E-Social Work: A Preliminary Examination of Social Services Contact Centres

by

Nigel Coleman

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy in Social Work

University of Warwick, Department of Health and Social Studies

December 2011

TABLE OF CONTENTS

iii

v

CHAPTER 5

THE CONCEPTION OF WORK AT NORTHSHIRE CARE DIRECT: ORGANISATION AND STRUCTURE

CHAPTER 6

THE EXECUTION OF WORK AT NORTHSHIRE CARE DIRECT

MANAGING SOCIAL WORK AT NCD

APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Project information sheet and research protocol

Appendix 2: Consent form for participants

Appendix 3: Initial Questions

Appendix 4: Staffing and costs of duty System in Northshire prior to NCD (2000)

Appendix 5: Original (2000) proposed staffing structure and costs for NCD

Appendix 6: NCD staff complement as at October 2007

Appendix 7: Floor plan at NCD

Appendix 8: Northshire County Council Management Structure (2005)

LIST OF TABLES AND FIGURES

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge and offer my thanks and gratitude to a number of people without whom this thesis would never have seen the light of day. Firstly, John Harris my supervisor who has acted with peerless patience, wisdom and understanding throughout my academic apprenticeship and who has helped guide me through the good and the bad times. He has maintained faith in me throughout, even when my own was flagging and continued to offer support and encouragement at all times.

Secondly, I would like to thank my wife Carol for putting up with me and feigning interest when I was becoming wildly excited by some academic event that was almost certainly dull and puzzling for her in equal measures. She has also continued to believe in me and has been there when I have needed her and has always helped me to keep things in perspective and overcome the many obstacles that I have encountered along the way.

Thirdly, I would like to acknowledge the support of colleagues past and present from New College in Durham and Teesside University, particularly Peter Connell, formerly Deputy Principal at New College who provided the initial funding for my research. Also my old colleagues from the social work team who were supportive and tolerant.

Finally I would like to offer my thanks and appