the local labour force*

To begin with Gov-Tel's preference for 'older' workers, those I spoke to (aged forty or over) indeed held positive attitudes to call centre work. This outlook was heavily conditioned by long and varied work-life experience in the case of both Eddie and William (each aged fifty) at Gov-Tel. William had spent two decades working in the Navy - largely based in the south of England - before taking early retirement and relocating to Clydebank (a town north-west of Glasgow; see Map 4-1) with his wife in the 1990s. Eddie, on the other hand, held a long history of council employment, where he started off as a gardener's labourer. For both workers the opportunity to work in a call centre arose somewhat spontaneously, and the position lent itself as an unexpected bridge into Glasgow's service-based labour market. Soon after moving to Clydebank, William received a phone call from a friend working at an agency who offered him a role in a local Clydebank call centre (to which he replied 'what's a call centre?'). Crucially, the relative ease of call centre life (in particular at Gov-Tel) was important in William's thinking:

'I just thought 'No, life's getting too short' – so when I came here and went on the phones it was actually quite a nice...it was a nice break, I basically took the call, dealt with it, (and) if it was a major problem it was going somewhere else.'

William, Team Leader/Trainer, Gov-Tel (March 2008)

After initially identifying a simple and stress free role on the phones, William decided to 'make a go of it' (interview) and to climb the operation¹. In doing so he moved from a 'seeker' rationale (using call centre work as a stress free means of engaging with the labour market), to one of an 'architect' intent on establishing a new career in services. Building on his teaching experience in the Navy, he took up the opportunity to train and to manage within Gov-Tel (initially on a secondment). Subsequently, climbing the call centre became something of a personal challenge. Similarly, Eddie had also identified call centre work as a form of 'brain work' in contrast to his previous role as a gardener's labourer for the council. After injuring his back outdoors, Eddie had deliberately turned down roles as a toilet and car park attendant in favour of an office role in the council: and this subsequently led to his role as an agent in Gov-Tel. Call centre work represented a modern form of office work that was previously unknown to both workers. Each now held around ten years worth of call centre experience.

These motivations contrasted with many of the younger workers I spoke to in Sales-Com in particular, who often held negative preconceptions of the call centre industry. Typical comments focused on the intensive, stressful and degrading image of call centre work, with one agent stating ‘Och, you know what you see on the telly! ‘Cluck cluck cluck!’ (interview with Jill, Gov-Tel). Crucially, this image was often tempered by discussions that young people in particular held with friends and family who had worked in the industry. As close to one in ten workers in Glasgow currently work in a call centre (Taylor and Anderson 2008), this is hardly surprising. Harry exemplifies this point:

‘I had a vague idea. I knew one or two people that had worked in them (call centres) before, and they told me it was sort of ‘easy money’ and all that. But they didn’t tell me about the depressing aspects of it – I just sort of went into it thinking it was easy money – you sit down and you get paid for doing not a lot...’

Harry, Antrax Res agent, Sales-Com (April 2008)

Within a labour market dominated by low-wage service alternatives, many young workers were encouraged to consider call centre work by friends and family members who presented this work as both easy and well paying (considering the labour involved). This understanding of call centre work was particularly prevalent for those who left school with few qualifications. For these individuals, and given the labour market realities of Glasgow outlined in Chapter 4, call centre work often formed an indefinite work-life plan. Many effectively fell into the ‘architect’ category of worker, by holding vague ambitions of climbing the operation and one day attaining ‘team leader’ or ‘management’ status. Yet, at the same time, young workers in particular often held ‘mercenary’ motivations geared around making and spending money (typically at the weekend). The following quote sums up a common understanding of the economic landscape in Glasgow and the options for school-leavers within this:

‘You come out of school so you’ve got to work somewhere, in unskilled work, so what options have you got in Glasgow? You could work restaurants, doing that kind of waiting stuff, but you’re always going to get minimum wage for that. You could work bar work – same again, and that’s long unsociable hours where you’re working Saturdays. These are the big days! Or you could work in a shop, which is bollocks, and you’re definitely gonna get £5.50 an hour and you’re not gonna go anywhere with it.’

Leon, QuickCall agent, Sales-Com (June 2008)

In contrast to other service options – i.e. restaurant or bar work – call centres were seen as a (relatively) well paying and comfortable form of work (they provided an ‘officey style lifestyle’ according to Leon). Notably many younger workers adopted these roles with specific lifestyles in mind, and within a broad ‘work to live’ philosophy. In Leon’s case he sought a role which paid enough money for his shared flat in Glasgow’s West End; a role which induced little stress either inside or out with the work place; and (building on this) one which left the evenings and weekends - the ‘big days’ - free for relaxing and socialising with friends. In selecting call centre work solely for these lifestyle benefits, and with little interest in skill development or progression, Leon and many other young workers were clearly aligned to the short-term ‘mercenary’ rationale (Table 8-1).

This should not imply that all young workers were content with this choice of work, and to this end several interviewees felt ‘trapped’ in a role on the phones (particularly those who held little experience in other forms of work; Cumbers et al. 2009). For others, the intensity and repetition of the work outweighed the financial benefits and the conventional hours on offer. Many of these individuals held loose attachments to their employers; and it was these individuals that tended to ‘hop’ from one call centre to another. Once again, it was often through informal channels that workers began to structure their next job opportunities, and it was typical for current and former colleagues to provide information on upcoming roles elsewhere. Subsequently workers often bumped into former colleagues in the workplace, deliberately or otherwise (as Harry alludes to below).

‘In Sales-Com there’s 3 people that I’ve worked with before, in various different places...you talk to people and it’s ‘so do you remember so and so from that place?’...you know you end up meeting the same people that worked everywhere else. It just goes to show that there is a lot of people that do just jump around call centres...’

Harry, Antrax Res agent, Sales-Com (April 2008)

Individuals within each centre acknowledged that many staff ‘did the rounds’ across the call centre industry in Glasgow. However, rather than searching out the most financially rewarding centres (as management suggested), the self professed ‘hoppers’ I spoke to typically sought less stressful and more personally rewarding work experiences rather than

higher rates of pay alone. Certain interviewees viewed this transitory strategy as a means to ‘getting one over’ on management in a similar sense to the resistance and resilient strategies outlined in Chapter 7. Other workers acknowledged this means of coping as one born from frustration at the lack of preferred work choices presently available in Glasgow (whether these were known or unknown).

8.2.2 *Work histories and social backgrounds*

In contrast to these strategies, many individuals held firm views and ideals towards the sort of work they *did* want to perform: and these aspirations tended to reflect both class and education backgrounds. Many of these ideals were also mapped onto the areas workers came from. In Gov-Tel I spoke with several agents from traditional working class areas in and around Glasgow (such as Airdrie and Springburn; see Map 4-1) who expressed a preference for masculine forms of blue-collar work over that of services. To this end both Steven (33 years old) and Rory (28 years old) held previous assembly line experience for Motorola in Bathgate (a now defunct electronics assembly plant). In response to the decline of factory and other forms of production work (i.e. those outlined in Chapter 4), both workers had subsequently turned to call centre employment as a means of reconnecting with the post-industrial labour market:

‘It’s (call centre work) the biggest industry in Glasgow. They used to have the ship builders – I’ve got a few of my friends that still work there, (but) that’s on the decline you know. And manual industries such as moulding engineering, even automotive factories, they’re away, steel industries are away from Motherwell, coalmining’s away from Lanarkshire, weavings away from Ayrshire – what’s left?’

Steven, agent, Gov-Tel (February 2008)

While Steven displayed a sense of loss at the transition to a service led economy, most workers agreed that call centres were ‘here to stay’ and that Glasgow in particular held an abundance of this new type of work. Linking back to discussions over agency and coping inside the workplace (outlined in Chapter 7), this pragmatic response to service work equated to a broad ‘reworking’ of current labour market conditions (Katz 2004). Thus, despite holding a preference for masculine forms of production work, all three former factory workers that I interviewed gleaned *positives* from this white collar and feminised form of work. Specifically, each regarded call centre work as something of a loophole into

a dependable and *comfortable* white-collar environment by contrast to an instable blue collar past:

‘They (my friends) are out in the pishing rain, you know! And that’s when you think ‘ah, comfy job, money guaranteed every week’, whereas some of them are working piecework with whatever they do, digging up whatever road, laying cables. They’ll get paid for whatever – how many metres they lay and what not - and if they’re not working they’re not earning, whereas we sit in here in a nice wee office...’

Steven, agent, Gov-Tel (February 2008)

This perception of service work security was greatest within Gov-Tel, where many agents interpreted the agent role as a ‘foot in the door’ to the broader body of the City Council. Generally speaking, these agents perceived call centre work as something of a long-term strategy; several spoke of their ambition to climb the centre and to realise a team leader or trainer position in the fullness of time.

In contrast to the above, workers with middle class and white collar work backgrounds often saw call centre employment in a more temporary light. In particular, I interviewed several graduates that aspired to higher status and personally challenging careers in tune with their degree subjects². Many of these workers had chosen call centre work due to the lack of preferred options in the current labour market (a trend echoed by Cumbers et al. 2009). Several graduates lamented their college or university choices, and (on the back of call centre work) had since vowed to retrain in more vocational subjects such as nursing or teaching. However other graduates, who were fresh out of university, often saw call centre work more positively as a means to re-charge, save money, and take stock before re-negotiating the labour market in search of more desired forms of work.

‘I finished my masters (a marketing degree) which was a very hard year, very, it was quite intense, and I just thought ‘I just want a job for a year that’s 9-5, weekends off, pays the rent, quite good cash...’

Abbey, team leader, Ire-Tel (December 2007)

Many educated workers who were qualified for higher end white collar careers embraced call centre work as a ‘stop-gap’ position. Like workers with blue collar histories, these individuals displayed ‘Refugee’ motivations (Table 8-1); this time by using call centres to

delay the stress implicit in more ‘serious’ forms of work. Further still, a large number of workers cited the ‘friendly’ environment and ‘fun atmosphere’ (interviews) present in centres such as Ire-Tel and Sales-Com as a key factor underlining this choice of work (interviews). Many had been lured back into call centre work following part time roles during university or previous full-time stints in-between other forms of work or study.

Alternatively other workers held definite career plans and work-life aspirations for which call centre work played a longer term facilitative role. Both Victoria (a team senior in Gov-Tel) and Carole (an agent in Ire-Tel) became call centre agents in a bid to save money to invest in their own respective businesses further down the line³. Victoria’s recent work history reflected a prolonged career strategy including P.A. work for a well known Glasgow fashion stylist. After leaving this role – which placed erratic and harrowing demands on her time – Victoria planned to save earnings from Gov-Tel for one-two years, before combining her media contacts with her call centre savings to launch her own photography business. In this sense Victoria (and certain others) demonstrated the ‘joined-up’ thinking behind former, present and future work decisions. Call centre work here formed a pragmatic ‘middle step’, with a definite goal in sight. Similarly, technically minded and highly qualified European workers in Game-Tel also entered call centre work as part of a longer term career strategy.

‘I think if you’re interested in IT, and if you want to make your career within IT – and IT is a very wide area of course – then this is a really good entry level position if you know what I mean. A lot of people would say ‘I have a degree in computer communications’ or whatever it is, and they might do this for a couple of years to get some good hands on experience, a bit more trouble-shooting, and then maybe start to progress within the IT industry. Not necessarily within the call centre industry, but moving in a different area...’

Jeff, team leader, Game-Tel (February 2008)

Many in Game-Tel saw the centre not just as a short term call centre role, but as the first rung of a broad IT career ladder. In this sense many agents identified Game-Tel as a useful means to CV build; and these workers more than any other represented career ‘Architects’ (Table 8-1), intent on forging a career *through* (though not necessarily within) call centre work. Unlike the other centres, the specific nature of Game-Tel’s industry (and especially

its clients) attracted individualised careerist strategies. To this end several agents described the role itself as important ‘work experience’ in line with a ‘Seeker’ rationale (interview with Emre, an agent with an Electronic Engineering degree). For Emre, call centre work was far from an arbitrary choice. Primarily he sought hands-on experience and relevant *working* knowledge to supplement his degree and class-room learning⁴.

8.2.3 *Fixed and footloose labour*

Two final worker groups with contrasting uses for call centres came from those heavily embedded in the locality due to historical/familial ties, and newcomers to Glasgow who held (potentially) footloose and fleeting engagements with the area. In terms of the former group, many of the parents I spoke to were interested in supporting a stable family home and had identified call centre work as a means to striking an effective work-life-balance. As shifts and schedules vary across industries, it is common for (especially working class) mothers to take certain types of locally available work, in order to meet the needs of children. In addition, these work choices are often selected to fit around the schedules of a male breadwinner, culminating in spatially restricted job searches (i.e. stories of containment; see Hanson and Pratt 1995).

In Ire-Tel especially, flexible work arrangements were important to many parents attempting to fit work around child rearing commitments and the schedules of other family members. To this end parents across all three Glasgow centres found conventional office hours apt for spending time at home with children. Notably, Marisa (a single mother of two living in Glasgow) found a 9-5 arrangement preferable to her previous late night shift work within hotels and restaurants. In addition several workers spoke favourably of their call centre’s proximity to Glasgow city centre and its shops and services. Glasgow’s transport links (i.e. road, rail, bus and underground) allowed parents to shuttle quickly in and out of work, thus allowing more time for out of work commitments. As a result, call centre work in the city centre provided a desired work-life balance for many parents based in communities in and around the outskirts of Glasgow. As part of this functional approach to work, parents in particular tended to dismiss the social benefits of call centre employment:

‘I get on well with everybody, I’ve not got any close relationships here but I’m not really looking for that here (work based friendships), I’ve got enough in my life...As

I say, I'm friends with Sharon, but I havenay (sic) made arrangements to see her outside of work individually...I'm personally not looking for friendships here, and I don't mean that in a bad way...'

Morag, manager, Gov-Tel (March 2008)

As opposed to taking friendships outside of the workplace, Morag (a manager in her early forties) preferred to focus her spare time on supporting her family (in particular her children) and her local church in Cumbernauld. Similarly other workers further down the call centre pyramid voiced a preference for keeping work and social reproductive spheres separate (as one agent remarked 'I quite like separating this place from my *actual* life'). These views reflect a perception of the working sphere as synthetic/artificial in contrast to life outside of work, and also tie in with a 'Mercenary' approach to work (Table 8-1). For many, call centre work – for good or for bad - was chosen to support and foster a discrete and impermeable social (and often family) life.

Such an approach contrasted greatly with younger and/or non-British foreign workers in both Game-Tel and Sales-Com. In particular many of the foreign workers I spoke to were living and working within Glasgow as part of a gap year abroad. Several chose call centre work in an arbitrary fashion ('a job is a job') and as a means of earning money to ensure initial 'survival' in a new labour market (interview with Claris, Sales-Com). Other foreign workers consciously profited from their natural language skills (such as French, German, Swedish, and Polish) to earn a premium service/call centre wage. Either way the work itself was chosen as a means to finance a life experience, and for this reason workers often adopted 'Seeker' rationales. Call centre work helped to pay for the 'adventure' of living abroad, and for many this was part of an all-round life experience: both living and working abroad.

In a similar sense to many graduates, several foreign workers also identified the social nature of call centre work as a key factor in their thinking. In particular, the opportunity to work and speak with compatriots helped assuage the trepidation of beginning a new life abroad⁵.

'I think it (working with fellow nationals) creates a sense of community, because you know, if you're in a French team you've got loads of French people around you, and

I think that helps you ease yourself into a foreign environment, because you have this kind of secure thing going on, working with people...like you.’

Frances, recruitment consultant and former client manager at Game-Tel (May 2008)

This motivation aligned several foreign workers with ‘Seeker’ (Table 8-1) rationales, as migrants in particular utilised Sales-Com as something of a social anchor into Glasgow more broadly. To this end I spoke with several foreign workers who arrived in Glasgow with few (if any) friends or contacts in the area. After initially moving to Dennistoun (an area in the East End of Glasgow; see Map 4-1), one Polish agent remarked: ‘How did I meet people? I started working in Sales-Com, pretty much’. Thus, working relationships were commonly converted into private friendships, and indeed several agents were now coupled with one another and/or living together. These workers often expressed a marked pride in prioritising personal values and friendships over more careerist approaches to call centre work (effectively the anti-thesis of the architect motivation).

To summarise, it is clear that many different worker groups understood and used call centre employment in different ways. Nevertheless a recurring theme – which crosscut different economic and social groups - is the perception of call centre work as inherently *easy* (interviews). Ironically, most individuals identified (to some extent) the stress free and simple nature of the role as an underlying *benefit* to call centre work. This finding is somewhat unexpected, given the criticisms levelled at the call centre labour process and job design (with particular reference to Taylorism and deskilling; see Taylor and Bain 1999; Bain and Taylor 2000; Helms and Cumbers 2006). While the agent role was tedious for many, a good proportion of workers were not seeking challenge or excitement through their labour. It is also probable that such acts of resilience and reworking as those outlined in Chapter 7 have helped combat many of the negative effects of the call centre job design.

8.3 Work-locality relations

Building on the above perceptions and rationales, the following section explores how the outside lives of workers carried over *inside* the work setting: thus impacting the social relations of each centre. In doing so the section focuses in the main on worker interactions in Gov-Tel and Sales-Com, as these centres drew most clearly upon different segments of the labour market. In turn, the section also illustrates how organisations themselves were imputed with class and gender values which influenced the work experience and promotion

prospects for different segments of the workforce. Ultimately this discussion illustrates the *two-way* nature of labour's social relationship with capital: as both worker and organisation 'rubbed off' and influenced one another to varying extents.

8.3.1 *Practicing identity through work*

'I would say it comes down to background...There's nothing you can really do about it, it's very difficult to try and coach someone out of their own personality...there are people that work in here that you could never change....'

Jim, trainer, Gov-Tel (March 2008)

One of the clearest examples of an outside identity carrying over into the workplace came from working class male workers in Gov-Tel, who arrived in the centre with strong masculine personas. These workers more than any other faced a challenge to retain their masculine identities, due to the emotional labour and the 'feminine' sensitivities required in working on the phones (Simpson 2004). In response, Eddie and Steven in particular (each from blue collar areas) utilised several informal practices in reflection of their working class principles. Nominally both agents supported the ideal of 'being yourself' on and off the phone, and in turn each refused to cow-tow to either customers or management as part of their role.

'This is me! I don't change for nobody...'

Eddie, agent, Gov-Tel (June 2008)

'I'm what you'd call a 'man's man'... I call a spade a spade and a shovel a shovel, you know?... the way I speak is the way I talk to everybody. I'm not gonna be 'yes sir, yes Madame' to anybody, you know, just working in the same workplace as me!'

Steven, Agent, Gov-Tel (February 2008)

Linking back to the less covert instances of resilience outlined in chapter seven, it was these agents in particular who dealt with angry customers through interrupting, shouting over, and blurting out 'unprofessional' slang terms. Eddie in particular refused to 'bow down' (interview) to condescending customers, and, in addition, both workers refused (at least notionally) to treat team leaders or management with any more respect than that bestowed to their fellow man. These recalcitrant attitudes to authority were also

supplemented with a large degree of ‘banter’, which often took the form of playful and degrading ‘piss taking’ (again, a practice common on the factory floor; Hearn 1985; Collinson 1988, 1992). To this end Steven admitted to the common practice of ‘slagging off the lassies’ as a means of killing time, and jokes were often made against female colleagues, posh customers and management. In doing so these male workers re-asserted their working class and masculine identities in the face of status threatening ‘women’s work’ (Collinson and Hearn 1994: 9; Kondo 1990).

Building on this masculine theme, it is important to note that several *different kinds* of masculinity were practiced by different individuals. With this in mind, male workers from different class backgrounds and age groups – who held corresponding rationales for work – acted in different ways. As Collinson and Hearn (1994: 11-12) note:

‘Instead of there being just one kind of men, dominant or otherwise, there are many different ways in which particular kinds of men and particular kinds of masculinities are reproduced, often in relation to other social divisions’

A prominent example comes when comparing the call centre ‘hoppers’ (who offered limited commitment to the role), and those workers intent on forging a career through call centre work. These workers often *embodied* their commitment to the role through the use of dress (similarly see Dyer et al. 2008):

‘...a lot of people do come into the job as a professional, they come in smart, they work hard, they do their best...they’ll wear a cracking suit that they’ve bought. You know, and then you’ll get a person beside them that’ll walk in wearing a creased shirt, going ‘you know what, I’m a call centre agent – I’m not really bothered!’’.

James, PrintEx agent, Sales-Com (May 2008)

Several Sales-Com agents deliberately ‘dressed down’ - opting not to wear ties, and at times arriving in creased shirts - for what they perceived as unskilled/unprofessional work. Alternatively, male agents with longer term aspirations (and often those who wanted to climb in Sales-Com) favoured smart, well ironed shirts with ties and immaculate suits. These attitudes reflect different forms of masculinity, with ‘hoppers’ often adopting rebellious schoolboy personas. Alternatively, male workers who wore suits embodied a careerist and individualised brand of masculinity.

This use of dress was also coupled with additional practices, variously designed to ‘other’ women and the less ambitious agents of the centre. As with McDowell’s (1997) experience of merchant banks, several male agents utilised sexualised and sporting language to this end, and to mark the centre as one congruent with masculine traits of ‘individualism, aggression, competition, sport and drinking’ (Collinson and Hearn 1994: 4; McDowell 1997).

‘I would say, if I was going to stereotype, it’s a lot like a football team. You wouldn’t have a girl in a guy’s dressing room during a football match, you know what I mean, it’s a lot of... (Pauses and makes a straining noise as if pushing) ‘*Come on!*’....you know what I mean?’

Henrick, team leader, Sales-Com (May 2008)

This point is emphasised through a popular football analogy, which demonstrates how certain agents framed and glamorised the role as a masculine team game to the potential exclusion of women (as in the case with Merchant Banking; see McDowell 1997)⁶. This exclusion is made overt through Henrick’s framing of the sales environment as a ‘dressing room’ incongruent with ‘caring’ feminine attributes. Similarly, many of the customer interactions within the Antrax Core team covered themes and topics of conversation intrinsically tied to a hard-headed and masculine-careerist identity:

‘You’re totally being yourself; you speak to them (customers) with a bit of respect, and you’re chatting away... I had a certain client who worked for Toshiba down south or whatever, I could phone Clive no problem – I was like ‘how was the Man Utd game? That was a good victory...’ – ‘oh brilliant...’... the phrase I found best worked was ‘listen, you’re a busy man, I’m a busy man – if we tie this up today, get this signed, you give me the purchase order, it’s done...’

James, PrintEx agent, Sales-Com (May 2008)

In the above quote, James demonstrates how he related to male businessmen by sharing his interest in football with them, and similarly through his understandings of hectic working/business life in general. In doing so he reproduced his identity in Sales-Com as inherently individualistic, hard working, and professional.

In contrast, female agents in both Gov-Tel and Sales-Com struggled to adopt the same masculine practices. In refraining from such sporting language, female workers placed themselves at odds with many of the male agents in the centre and indeed management/the organisation as a whole (more to follow). However, certain women in the centre did find ways of harnessing their own gender ascriptions via overtly feminine and sexualised performances:

‘... you know you have to be nice to them (the customers)...and you’re allowed to say some lies you know...(if) the customer asks ‘are you blonde or brunette?’ – you would say ‘blonde’. It’s just a question of how you’re going to handle that – if you’re going to say ‘Yes, I’m blonde, and I’m double D....and I love the colour pink’ – you could flirt, but as long as you can handle it...and turn it into a joke and not make the customer feel bad, then it’s all good....’

Petra, call moderator, Sales-Com (May 2008)

To this end I spoke with several female agents who admitted to flirting with male businessmen. In this way, certain agents adopted feminine and sexualised identities in contrast to the hard-headed sales persona adopted by several males. For her own part, Petra (a Polish worker) and other agents jokingly equated her accent to that of a ‘Russian prostitute’. In doing so, several female workers turned Sales-Com into a more risqué workplace than that typically associated with routine office or call centre work (see Korvajärvi 2008)⁷.

Ultimately these points illustrate how fractured ‘labour’ as a category was within both Gov-Tel and Sales-Com. Far from a united worker-class of agents on the floor, it is evident that various sub-groups and ‘classes for themselves’ existed in competition with one another. These identification practices tended to reflect several facets of worker life born outside the sphere of production. In this way the places that workers came from, their social backgrounds, and their resulting motivations imparted on the centre in different ways. As part of this process agents typically identified with like-minded workers (often those with similar backgrounds and ideals); and this was often how ‘cliques’ formed on the call centre floor. As one agent in Sales-Com remarked: ‘It’s easier to become friends with guys that are just like you’. Together this demonstrates the flexibility of call centre work as a discursive space, practiced and reproduced as socially masculine *and* feminine

depending upon the worker in question (see Crang 1994 for a similar discussion in a restaurant work-space). Importantly though, each organisation valued and encouraged certain gendered practices and identifications over others as the following section shall discuss.

8.3.2 *Gender, class and management*

‘...there has been a shift from what might be termed the ‘gender-in-organisation mode’ – where organisations are seen as settings in which gendered actors behave...to theorising organisation themselves as embedded with gendered meanings and structured by the social relations of sexuality’

(McDowell 1997: 27).

While many of the above practices were subtle and therefore difficult to control or influence, it is important to note that management allowed and even *encouraged* many of these behaviours. Despite the gender neutral and rational depictions of control discussed in Chapter 5, certain (often masculine) practices and behaviours helped to structure opportunities for promotion in both Gov-Tel and Sales-Com (see Collinson and Hearn 1994; Collinson and Knights 1986; Cockburn 1991). As part of this structuring of opportunity, it is significant that social relations from *outside* the work environment were often transposed into the formal work setting. In certain instances the socio-spatial divides from within and around Glasgow were mapped onto the internal geographies of the workplace, often in new and unexpected ways. In turn, many workers developed their own strategies to help ensure both progress and ‘survival’ in the workplace.

Perhaps most notably, it was no coincidence that working class males ‘got away’ with ‘bawdy’, unprofessional and illicit actions (i.e. the masculine practices discussed earlier) in Gov-Tel. In explaining this trend, Victoria (a team senior) pointed to a marked bias from the management, and the fact that many managers originated from the same or similar areas to agents like Eddie and Steven. In addition workers such as Eddie held long histories of council employment (pre-dating Gov-Tel), which corresponded with several figures in upper management. These ties notwithstanding, Gov-Tel clearly benefited from the long term commitment these (often working class) agents brought to the role. As mentioned in Chapter 6, the same workers also possessed the valued ability to relate to

customers from similar backgrounds and areas of the city. As a result, management made something of an informal pact with such agents:

‘A duty manager put it to me, and was quite on the ball I think, they said ‘Victoria....you’re not street wise like us’... that’s what was passed back to me - i.e. I don’t just tell people to ‘Shut up’...(because) I’ve never had to do that before!...There is a lot of favouritism in here. (Impersonates team leader speaking to agent) ‘Will you do me a wee favour, will you work a bit later, is that alright?...’ – but they’re aware of the way that person speaks to the customers...there’s hypocrisy amongst the style of upper management about how they want to deal with it (customer service)’

Victoria, team senior, Gov-Tel (March 2008)

As opposed to following the official channels of discipline, team leaders were expected to display a common sense ‘street smart’ approach to misbehaviour. Rather than formally disciplining staff, team leaders were encouraged to *informally* rebuke agents such as Eddie: effectively by telling them to ‘shut up’ or ‘get on with it’. This tolerance for masculine (mis)behaviour at the agent level also influenced managerial practices; job evaluation schemes; and the *promotion* prospects of would be team leaders and managers. In turn, rather than the gender neutral professionalism which management ‘officially’ espoused, Gov-Tel encouraged a specifically gendered team leader role. As McDowell (1997: 151) notes:

‘Images of authority are gender-saturated. Indeed, the very notion of authority is associated with masculinity – with...male size, shape, voice and expressions. For women the images and roles that are available at work tend to be familial or sexualised’.

In the case of Gov-Tel, many of the female team leader and management roles were staffed by women rich in the (somewhat negative) imagery of a teacher in a socially awkward school (see Tannen 1994; Marshall 1984). In a telling analogy, Victoria herself equated her own role (team senior; the position between team leader and agent) to one of ‘child minding’. While formal disciplinary procedures were reserved for the more serious acts of misconduct, Team Leaders were expected to shout and scold the agents who displayed masculine/juvenile/unprofessional behaviours. Arguably, such responses were best learnt *outside* the workplace (in homes and communities more broadly), and consequently

Victoria saw little prospect of climbing and managing in the centre. Culturally, she felt out of place. Thus, despite representations of a feminine and professional workspace, in reality Gov-Tel was ran with values and practices more akin to a masculine and working-class discourse.

In a similar, though more extreme sense, Sales-Com also relied upon and rewarded agents who displayed overtly masculine behaviours. While management officially encouraged workers to adhere to legal rules of sale, workers who broke formal rules and procedures were not always punished:

‘...a lot of times there’s instances where mis-selling goes on, where they push it right to the limit or even blatantly lie on the phone...Now if you’re a team manager, right, and you’ve got say Maradona in your team – and he’s quite prone to diving or handling the ball – are you gonna keep him in your team or are you gonna get rid of him?...Of course you’ll keep him! I would!’

Leon, QuickCall agent, Sales-Com (June 2008)

Not only did mis-selling agents maintain their role in Sales-Com, according to several interviewees these agents were prime candidates for promotion to the high-end campaigns. Furthermore it was often the same male agents who dressed smartly, those who related the centre to a masculine sports arena, and those who generated large sales volumes (through mis-selling or otherwise) that achieved forms of promotion. As mentioned in Chapter 5, the different campaign workflows in Sales-Com effectively formed a hierarchy of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ sales campaigns. Antrax Core represented the most lucrative sales campaign:

‘It’s very hard to get in (the Antrax Core campaign), and its ‘jobs for the boys’ almost, as well, you’ve got that coming in...you’ve got to be kind of friendly with them (management) and work your way in...Personalities go a long way.’

Leon, QuickCall agent, Sales-Com (June 2008)

‘Basically what happened is a manager came and said ‘I want you to apply for this’. And I was like ‘OK...’. And I applied for it – I kind of knew I’d get the job after they told me to apply for it. Which I think sometimes is kind of wrong, you know what I mean? They tell people to apply for jobs...It is professional, but it’s

professional in a sneaky way...the job decision is already made way before anyone knows.’

Henrick, team leader, Sales-Com (May 2008)

Several managers in Sales-Com covertly *advised* the desired agents – often those who displayed masculine and careerist mentalities - to apply for upper level positions. Ultimately this practice underpinned the sexual division of labour on the call centre floor, with Antrax-Core in particular exemplifying something of a ‘Gentlemen’s club’ (Maddock and Parkin 1993). Six of the seven agents of this all male team were Rangers supporters, while the final member supported Celtic (also male). On the two occasions I observed this team discussions of football were rife, while I was advised by two other agents that the campaign manager of this team was a crass misogynist who frequently bragged of his sexual exploits (interview with Petra, Sales-Com; May 2008). In short, this team more than any other practised a masculine discourse which aided the exclusion of female workers.

Seemingly, many managers in Sales-Com found women inappropriately sexualised for the harsh world of business. This point is well illustrated by a team leader, who joked that flirting was only successful as a sales technique in direct rather than relationship sales (i.e. those requiring instant credit card details over and above long term negotiations; interview with Henrick, Sales-Com). In turn women agents occupied the ‘mixed’ lower level cold calling roles while male team leaders and agents dominated the higher end sales campaigns (see Collinson and Knights 1986)⁸. This pattern of employment was largely based on gender assumptions and the adherence to informal masculine scripts embedded within the organisation as a whole. Workers who did not (or could not) conform to this masculine script faced an uphill struggle to attain the better paid roles within the centre, or even to retain their job in the face of a shrinking client base and downsizing.

As a consequence to these barriers several workers developed ulterior methods for climbing the centre, in the hope that management would notice their potential. A common tactic for aspiring staff was to plough additional time and effort into the Apprentice Scheme, or else to stay behind after work to discuss aspects of the role with Team Leaders (i.e. ‘brown noser’ tactics which Harry discussed in Chapter 7). This tactic induced stress for many workers who saw little return on their efforts (a common outcome for workers

attempting to climb low-end service ladders; see Crompton and Brockmann 2006). At the same time, several workers felt that private backgrounds and social circumstances outside the centre impacted the chance to progress.

‘I went to him (a campaign manager) ‘I’m struggling, I’ve got a new flat, I need a better wage’ – he was a St. Mirren fan and I’m a Thistle fan, so he was thinking ‘oh fancy West-Ender’ – and he just put me straight back on the phones, he didn’t even give me the option...’

Leon, QuickCall agent, Sales-Com (June 2008)

In the above instance Leon felt that his West-End background (combined and partly signified by his support of Partick Thistle⁹) worked to his detriment when negotiating a pay rise with a manager from working-class Paisley. Relatedly, two workers felt that school background played a part in structuring opportunities to advance. Such comments suggest that positions in the centre – at least in the minds of many workers – were influenced by pre-existing social and spatial divides outside the workplace: and within and across Glasgow more generally. In response, several agents harnessed informal social connections and friendships (often with team leaders) as a means to ‘survive’ bouts of downsizing.

‘...people are getting let go left, right, and centre. The atmosphere has gone...and people are reaching out to their own little cliques in there’

James, PrintEx agent, Sales-Com (May 2008)

‘...especially in a small call centre like this, it becomes almost like a small drama... if you keep yourself to the right people, you will survive...’

Henrick, team leader, Sales-Com (May 2008)

In particular many of the Continental European workers – whose jobs faced the greatest threat – argued that friendships with non-British managers were vital in maintaining a role in the centre during bouts of downsizing. One Polish agent argued that workers (at times) decided for themselves who would stay or leave the centre, based on leaked information on the campaign closures and client withdrawals. Importantly, such conversations often took place outside the workplace – in houses, bars and cafes – and between agents and Team

Leaders who primarily saw themselves as friends rather than colleagues¹⁰. Such coping strategies demonstrate the subtle inter-relations between work and home, and how networks established in one spatial sphere often impacted upon the other. As Maguire (1989: 72) notes:

‘It is the interaction between ‘work’ and ‘non-work’ which is important. In the study of social control in the workplace it is neither solely the external environment nor the ‘internal state’ of the workplace which requires examination, but the interpenetration of the two’.

This discussion has shown how the geographies of the local labour market were carried over and effectively ‘came alive’ within the workplace. There existed a clear spatial dimension to the power relations in each centre: wherein management rewarded the behaviours of staff drawn from particular backgrounds and areas of Glasgow. In Gov-Tel, management favoured the ‘street smarts’ of workers drawn from working class areas, over and above the behaviours of non-local workers from middle class commuter towns (as was the case with Victoria). Meanwhile, male workers brought up to hold masculine hobbies and attitudes in Sales-Com faced less difficulty climbing the ranks of Sales-Com than (typically) migrant workers or women. Ultimately it is the failure to recognise the embedded dominance of masculinities within conventional power relations that, in part, explains how so many equality initiatives fail within the workplace (Collinson and Hearn 1994; Collinson and Knights 1990; Cockburn 1991). Nevertheless, workers found ways of coping with this structural bias. In particular several (continental) European workers in Sales-Com demonstrated how groups and individuals may infiltrate management, and in doing so adjust the outcomes of unofficial discourses and practices of power.

8.4 ‘Narratives’, ‘careers’, and work-life identities

This final section examines the work identity different individuals projected as call centre employees. In doing so, the section draws upon the notion of career ‘narratives’, and in particular the connections workers made between new and old work experiences as a means of negotiating new work identities. Once again, the meaning of a ‘call centre identity’ varied along axes of social differentiation such as age, gender and class. Ultimately the section argues that many workers displayed an agency through strategies to extract both dignity and meaning from call centre employment.

8.4.1 Careers and 'Narratives'

In explaining how call centres impacted the broader life identities of workers, it is worthwhile turning to Richard Sennett's (1998; 2008) analysis of working life in the 'flexible' era¹¹. Sennett has argued that work arrangements today – punctuated by notions of 'team-work', flexibility, and short termism - have eroded our ability to form meaningful identities through work careers. As he notes:

“Career’...in its English origins meant a road for carriages, and as eventually applied to labour meant a lifelong channel for one’s economic pursuits. Flexible capitalism has blocked the straight roadway of career, diverting employees suddenly from one kind of work into another. The word ‘job’ in English of the fourteenth century meant a lump or piece of something which could be carried around. Flexibility today brings back this arcane sense of the job, as people do lumps of labour, pieces of work, over the course of a lifetime.’ (Sennett 1998: 9).

Via patterns of stable and related work (i.e. careers), Sennett argues that a narrative begins to shape which chronicles the logic of our work-life history. In turn, narratives impart broader meanings and lasting values within us (thus fostering identities and character traits). According to Sennett, a broader understanding of life as a whole is better fostered through routine, stable and consistent working narratives:

‘Narratives are more than simple chronicles of events; they give shape to the forward movement of time, suggesting reasons why things happen, (and) showing their consequences...’ (Sennett 1998: 30).

As opposed to drifting aimlessly between unrelated roles or instable forms of work, the career ‘road’ and its narrative provides a broad coherence and stability to our working life (Huws 2006). Furthermore it is through a trajectory of related work that individuals develop industry specific skills, which in turn help to develop professional identities *outside* the workplace as well as in it. These understandings are especially relevant for call centre workers, as many interviewees held varied work histories (at times within instable industries) and often a prior indifference to call centre employment. As Billy jokingly remarked:

‘You’re in school right...and you get asked that infamous question ‘what do you want to be when you grow up?’ - A ‘fireman’, an ‘astronaut’, a ‘policeman’, ‘MI5’, a ‘lawyer’, a ‘dentist’ - I will guarantee you that no one’s ever said ‘I want to work in a call centre Miss’.’

Billy, QuickCall agent, Sales-Com (April 2008)

While each worker held a reason for working in a call centre, many struggled to ‘make sense’ of their role as part of a longer term working narrative. Certain workers were more or less comfortable with their identity through their role; while many struggled to extract a pride or dignity, others were relatively satisfied with their identity via this work. Such reactions were often tied to notions of class and the aspirations of different worker groups (Sennett and Cobb 1972).

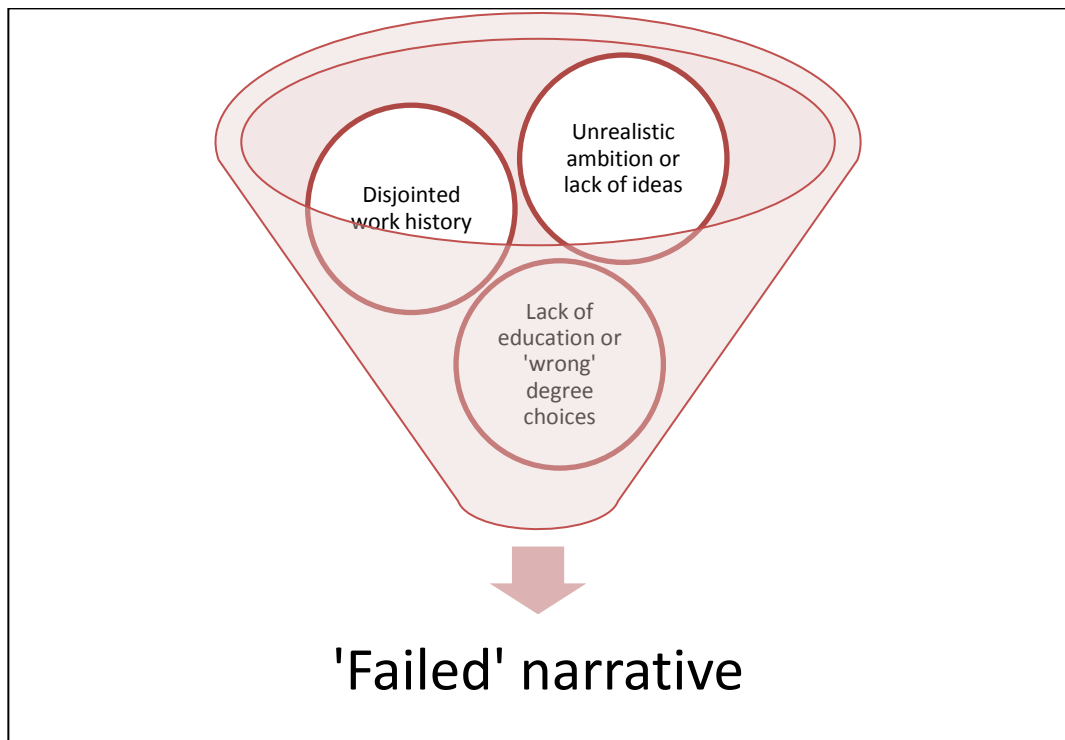
Table 8-2: Work-life identity through call centre employment

Identity type	Typical feelings
‘Prisoners’: no narrative through work.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Exasperation at failure to build coherent work history/ careers; - Preoccupation with an ambition or ‘dream’ which is (seemingly) untenable. - Call centre skills often underplayed or discredited; - Feelings of ‘failure’ and the impossibility of escape.
‘Pragmatists’: Potential narrative(s) through work.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Often difficulties in building up/connecting work histories, although arguably through choice; - Many workers open to the possibility of returning to a former career trajectory or narrative. - Call centre skills often partially acknowledged; - Options and often optimism regarding future employment within or out-with the call centre industry.
‘Careerists’: a strong working narrative tied to call centre work.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Coherent work histories and logic behind working choices; - Belief in industry specific skills (e.g. ‘sales’ or ‘customer service’), their transferability, and job titles which infer this; - Belief in the importance or worth of the role; and often the ability to ‘make a difference’; - Positive feelings of permanence/stability within this trajectory.

Following up on the worker motivations outlined in Table 8-1, Table 8-2 represents a heuristic device for explaining the main identifications workers made with call centre work. To this end, three distinct worker categories are put forward. Most notably, certain workers failed to form positive identifications with their role. Many projected feelings of being ‘trapped’ and alienated by their work. At the other extreme, several spoke favourably of their identity as *professionals* proceeding down the road of a worthwhile career. In-between these two perspectives, the majority of workers I spoke with are better described as ‘pragmatists’ who were optimistic about their future working life. These workers gleaned both positive and negative understandings of their work trajectory, their future options, and their current identity as call centre workers. Again, these attitudes and impressions were often tied to categories of class and gender, and often linked back to the places workers came from. These factors heavily conditioned the acceptability (or not) of call centre work as a site for building a career and/or a broader work-life identity around.

8.4.2 ‘Prisoners’: *Illegitimate feelings and ways of coping with ‘crap work’*

Figure 8-1: The failed narrative of call centre work



Many of the workers who failed to identify with their role came from middle class backgrounds, and held corresponding aspirations for high status forms of work (often on the back of a university degree). To this end I spoke with would-be artists, photographers,

and film producers (to name but a few) who had all settled for a role on the phones as a temporary strategy (Cumbers et al. 2009). In particular these workers struggled to accept the feelings of alienation linked to the technical control and Taylorism outlined in Chapter 6 (Wood 1982). In turn, workers such as Penelope and Victoria (at Game-Tel and Gov-Tel respectively) rejected their identity as call centre workers, and instead clung to their creative desires and aspirations for more meaningful forms of work.

‘...when people ask, I tend to mention what my other plans are, and to say ‘well I’m trying to get a teaching job but I haven’t tried really hard...’. I don’t really go into details of what I do now...’

Penelope, agent, Game-Tel (June 2008)

‘I feel a bit like I’m looking at it almost from an outsider’s perspective in a way...because I’m in it (the call centre), but I’m *outside* – because I’ve got my own goal which I do aim to achieve. Its been postponed because of my son, but I still plan to achieve it...’

Victoria, team senior, Gov-Tel (March 2008)

By focussing on future roles and ambitions (i.e. teaching and photography) both Penelope and Victoria maintained a work identity more in tune with their middle class aspirations. Even inside the workplace, Victoria felt removed from many of her colleagues as she felt her ambitions captured her identity better than the work which she currently performed. This strategy was useful in the short-medium term as a means of preserving a more pleasing and ambitious work-life identity. Similarly other (usually middle class) workers denied their identity as call centre workers, through projections of opaque titles and job descriptions:

‘It took me a long time to tell people – people would ask me ‘where d’you work?’ – and I would say ‘Transport Coordination Centre – I manage Taxi contracts’ – I don’t always say to them ‘I work in a contact centre’...I think people’s perception is...(pauses)...not always good on contact centres.’

Morag, manager, Gov-Tel (March 2008)

Even Morag – a manager in Gov-Tel – reflected a shame in describing her role as one within a call centre. Similarly, workers within Sales-Com often relayed opaque (yet

official) titles as ‘account managers’ and/or ‘lead agents’ where possible, which bore little indication of the setting in which their role took place¹². Often the same and other workers described at great length the various types of services they provided in a bid to convey an important and worthwhile occupation. In doing so, workers would either disguise the fact they worked within a call centre, or else re-cast the role as one worthwhile and interesting. These were all strategies of coping with the perceived reality of a low-status work identity.

Alternatively, several workers without future plans or notions of ‘ideal work’ faced less resolvable barriers in making sense of their identity through work. In reflecting a more passive understanding of their future, many spoke negatively of call centre employment as a ‘cycle’; ‘trough’; or ‘trap’ (interviews).

‘I never went to Uni. to do my degree because I thought I’d end up working in a call centre. It’s just one of those things... Everyone just settles for what they can do – you take what’s available... And I still don’t know what I want to do...I just kind of drift along at the minute, seeing what fits best...’

Lewis, forecaster, Gov-Tel (February 2008)

‘I’m trying to break the cycle completely, what I want to do is to go back into college, I have my ambitions – my ambition is to be a film maker. That requires a lot of time, a lot of money, a lot of dedication. So that’s something I’ll have to put on the backburner.’

Harry, Antrax Res agent, Sales-Com (April 2008)

Lewis held a degree in IT for which he saw little prospect of applying to a working role, whilst Harry felt that his ambitions of film making were wholly unrealistic without qualifications. Both held sombre interpretations of their working alternatives; and each accepted call centre work as the ‘least worst option’ in the context of the Glasgow labour market. Rather than focussing on future moves (realistic or otherwise), these workers often coped with their work identity through blunt appraisals of their role.

‘I say ‘I work in a call centre’. No ifs, no buts – it doesn’t matter what you’re doing, you’re working in a call centre. You’ve got your head plugged into a machine 7 hours a day – you work in a call centre.’

Harry, Antrax Res agent, Sales-Com (April 2008)

“I say ‘council call centre – its crap!’ – that’s what I say, pretty much word for word. (but) I don’t talk about work... Like I say, I only have very vague ideas what my friends do for a living, and it’s nice that way!”

Tim, agent, Gov-Tel (March 2008)

Notably, many of these workers felt stultified and deskilled working in a call centre, and they depicted this reality to anyone who asked about their working-life. While such depictions may appear passive and accepting of an unhappy call centre identity, they are not. These workers refused to alienate themselves further by depicting more optimistic appraisals of their role than that felt. Several workers (including a number of working class agents) refused to talk about work at home or with friends in the pub. Instead, agents like Tim labelled their job as ‘crap’ before emphasising their identity through alternative hobbies and pursuits (such as St. Mirren football club) in conversations outside the workplace. For male workers especially, this represented a further way to maintain a masculine identity despite performing feminised service work (see Simpson 2004). Notably, Steven’s manual friends jokingly labelled him a ‘poof’ for holding down an office role. However, he still maintained his own masculine identity through similar put downs and via misogynistic depictions of the women he now worked around. He also re-cast his job as one inherently easy and secure, in contrast to the physical work many of his friends held down. In this way he ‘got one over’ his friends by emphasising the logic he displayed through this choice of work.

In addition, several workers held a greater pride in other forms of labour – such as charity, community or part time ‘D.J.’ work – which they performed outside their call centre. In doing so those who found call centre work incongruent with ‘who they are’ found ways of maintaining and projecting more ‘genuine’/desirable identities. This strategy bears a strong resemblance to Holloway’s (2005) emphasis on creative doing and ‘non-subordination’. Rather than pitching an identity around inherently alienating paid employment, several workers refused to be classified this way. In doing so, these individuals maintained a ‘non-identity’ as ‘an undefined and unclassified ‘what’ with unpredictable futures’ (Holloway 2005: 144). Thus, contrary to the arguments of Richard Sennett (1998), many workers retained a dignity and understanding of their own identity as separate from that of their current employment.

8.4.3 'Pragmatists'

In contrast, other workers were more optimistic about call centre work and their futures within this 'industry'. Several – often those without university degrees - expressed more positive understandings of the skills taken on through call centres and the options this provided. This is not to say that most workers saw call centre work as a long term career, but rather that many saw greater potential to expand into other areas within or out-with their call centre. This, in turn, helped many to identify more positively with their working role.

'Here I have opportunities in every way; I have a variety of information to put on my CV... I'm not really thinking what I could do after this role, (but) I'm prepared for what happens next because I just like things to happen...If I've got an opportunity to go to Jamaica picking up coconuts I might do that! But at the moment, my fate is here for a few years!'

Ricardo, agent, Game-Tel (February 2008)

'I don't like structure too much (laughs)...I don't like to feel like I'm tied in. I like this job. (It's) like I always said, the morning I wake up and go 'I don't want to go into work' is the day I should leave. Get out. So at the moment I don't say that, and its enjoyable. But the morning I do, I'll be gone within a month. '

Mike, manager, Ire-Tel (December 2007)

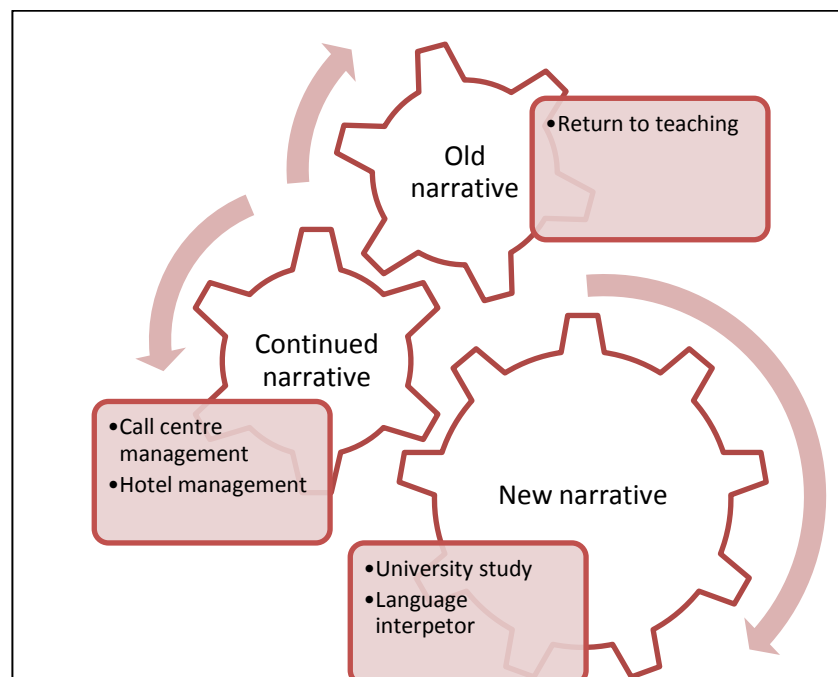
Such attitudes effectively contradict Sennett's negative depiction of the flexible era. Far from reaching out for stable and predictable career narratives, both Ricardo and Mike *embraced* call centre work as the latest instalment of an unpredictable work-life trajectory; for which call centres themselves played a facilitative role (Beck 2000). Both of these workers were happy to define themselves as call centre workers, but within the context of an unpredictable working narrative. Importantly both these and several other workers acknowledged skills taken on through the role. Ricardo now understood the intricacies of video conferencing equipment and wireless router systems; and he felt this could transfer into an IT role in the future. Meanwhile Mike – and several others who had received management/team leader training of some sort – felt better equipped for a career in management within or out-with the call centre industry. As a result, both workers believed

that call centre work had helped to facilitate different career options and potential work identities for the future.

Similarly several foreign workers projected a multiplicity of working options either through or out-with call centre work. Former Sales-Com agent Anya was a case in point (see Figure 8-2); as she identified several potential career paths with corresponding narratives based upon past, present and future working roles. Before call centre work Anya was an English teacher in her native Poland. Despite emigrating and supporting a new life in Glasgow through call centre work, she confidently remarked: ‘Come on, it’s not that I left everything and can’t go back!’ (interview with Anya, Sales-Com, May 2008). In this sense she found her old working narrative an ever-present option in the back of her mind. Similarly several other workers echoed the possibility of returning to a former working role (including accountancy and sports coaching roles). This thinking confirmed to many that call centre work was an *option* and not a ‘trap’.

Figure 8-2: Pragmatic work futures based upon alternative career-narratives

(based upon an interview with former Sales-Com agent Anya, May 2008)¹³



This finding also suggests that call centres in Glasgow may be facilitating new and unexpected work trajectories for migrant and spatially flexible workers in particular.

Workers who initially enter the Glasgow labour market from abroad (who often hold no clear idea on employment options) seem to adopt call centre work pragmatically, and as a platform from which to plot diverse work-life futures. In addition to the above viewpoint (that her 'old' work-life was still available), Anya also identified her current call centre role as a potential career path into customer service management. Anya believed that the CRM skills and the experience of managing other people could also translate into management roles outside the call centre industry itself. She also identified two *new* career paths whilst pondering her options within call centres. Having improved upon her English and German skills, the first path was to work as a language interpreter for the City Council. Alternatively, Anya was also toying with the idea of abandoning all of these options in favour of a return to university to study Public Relations and a future job within this field.

These findings both support and undermine the notion of career 'narratives' as a means of providing stable work-life identities. Notably, many workers acknowledged the need to foster and hold down professional careers. To this end Anya (and several other workers) interpreted call centre work as a (potentially) skilled and worthwhile career path. However workers also embraced (and even encouraged) *multiple* working options and future career paths which held no relation to one another. Many workers were at ease with incoherent working histories and futures. Anya presented her working life as a constellation of exciting options, incorporating both old and new skills and work experiences. She was visibly excited at the prospect of the different careers and *potential* work-life identities for which call centre work helped facilitate. The unpredictability was, if anything, a boon.

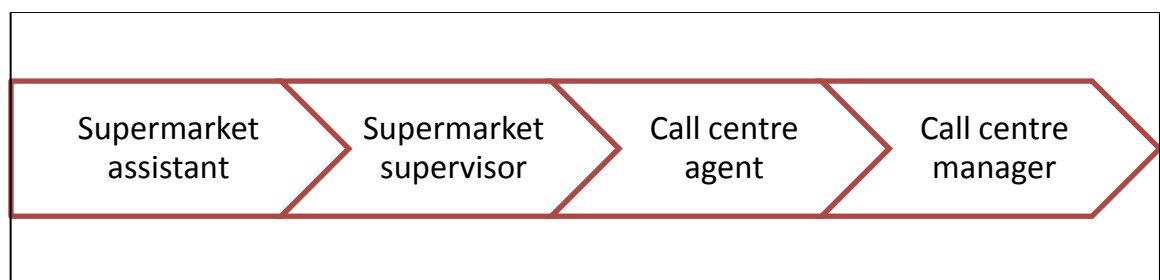
8.4.4 *Professional-Careerists*

'The historian Edward Thompson points out that in the nineteenth century even the least favoured workers, whether poorly employed, unemployed, or simply foraging from job to job, tried to define themselves as weavers, metal-workers, or farmers. Status in work comes from being more than just 'a pair of hands'; manual labourers as well as upper servants in Victorian households sought it in using the words 'career', 'profession', and 'craft' more indiscriminately than we might think admissible.'

(Sennett 1998: 119)

This final section considers the individuals who conveyed a pride and dignity through their status as call centre workers, and explores how they did so. Notably, many of the workers who held positive understandings of their role pointed to the logic and coherence of their work-life history *as a whole*. This was typically achieved by drawing upon the linkages between past and present forms of work to form a working ‘narrative’, as Sennett (1998) has suggested. These narratives at times incorporated the earliest worker roles and initial forays with the labour market.

Figure 8-3: Linear work trajectories which form coherent careers (based upon Gemma, manager, Sales-Com)



Gemma – my managerial contact at Gov-Tel - was a case in point. In explaining her success in climbing the call centre ranks, she pointed to her rise from a checkout worker/supervisor in Somerfield to manager in her previous and current call centre. Gemma felt that interacting with customers and managing staff in a supermarket had helped form a customer service ‘background’ implicit with the necessary skills she used today.

‘When I was at university I’d worked as a supervisor in Somerfield...I absolutely loved it... you know the whole retail industry is very big on customer service...You’re in Glasgow, there’s lots of opportunities in the call centre industry, (and) you know that you’ve got a customer service background from doing part time work. So you just kind of go in there and think ‘right, this is a start off the bottom way, and I can work my way up’... I was a customer service advisor for 6 months, I was a team leader for 6 months, and then I was a team manager for 2 years.’

Gemma, manager, Gov-Tel (March 2008)

Ostensibly this strategy of linking past and present service work and climbing the call centre ranks was available to all workers. However, it was arguably Gemma's *working* class upbringing which made a career in call centres an attractive option to her.

‘My step mum – fabulous though she was – brought me up to think that just because you went to university didn't mean you qualified for a good job when you came out. I didn't think I had earned anything particularly great because I'd been at University, for me it was more about the experience of studying...and broadening my knowledge at that level, rather than coming out with something on paper that meant I could jump past everyone else...’

Gemma, manager, Gov-Tel (March 2008)

Unlike many middle class workers (arguably Victoria or Penelope discussed earlier), Gemma saw little or no need to follow a career path based upon her University learning¹⁴. This had helped her to interpret call centre/service work as a valid and acceptable career option. To this end Gemma relayed the importance of call centres to the modern economy, as the contemporary medium for delivering most services. Rather than distancing herself through projections of more desired work, Gemma presented herself as a customer service and management *professional* within an important contemporary industry.

Gemma was not alone in forging such professional identities through working narratives, however specific identities tended to vary between workers and centres. Several workers projected *craft specific* service identities based upon their own work histories and call centre experiences. For example, Billy (Sales-Com) primarily saw himself as a *sales agent* who had nurtured specific selling skills and techniques through a prior door-to-door role. In his own understanding, he had added to these initial skills by learning both ‘cold’ and ‘warm’¹⁵ sales techniques over the phone in Sales-Com. As opposed to understanding his role as that of a ‘call centre agent’, Billy projected himself as a ‘seller’ who worked ‘in sales’. Elsewhere Game-Tel agent Emre demonstrated how call centre work had played its part in his own rise as an Electronic Engineer. Emre had arrived at Sales-Com after graduating with a degree in this field, coupled with a stint at IBM's call centre in Greenock. Not long after my last visit to Game-Tel, Emre left the centre to enrol in an

Electronics MSc. In a facebook correspondence, Emre informed me he was now working as a Hardware Design Engineer for a major electronics firm, to which he added:

‘I think having Game-Tel on my CV helped me to find this job along with my other (study) experiences...it still counted as a professional job in some way...I improved my technical troubleshooting and resolution skills at Game-Tel and this is always needed in an Engineering field.’

Facebook correspondence (November 2009)

As such, Emre’s history of call centre work – in combination with his studies - played an important role in forging a professional career identity as an Electronics Engineer. In an interesting twist, Emre had earlier confessed to holding part time roles in a myriad of unrelated fields including stints as a fish distributor and as a steward. However, he categorised these roles as ‘survival’ jobs accrued merely to finance his studies. Mentally Emre (and several other workers) sieved out the relevant and related forms of work to construct career worthy narratives apt for a professional careerist identity.

To summarise, workers within all three settings found call centre work more or less acceptable as a work identity. Once again this outcome was tied to categories of class, and depended upon upbringings, past experiences and future ambitions. Nevertheless the majority of workers found ways of ‘making sense’ of their working history and future options. This tended to be easier for workers who interpreted skill and usefulness from their call centre role. These individuals could embrace their centre as a potential career path or long term option, often within the mindset of a professional identity. However it is worth stating that *no* worker conveyed a total control of their working histories or futures. Those who had experienced promotion often spoke of the ‘lucky’ nature of their success, and of their fortune in being at the right place and time to benefit from any opening. Acknowledging such instability did not mean that workers relinquished control of their working lives *tout court*. To this end, individuals within each heuristic category demonstrated a subtle agency in embracing unpredictable and instable realities. Importantly, the conceptual cobbling together of loosely related work histories represented but one strategy for establishing an identity and coherence to one’s working life. Other workers focused upon private forms of ‘doing’ more congruent with their personality than labouring in a call centre role.

8.5 Conclusion

To conclude, this chapter has explored the distinct rationales and motivations workers held for adopting call centre work. These motivations often tied back to the social division of labour, and the perceptions different segments of the workforce held towards this work. Notably, the majority of workers have been shown to interpret call centre employment as relatively *easy*, and conducive to a stress free work-life balance. Call centre work was also chosen by most segments of the local labour pool as the ‘least worst’ option in terms of pay, in contrast to other forms of accessible work available locally.

A key point of significance is the new geographies of employment that appear to be emerging through call centre work. Notably, many commentators have questioned the value of call centres in providing meaningful employment to (in particular) working class segments of old industrial locales (Belt 2002; Helms and Cumbers 2006). The chapter has argued that certain working class males not only applied themselves successfully to call centre work in Glasgow; but also that working class and masculine behaviours were successfully imported into the call centres themselves. Perhaps ironically, it was middle class segments of the labour market that often struggled to impart identities upon the centre and to accept these roles as long term and worthwhile. Thus, rather than churning the ‘new urban poor’ through the labour market, it was often middle class and educated workers from more affluent parts of Glasgow that struggled to adapt to these roles (Helms and Cumbers 2006). These findings, coupled with the novel ways in which migrant workers appear to benefit from call centre employment, suggest that new divisions of labour are being created through this form of work.

Notes

¹ At the time of the interview, William was currently on secondment within a management position.

² The same agents often conveyed a stigma towards call centre work; variously describing their role as grossly simplified and ‘dead end’ (interviews).

³ I interviewed Carol towards the end of her five year plan to open a café in Portugal with her husband. In particular she cited Ire-Tel’s flexibility as an effective means of planning and financing this venture.

⁴ Alternatively those without degrees or those who held non-technical qualifications often saw Game-Tel as a laid back platform for biding time and planning alternative career paths further down the line (in much the same way as workers discussed earlier; interview with agency consultant).

⁵ Furthermore a number of foreign workers possessed a limited grasp of English, and so a role involving their native language was preferable.

⁶ This analogy to Maradona and Zidane (both former World Cup winners) was clearly seen as apt, in that both players are widely renowned as inherently flawed/deviant geniuses on (and at times off) the football field.

⁷ Whether this represents a form of agency is something of a moot point. On the one hand female agents who flirted with customers ostensibly created fresh identities at odds with the more masculine discourse running through the centre. However, at the same time, in flirting over the phone agents also played up to misogynistic typecasts and assumptions held on women. Similarly, certain male agents attributed sales through this practice as a result of 'natural' and unfair advantages innate to women.

⁸ This trend was partly justified by Henrick, who felt that female flirting tactics held no place on the higher-end campaigns, in contrast to the 'connections' (e.g. football talk) and commonalities male agents had with high-level businessmen on the Antrax Core and PrintEx accounts.

⁹ Partick Thistle football club are based in Maryhill (see Map 4-1), a largely working class area of Glasgow. However, it is not uncommon for residents of the (nearby and relatively affluent) West End and Partick areas to lend support to Partick Thistle. This is particularly the case for those not associated with an Old Firm team.

¹⁰ Notably this practice drew parallels to the institutions and informal gatherings utilised by Protestant workers, which acted to marginalise Catholic counterparts during the latter half of the 19th century (and present throughout much of the 20th century up to the mid-1970s; Melling 1982).

¹¹ To which Sennett (1998) cites McDonaldised service roles as a prime example.

¹² To this end, I have suspicions that Management in Sales-Com designed these titles specifically to induce a greater pride and work-identity within its workforce.

¹³ It is worth explaining that I interviewed Anya after Sales-Com had released her. At the time of the interview Anya was working for Glasgow's Hilton call centre. It is for this reason that she believed her CRM and booking skills honed over the phone could translate into a Reservation Management position within the hotel industry. As such, this planned move represented a potential extension of her current call centre career/narrative.

¹⁴ Incidentally Gemma held a 2:1 in English from the University of Glasgow.

¹⁵ 'Cold sales' are sales made to customers who are unfamiliar with the seller (and often the product) whilst 'warm' sales imply a prior relationship between the customer and the seller/firm.

CHAPTER 9

CONCLUSION

9.1 Introduction

This final chapter is used to synthesise the main findings from the preceding empirical chapters, in order to meet the aims and to answer the research questions outlined in Chapter 1. To reiterate the thesis was driven by three broad aims, which were each intended to benefit the sub discipline of labour geography. Firstly, the research aimed to develop a nuanced and discriminating grasp of worker agency (Castree 2007), which expands upon simplistic notions of ‘resistance’ presently in vogue in labour geography. Rather than focussing on collective acts of worker resistance against capital, the research intended to demonstrate how workers use their agency in coping and *consenting* to the rules of capital within day-to-day work. Secondly, the thesis aimed to uncover how individuals structure a broader life through routine service work, available locally in the Glasgow labour market. Call centres have been chosen as the site for exploring each of these aims. The third aim of the research was to theoretically inform the labour geography project, with particular reference to Andrew Jonas’ top-down concept of a local labour control regime (Jonas 1996).

The chapter is divided into three parts. The opening section provides a summary and synthesis of the main empirical findings, and discusses the findings of the main empirical discussion chapters (5,6,7 and 8) in relation to the research questions outlined in Chapter 1. In answering these questions, the section effectively ‘sketches out’ the bigger picture of the research as a whole. The subsequent section then builds on these empirical findings, by critically reflecting on the *theoretical contribution* the research has made, and in effect states the main contribution of the thesis as a piece of research. This discussion links back to several of the theories and ideas introduced in Chapter 2, and in particular debates surrounding labour geography and the related concepts of agency and control. Perhaps most notably the section explores whether findings from this research can feed in, and be used to inform, the theoretical concept of a ‘local labour control regime’ (Jonas 1996). The final section then explores some future directions for labour geography, based on the findings of this thesis.

9.2 Summary and synthesis of main findings

To help achieve the broader research aims, three lines of enquiry were outlined in Chapter 1 in the form research questions. Essentially these questions act as a heuristic device for achieving the broader overall aim of the research. The following section is structured to respond to each of these questions in turn, bearing in mind that ‘answers’, for the most part, are interspersed *throughout* the main empirical research chapters.

R. Q. 1. What motives and rationales underpin worker engagements with call centre employment, and how do these vary from person to person? To what extent do motives and rationales reflect existing labour market realities and/or constraints?

With regards to worker motives and rationales, it is undoubtedly the case that the options available through the local labour market structure impact motives and rationales for choosing forms of work (Hanson and Pratt 1995). To this end Chapter 4 provided a historical context of past-up-to-present labour market conditions, by detailing Glasgow’s shift from a productionist old industrial city, to a city now based on service employment (whereby service work constituted 89% of jobs in 2006). Deindustrialisation has contributed to a widening polarisation of Glasgow’s labour market, chiefly between those able to secure professional and skilled lines of work, and those who are forced to adopt low-barrier, (and often) low paying forms of work (Cumbers et al. 2009). Within this context, the majority of interviewees understood call centre employment as one of the *better* low-barrier forms of service work available. Beyond this general understanding, individuals held specific motives and rationales for adopting a role on the phones. These rationales often corresponded with positionalities held outside the world of work (including factors such as worker age, class, gender and so forth), in addition to temporal factors such as life stage and previous work history. Relatedly, call centre work was chosen as a means of achieving a particular work-life balance for most interviewees.

With this in mind, Chapter 8 categorised worker rationales into three broad categories: namely ‘mercenaries’ in search of short term rewards; ‘architects’ intent on forging a career; and ‘seekers’ looking for new experiences and friendships through work. Younger workers in particular were shown to hold ‘mercenary’ attitudes to work, often adopting call centre work as a form of ‘easy money’ and as part of a broad ‘work-to-live’ philosophy (i.e. ‘living for the weekend’). Many of these individuals held loose commitments to the

role, and often ‘hopped’ from one centre to another in response to different factors (typical explanations including boredom, or in response to disciplinary procedures). Rather than identifying the best paying organisations, as management suggested, it appeared common for ‘hoppers’ to seek out less stressful and more personally pleasing roles in rival centres: often on the recommendation of friends and family members. Older workers, on the other hand (including those with blue collar backgrounds), were shown to view call centre work as a stress free - and potentially rewarding - route back into Glasgow’s service based labour market. There also existed a clear contrast in motivation between locally embedded workers – who held long attachments to places in and around Glasgow - and migrants who were relatively new to the Glasgow area. Mothers in particular held clear distinctions between work and home; and primarily worked in order to foster a family home (often outside the city). This rationale differed greatly from most migrant workers I spoke to in Sales-Com, who chose the role not only as a source of income, but (in line with a ‘seeker’ rationale) as a means for meeting new friends and establishing initial roots in the city.

Crucially, management in each centre were aware of many of these rationales, and their links to specific groups of worker. This in turn helped to explain patterns of employment. After accepting that ‘ideal’ categories of staff were few and far between (i.e. workers who were both passionate and committed to a life on the phones), management subsequently drew upon the social division of labour in different ways. As demonstrated in Chapter 6, Sales-Com identified ‘green labour’ in the form of school leavers with little or no call centre experience (who were deemed less likely to ‘hop’), whilst Gov-Tel relied upon older, and, in particular, local workers who offered commitment to the role and local knowledge on the phones. In turn, it is worth reiterating that many workers thought practically about the sorts of call centre they wanted to work in. In particular skilled migrant workers in Game-Tel often saw this centre as a means of forging an IT based career, while workers in Gov-Tel outlined the stability and the internal labour market of a council employer as a major draw to the centre.

R. Q. 2. Inside the workplace, how is agency performed, and how do different forms of managerial control alter the ways in which agency is exercised? Relatedly, what does this tell us about the performance of labour agency more broadly?

Having established the motivations behind call centre employment, this second enquiry shifted the analytical focus to labour agency inside the workplace itself. This discussion began initially in Chapter 2 through a review of labour geography, and its focus on collective forms of labour resistance against capital. Contrary to outright resistance, *inside* the workplace workers have been shown to perform a broad repertoire of subtle and often passive strategies for surviving and improving the work experience (in line with the labour process theory (LPT) tradition). To this end the work of James C. Scott (1985) and Cindi Katz (2004) helped in articulating three distinct forms of coping: namely strategies of *resilience* and *reworking*, in addition to resistance (as first outlined in Chapter 2, and applied in Chapter 7 in particular). Resilience is here understood as those small practices that workers used for ‘getting by’ and recuperating within the existing social relations of the workplace, while ‘reworking’ involved a more proactive recalibration of power relations: with a view to improving conditions and ‘redressing the inequalities’ of the work experience. Less frequently, these related forms of coping were, at times, accompanied by direct forms of *resistance* which sought to confront the conditions of oppression head-on. The boundaries between these terms were frequently blurred in practice.

In applying the ‘3 R’ lens to the empirical material, it was evident in Chapter 7 that particular coping strategies were applied to specific aspects of the job design and work experience. Forms of coping were invariably structured by management’s control of the labour process; which typically relied upon normative methods of seduction (designed to garner staff consent), in addition to more coercive forms of technical control (e.g. the use of a dialler to route calls). For example, the pressure to perform patiently and politely on the phone induced several resilience based responses for meeting out this task. These ranged from swearing ‘back stage’ (i.e. off the call), to seizing opportune moments to lecture customers within the call itself (thus accruing ‘own back’). These indiscretions, however minor, helped workers to self-recuperate and let off steam on a day-to-day basis (despite management’s attempt to govern and control these interactions through surveillance technology). Building on these methods, workers coped with alienation in the role through both resilience and reworking, specifically geared towards role improvement. Methods ranged from counting down the clock (e.g. through daydreaming or informal chatting) to more pro-active instances of role adjustment to allow for greater challenge and fulfilment (such as when agents in Gov-Tel telephoned service depots to aid with customer

enquiries). Ultimately the research has shown that workers rarely challenged management in a direct or overt sense, although these practices did take place. Many agents in Sales-Com undermined normative efforts to control staff (outlined in Chapter 6) through a hidden transcript of opposition (Scott 1990); whilst in Gov-Tel staff openly vented their frustrations with the role (whether that be frustrations at the repetition in the role, or a lack of progression).

Broadly speaking these findings confirm the point outlined in Chapter 2, that ‘resistance’ is often inappropriate as a term for explaining labour agency inside the workplace. The term ‘agency’ reflects labour’s desire and ability to act and create for itself on some level: it is not always synonymous with fighting capital. With this in mind *most* forms of worker agency do little to subvert existing power relations, and in many instances labour agency may *benefit* management by improving rates of production or the quality of the service ‘product’ (for example, when workers are driven to secure commendations on the phone). Following on from this, it is important to state that much of what passes for worker agency is relatively passive, mundane, and ‘everyday’ in nature. Indeed, the fact that coping strategies are this way goes some way to explaining their effectiveness. Management struggled to discipline staff for bending rules in subtle and slight ways, and subsequently turned a blind eye in many instances.

R. Q. 3. What is the relationship between call centre employment and worker lives on the whole? To what extent are notions of ‘pathways’ and ‘narratives’ useful, as a means for understanding the ways in which people use and understand their life through call centre work?

The relationship between call centre work, and the broader lives that workers lead was explored most explicitly in Chapter 8. As well as tackling the motives behind call centre employment, this chapter focussed on the different subject positions of workers, and demonstrated how various background geographies and subjectivities were carried over and came to ‘matter’ in the workplace. Most notably, male workers successfully applied a range of practices which helped to recreate a stereotypically feminine form of work (not least within the minds of many workers) into one more masculine. These practices, and the forms of masculinity in question, varied both across and within Sales-Com and Gov-

Tel. Moreover, organisations themselves at times demonstrated an indirect gender bias, which in turn structured the opportunities for advancement in different ways. Thus, Sales-Com favoured individualist careerist traits commonly found within young males, whilst Gov-Tel favoured a ‘street smarts’ approach to work typically embodied by individuals from working class upbringings and areas of the city. In this sense worker lives ‘on the whole’ – and in particular class and gender backgrounds – were clearly important (at least in the minds of workers) in determining workplace progression.

The empirical discussion concluded with a discussion on work identity, which applied Sennett’s (1998) concept of a work-life ‘narrative’. Essentially, Sennett argues that short term and instable forms of work (typical of the ‘flexible’ era; Allen and Henry 1997) provide little basis for identity and character formation, and that longer term and stable forms of employment provide a ‘narrative’ which is vital for character formation. Pathways into call centre work – in the form of worker backgrounds and previous work experience: i.e. where workers *came* from – proved influential in determining a work identity through call centre employment. In agreement with Sennett, many individuals clearly lacked the stability of a working ‘narrative’; as evident by those workers who felt ‘trapped’ in a role on the phones. In response many (often educated and middle class) workers dismissed their role as dead end or ‘crap’, whilst struggling to identify a viable alternative. However, a larger group of workers found ways of accepting their identity as call centre employees. Those from a working class background tended to accept call centre work pragmatically as a possible career narrative, whilst several foreign workers (who held language skills) remained open to the possibility of multiple career pathways. To this end, several workers were optimistic about their future working options, which included the possibility of reverting back to a former occupation held prior to a role on the phones. There also existed a number of interviewees who held strong careerist identities with either a specific industry skill (such as ‘sales’ or ‘customer service’), as well as those who identified a narrative in their working history based on related forms of past service employment. In sum, call centre work acted as a platform from which to base a highly malleable work identity and outlook, which often pivoted and combined with past experiences and backgrounds.

9.3 Theoretical contributions and reflections

Stepping back from these specific empirical findings, the research has also made several broader theoretical points for the (rapidly expanding) labour geography ‘project’ (see Lier 2007; Castree et al. 2004; Castree 2007; Coe and Jordhus-Lier 2010). To reiterate, labour geography is a sub-discipline of economic geography that explores the multiple geographies of employment from a *worker* perspective (Coe and Jordhus-Lier 2010). The project initially ‘took off’ in the early 1990s, with several studies arguing the case for labour’s own ability to secure a spatial fix over capital. More recently labour geography has broadened out to explore new sectors and modes of organisation – including a much needed focus on community politics and the interlinking spheres of work and home (Wills 2009). Despite this expansion, the bulk of labour geography has continued to focus on collective, successful, and often dramatic forms of space changing labour resistance against capital (Lier 2007; Moody 1997).

The clearest theoretical contribution of the research has been to delimit and ‘unpack’ a more nuanced understanding of worker agency – as it is embedded within different structural contexts - from which labour geography may benefit (Castree 2007: 858). A different appreciation of labour agency was made possible from the offset via a research design that focussed on a routine form of work, and the routine struggles involved in getting by within this. To this end, the combination of interviews with ‘bottom of the rung’ workers together with observations of the labour process ‘in action’ facilitated a deep insight into the day-to-day behaviour of workers: and their actions as well as thoughts (see Dunn 2007). This comes in contrast to traditional approaches in labour geography, which have tended to rely on interviews with organising bodies such as unions. Such a position has helped to facilitate two principal insights into worker agency.

Firstly, the findings shed light on the question of ‘purpose’, and whether practices of getting by *necessarily* involve strategy or intent on labour’s behalf (Coe and Jordhus-Lier 2010; Castree 2007). In their recent paper Coe and Jordhus-Lier (2010: 4) describe agency as ‘intentional, purposive and meaningful’ action directed against structures. However, many of the practices that workers use inside their day-to-day role are implicit (essentially knee-jerk) reactions that come as ‘second nature’ whilst performing the role. To this end it is unlikely that workers would view all performative acts - such as impersonating callers -

as a deliberate means of coping or resisting in the role. Many of these behaviours are habitual – and arguably subconscious – responses that require little thought or prior planning. And yet practices such as these are emblematic of the manner in which workers self-cope within their role, *irrespective* of intention. I would thus argue that purpose and intent are not pre-requisite features of labour agency: like so many forms of creativity, labour agency frequently exists with little blueprint or intended outcome in mind.

Secondly, this reinterpretation of everyday practice is a useful means of ‘un-romanticising’ labour resistance (Cresswell 1996; Abu-Lughod 1990), and opens up new possibilities for research into other routine/everyday work environments (where different forms of coping are likely to prevail). With this in mind, the research has demonstrated that labour agency is not synonymous with virtue or good intention – or, to use Cresswell’s (1996: 260) expression, with everyday acts of ‘heroism’. In many (perhaps most) instances, the workers of this study acted in such a way as to safeguard their own interests through subtle and routinised practices. As well as ‘positive’ acts of getting by, workers also demonstrated less venerable traits such as pettiness, vanity, and greed on occasion (as demonstrated by certain workers that mis-sold products in Sales-Com). These pejorative values are every bit as ‘human’ as those which are traditionally celebrated within and out-with labour geography: and are equally geared towards autonomous self-survival on a day-to-day basis.

In addition to these general points on agency, the worker-centred approach of this research has significant import for the top-down (and overtly structural) concept of a local labour control regime (local LCR). To reiterate, the LCR concept is helpful for understanding labour’s relationship with capital as it plays out in particular places (i.e. local labour markets). Despite capital’s mobility, the concept recognises that firms necessarily develop ties with local places, and the workers within these, in order to realise production (i.e. a spatial fix; see Harvey 1999). Capital requires an influence over the conditions under which labour power is reproduced and is integrated into the labour process (Jonas 1996: 325). As shown in Chapter 4, this influence is typically achieved through a range of social and political institutions – levied by both capital and the state – which are designed to foster ‘reciprocities’ between the (related) spheres of production, consumption, and reproduction (Jonas 1996: 323). Within Glasgow, Helms and Cumbers (2006) have cited

call centre work as a key component of the city's present local LCR - which uses labour market intermediaries to help shift the unemployed off benefits and into contemporary forms of (typically low paying) service work. The thesis has several points to make with regards to the LCR concept.

Firstly, it is worth attesting the role that call centres play in Glasgow's labour control regime. In agreement with Helms and Cumbers (*ibid*), call centres undoubtedly play a strategic role in the Glasgow locale: primarily as a means of tackling unemployment. In a bid to secure this form of work, the state has placed considerable effort in both attracting operations (often through regional selective assistance grants), as well as providing a range of aftercare support functions from which call centre management may benefit (e.g. team leader training programmes). These initiatives are clearly designed to encourage and embed call centres in the Glasgow area. As Helms and Cumbers point out, labour market intermediaries (such as JobCentre Plus) now play a key role in altering the attitudes and aspirations of the Glasgow poor towards call centre and other forms of service work. The success of this transition is testified by the high numbers presently employed; as close to one in ten of Glasgow's workforce (i.e. those employed) are now connected to a form of work that bears little or no relation to the city's old industrial heritage and labour market culture (Taylor and Anderson 2008). Whilst few workers regard call centre employment as 'ideal', the majority of interviewees (from a range of social backgrounds) found ways of justifying and accepting this form of work as the modern 'norm' for Glasgow.

Secondly, there remains a major limitation with the LCR concept which the thesis seeks to address through this Glasgow case study. Although useful in outlining the structural constraints that workers face (i.e. when negotiating the local labour market), LCR theory presently underplays the ability of workers to think, act, and to *respond* to existing conditions. This has created an unrealistic picture in which the efforts and intentions to regulate workers in a given place are seemingly reduced to successful outcomes. In their own appraisal, Helms and Cumbers (2006) present call centre turnover as clear evidence of labour 'resistance' from inside the Glasgow LCR. Whilst agreeing with this point, the main contribution of the research is to uncover a multitude of passive and informal ways that workers cope and *consent* with call centre work on a day-to-day basis. This form of agency is not obvious, and does little to intimate the 'breakdown' of a given control

regime. However, it is not submission *tout court*. Rather than resisting capital, individuals that consent to low wage work find ways of surviving and improving the experience of this from the ‘inside-out’. Whilst this does little to alter the control regime, an appreciation of this form of coping is vital for understanding how labour markets and labour market control regimes actually function in practice. Through a host of subtle practices – which bubble below the surface of the LCR – workers are capable of hewing satisfaction from mundane and coercive forms of work.

Building on this point, it is important to remain realistic about what this sort of agency ‘means’ for labour market control. Based on an appreciation for ‘passive’ coping, it is fair to say that worker action is circumscribed to a large extent by the structures of the workplace and the broader LCR. Strategies for getting by often equate to an experiential consciousness and lived experience of low-status work (Thompson 1963), which does little or nothing to alter the material realities of living and working (for example) in the Glasgow labour market. Put simply, individuals in search of work are forced to take their pick from the sorts of jobs that are available. This may seem a pessimistic outcome, but realistic research findings are of more use than one’s which provide false hope or optimism.

Despite this cautionary point, the story of this thesis is not simply one of structure ‘winning’ over agency. While the above practices appear somewhat ineffectual in comparison to the space shaping collective strategies traditional to labour geography (e.g. Herod 2001a; Holmes 2004), the day-to-day behaviour of call centre staff has undoubtedly disrupted capital’s ‘ideal’ vision for the Glasgow locale. As demonstrated in Chapter 5, call centre employment relations have undergone significant adjustments in the last decade or so, including an increase in the proportion of workers on full-time contracts, and a sharp fall in the percentage of temporary staff (falling from 27.4% in 1997 to 6.7% in 2008). Chapters 5 and 6 have also demonstrated that different call centres are forced to draw and rely upon unintended segments of the local population. In turn, management continue to alter the internal dynamics and control strategies in direct response to the perceived social traits and characteristics of these prevalent worker groups. This reflects a need for local adaption and incorporation on the part of call centre capital, which labour is essentially shaping. As Jonas (1996: 331) notes:

‘Whereas adaption refers to the tailoring of labour control practices to fit the dominant social relations and power structures of the locality, incorporation involves the creation of new mechanisms of integrating local workers and their attendant ‘baggage’ of consumption habits, work attitudes, local traditions and cultural norms into the workplace. Without an ability to incorporate and adapt to local labour market conditions, capital faces limits to its ability to restructure through space.’

In this sense, workers can be seen to influence Glasgow’s economic landscape from the bottom-up, in a typically passive and covert fashion. Rather than providing a ‘generic’ form of employment for ‘any’ worker to perform (i.e. in line with the intentions of Scottish Enterprise), organisations have internally adapted in response to particular segments of the local population.

9.4 Directions for future research

Following on from the above points, this final section is used to inform future directions for research in labour geography. There are three main points that occur. Firstly, the thesis has highlighted the need for labour geography to focus on the ‘everyday’, subtle, and often unintentional ways in which people cope and improve their day-to-day working lives. Everyday resilience and reworking of the sort discussed represents *the* most typical form of coping with the geographies of capitalism, and future works in labour geography should be alive to such micro-forms of getting by. In stating this, I do not mean that labour geography should *abandon* its traditional lens onto collective (often union-based) forms of agency. These practices are of course important, not least in providing hope that labour is capable of wrestling for better structural ‘deals’ than capital would otherwise allow. To this end it is clear that different structures enable and constrain different possibilities for action. Studies that explore (for example) union resistance against capital restructuring can be juxtaposed (or even combined) with approaches that focus upon day-to-day survival within and through the workplace.

The second point relates to transferability, and what these findings say about the bigger picture of call centre work in post-industrial Britain. As opposed to making general statements on the conditions of call centre work per se., intensive qualitative methods were used to access a *depth* of emotion and experience (mainly) within three Glasgow call

centres. While there are likely to be parallels between the coping strategies outlined in this research and other call centres throughout the UK, a future research design could focus on contrasting types of labour market: the initial intention of this research. This could include, for example, experiences of workers within city labour markets in contrast to those based in towns reliant on one or two centres for employment (similarly, see Paulet 2008; Kolinko 2002). Such an approach could help to identify the impact that labour market contingencies make in receiving this 'universal' form of employment.

The final point regarding future research again relates to labour control regime theory. This thesis has focussed upon the agency of call centre workers, and has used ethnographic methods to uncover a host of coping practices that would otherwise remain 'hidden'. This discovery of agency at the micro-level of the workplace opens up the possibility for further research into worker agency across a *range* of alternative economic sectors and organisations. To this end, labour control regimes in other cities – whether partial or otherwise - are likely to rely upon particular factions of capital to a greater or lesser extent. In turn, different economic sectors are likely to involve distinct forms of managerial control and work organisation, which enable and constrain different forms of worker coping. By expanding the empirical focus to incorporate new industrial settings, a fuller picture is allowed into how workers cope and construe desirable lives within a range of spatial settings and economic sectors.

Appendix A

Sample semi-structured interview format

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION (basic information).

What's your name?
How old are you? (date of birth):
Where are you from?
What did you do before this role?

INTERPRETATION OF THE ROLE

How long have you worked in this role?....
Could you sum up briefly what it is you do?
What was the training like for it...did it take a long time to master?....
How do you feel about the technology used?
What about monitoring and control, how do you feel about this?
- Is this a common feeling?
How do you feel about speaking to customers over the phone?
Are there other roles you perform?
Can you express yourself in your role – both on the phone or off it?

ADAPTING AND INTERACTION

How do you get to work?
What hours do you work? Set shifts?...
- Is this flexible?
- Ever a problem getting in?
- What do you do outside of work?
Friendships inside work?
What are the biggest issues for you in your role?
What would you change?
What do you do on your breaks etc – spare time at work?
What about your colleagues – in general do you get on with the people you work with?
Do you hang out with staff outside of work?
How would you summarise the atmosphere?

LONG TERM PLANS AND LIFE OUTSIDE

How long do you see yourself staying in the role?
Do you see working here as a long term plan?
What's important in making this decision?

Appendix B

Sample call centre agent interviewee request form



Thomas M. Hastings
School of Geosciences
Room 119, St. Mary's
University of Aberdeen
Elphinstone Road
Aberdeen
AB24 3UF

Email: t.hastings@abdn.ac.uk

Dear Sales-Com employee,

I am a Geography student at the University of Aberdeen, conducting a research project on labour geography. My particular interest is the lives of call centre employees, and I am hoping to use the Sales-Com call centre as a case study. The research is hoping to show how different individuals experience call centre work in Glasgow, and whether this varies from place to place.

What I am looking for is around 10 members of staff who are willing to give me an hour or so of their time outside of work over the next couple of months. The hour will be spent conducting a loose **interview**, used to discuss how you feel about your role and what the job means to you. This interview is 100% **confidential**, and the project is a totally independent piece of research, one separate from the company you work for. The findings from this research will be presented in a PhD thesis scheduled for completion in 2009 - and any quotes used will be anonymised in this publication. Interviews shall take place at a time and location of your own convenience outside of work (such as a coffee house, bar, anywhere really). Members who are willing to lend their time in this way shall be rewarded with a gift voucher to the value of £10.

I hope to visit your centre on a handful of occasions over the coming months, in a bid to understand what the work inside involves. Should you be willing to take part in my project, I look forward to speaking with you, and please feel free to contact me should you wish to discuss any aspect of the research in greater detail.

I look forward to hearing from you,

Tom Hastings, University of Aberdeen.

Appendix C

Interviewee list: location, date, duration

Table C 1
Call centre intermediary contacts list

	Organisation	Interviewee	Location	Date	Duration (hrs, mins)
1	STUC	STUC Assistant Secretary	Boardroom	16/08/2007	01:10
2	Unison	Scottish Organiser	Boardroom	24/08/2007	01:25
3	JobCentre Plus	Employer Engagement Team Manager	Boardroom	20/09/2007	00:38
4	Contact Centre Association	Executive Research Director	Telephone Interview	20/09/2007	00:40
5	BECTU	Scottish Officer	Boardroom	21/09/2007	01:27
6	Scottish Enterprise	Account Manager for Business Growth	Boardroom	22/09/2007	00:57
7	CWU	Head of Regulatory Affairs	Hotel, Dublin	24/09/2007	00:53
8	Ire-Tel	Head of Telephone Sales and Services (TSS)	Manager office	25/09/2007	00:38
					Total: 07:48

Table C 2
Initial call centre meetings list

	Organisation	Interviewee	Location	Date	Duration (hrs, mins)
1	Loan-Tel	Fiona – manager; Julie - manager	Manager's office	30/10/2007	00:45
2	Gov-Tel	Grace – manager; Gemma – manager; Lucy - manager	Manager's office	31/10/2007	00:44
3	Game-Tel	Margaret - manager	Manager's office	31/10/2007	00:30
4	Game-Tel	Ulrika - client manager	Manager's office	31/10/2007	00:07
5	Game-Tel	Kate - manager	Manager's office	31/10/2007	00:41
6	Insure-Tel	Caroline - manager	Manager's office	31/10/2007	01:00
7	Travel-Com	Kerry - manager	Manager's office	01/11/2007	01:17
8	Eye-Com	Siobhan - manager	Manager's office	01/11/2007	00:49
9	Sales-Com	Sheila – manager; Frank - consultant	Manager's office	07/11/2007	00:55
					Total: 06:48

Table C 3
Ire-Tel (pilot) interviewee list

	Organisation	Interviewee	Location	Date	Duration (hrs, mins)
1	Ire-Tel	Abbey - team leader	Ire-Tel board room	05/12/2007	01:14
2	Ire-Tel	Samantha - recruitment	Ire-Tel board room	05/12/2007	00:42
3	Ire-Tel	Terry - business leader	Ire-Tel board room	05/12/2007	00:50
4	Ire-Tel	Rebecca - team leader	Ire-Tel board room	05/12/2007	01:30
5	Ire-Tel	Gill - agent	Ire-Tel board room	05/12/2007	00:33
6	Ire-Tel	Chloe - agent	Ire-Tel board room	05/12/2007	00:38
7	Ire-Tel	Mike - manager	Ire-Tel board room	14/12/2007	00:51
8	Ire-Tel	Michael - business leader	Ire-Tel canteen	14/12/2007	00:46
9	Ire-Tel	Kia- agent	Ire-Tel board room	14/12/2007	00:40
10	Ire-Tel	John - agent	Ire-Tel board room	14/12/2007	00:35
11	Ire-Tel	Laura - agent	Ire-Tel board room	14/12/2007	00:40
12	Ire-Tel	Ruth - agent	Ire-Tel board room	14/12/2007	00:31
					Total: 09:30

Table C 4
Gov-Tel interviewee list

	Organisation	Interviewee	Location	Date	Duration (hrs, mins)
1	Gov-Tel	Rory - agent	Gov-Tel boardroom	13/02/2008	01:21
2	Gov-Tel	Jill - agent	Gov-Tel boardroom	22/02/2008	01:13
3	Gov-Tel	Lewis - Forecaster	Gov-Tel boardroom	22/02/2008	01:25
4	Gov-Tel	Mary - trainer	Gov-Tel boardroom	27/02/2008	01:50
5	Gov-Tel	Steven - agent	Gov-Tel boardroom	27/02/2008	01:10
6	Gov-Tel	William - team leader/trainer	Gov-Tel boardroom	05/03/2008	01:17
7	Gov-Tel	Tim - agent/trainer	Gov-Tel boardroom	05/03/2008	01:15
8	Gov-Tel	Morag - manager	Gov-Tel boardroom	05/03/2008	01:07
9	Gov-Tel	Jim - trainer	Gov-Tel boardroom	05/03/2008	00:45
10	Gov-Tel	Gemma – service development manager	Gov-Tel boardroom	28/03/2008	01:19
11	Gov-Tel	Victoria – team senior	Gov-Tel boardroom	28/03/2008	01:08
12	Gov-Tel	Eddie - agent	Gov-Tel boardroom	24/06/2008	01:20
					Total: 15:10

Table C 5
Sales-Com interviewee list

	Organisation	Interviewee	Location	Date	Duration (hrs, mins)
1	Sales-Com	Jean - project leader	Pub	26/03/2008	01:10
2	Sales-Com	Helana – Antrax Res agent	Pub	03/04/2008	01:35
3	Sales-Com	Claris – Former QuickCall agent	Pub	08/04/2008	01:31
4	Sales-Com	Harry – Antrax Res agent	Pub	15/04/2008	02:06
5	Sales-Com	Marisa – Antrax Res agent	University	15/04/2008	01:20
6	Sales-Com	Billy – agent	Café	15/04/2008	01:34
7	Sales-Com	Petra – call moderator	Pub	01/05/2008	01:50
8	Sales-Com	Matthew – PrintEx agent	Pub	07/05/2008	01:05
9	Sales-Com	Julia – Antrax Res agent	University	07/05/2008	00:40
10	Sales-Com	James – PrintEx agent	Pub	09/05/2008	01:56
11	Sales-Com	Henrick - team leader	Pub	14/05/2008	01:45
12	Sales-Com	Anya – Antrax Res agent	Café	16/05/2008	01:14
13	Sales-Com	Leon – QuickCall agent	Pub	24/06/2008	00:55
					Total: 18:41

Table C 6
Game-Tel interviewee list

	Organisation	Interviewee	Location	Date	Duration (hrs, mins)
1	Game-Tel	Ricardo – agent	Game-Tel floor	08/02/2008	00:28
2	Game-Tel	Angus 1 - knowledge based administrator	Game-Tel floor	08/02/2008	00:43
3	Game-Tel	Ulrika - client manager	Game-Tel floor	08/02/2008	00:20
4	Game-Tel	Robert 1 – manager	Manager office	08/02/2008	01:07
5	Game-Tel	Jeff - team leader	Game-Tel floor	08/02/2008	01:04
6	Game-Tel	Frances – Former client manager	Café	23/05/2008	00:59
7	Game-Tel	Robert 2 – manager	Manager office	04/06/2008	00:20
8	Game-Tel	Emre – agent	Game-Tel floor	04/06/2008	01:15
9	Game-Tel	Chloe – agent	Game-Tel floor	04/06/2008	01:11
10	Game-Tel	Penelope – agent	Game-Tel floor	04/06/2008	00:57
11	Game-Tel	Angus 2 - knowledge based administrator	Game-Tel floor	04/06/2008	00:24
12	Game-Tel	Robin – IT manager	Game-Tel floor	10/06/2008	00:55
13	Game-Tel	Dean - sales manager	Game-Tel boardroom	10/06/2008	00:51
14	Game-Tel	Robert 3 – manager	Manager office	10/06/2008	00:18
					Total: 10:52
1	Eye-Com	Barbara – agent	Private home	12/04/2008	01:28

Table C 7
Non-participant observation visits

Organisation	No. of visits	Total word count from observations (approx.)
Ire-Tel	4	4,200
Gov-Tel	5	11,000
Sales-Com	6	17,000
Game-Tel	4	2,300
		Total words: 34,500

Appendix D

Interviewee profiles (sex; age; education; and previous roles held)

Table D 1: Gov-Tel interviewee profiles

Name	Sex	Age	Education	Previous roles
Steven - agent	M	33	School	Call centre agent, factory supervisor
Jill - agent	F	27	Degree	Supermarket worker
Tim – agent/trainer	M	24	Degree	Clerical assistant, supermarket worker
Rory - agent	M	28	College	Call centre agent, factory worker
Eddie - agent	M	50	School	Office administrator, gardener's labourer
Victoria - team senior	F	35	Degree	Personal Assistant, freelance photographer
Lewis – forecaster	M	28	Degree	Cinema worker, call centre agent
William – team leader/coach	M	50	School	Call centre team leader, navy officer
Mary - trainer	F	42	Degree	HR manager, call centre manager
Jim - trainer	M	29	Degree	Case worker
Gemma - manager	F	31	Degree	Call centre manager, supermarket worker
Morag - manager	F	42	School	Administrative manager, personnel Manager

Table D 2: Sales-Com interviewee profiles

Name and role	Sex	Age	Education	Previous roles	Nationality
Anya – Antrax Res agent	F	30	Degree	High school teacher, interpreter	Polish
Helana – Antrax Res agent	F	36	College	Hotel receptionist, waitress	Mexican
Clariss – QuickCall agent	F	27	Degree	Guidance teacher	French
Harry – Antrax Res agent	M	24	College	Call centre agent, salesman ('door-to-door')	British
Marisa – Antrax Res agent	F	35	Degree	University tutor, town planner	Chilean
Leon – QuickCall agent	M	28	School	Call centre agent; call centre agent	British
Julia – Antrax Res agent	F	29	Degree	Call centre agent, child minder	Spanish
Matthew – PrintEx agent	M	22	College	Call centre agent, bar person	British
James – PrintEx agent	M	28	School	Bar person/waiter, butcher	British
Billy- QuickCall agent	M	21	College	Salesman, car mechanic.	British
Petra – call moderator	F	26	School	Bar person, au pair	Polish
Henrick - team leader	M	26	Degree	Bar person, shop assistant	Swedish
Jean - project leader	M	32	Degree	Call centre agent, call centre agent	French

Table D 3: Game-Tel interviewee profiles

Name	Sex	Age	Education	Previous roles	Nationality
Ricardo - agent	M	34	College	Call centre agent, hotel manager	Portuguese
Sarah - agent	F	20	School	Call centre agent	Swedish
Penelope - agent	F	35	Degree	Call centre agent, call centre agent	Spanish
Emre - agent	M	34	Degree	Call centre agent	Turkish
Chloe – agent	F	35	Degree	Call centre agent	French
Angus - knowledge based administrator	M	40	Degree	Call centre agent, photography teacher	British
Jeff - team leader	M	37	Degree	Telecom engineer, airport telecom engineer	Dutch
Robin – IT manager	M	38	Degree	Call centre agent, market researcher	Dutch
Kim - client manager/agency	F	31	College	Nursery nurse, au pair	French
Farhad - sales manager	M	31	School	IT consultant	British
Ulrika - client manager	F	32	Degree	Call centre team leader	Swedish
Carol - manager	F	30	College	Call centre manager	British
Robert - manager	M	33	College	Finance manager	British

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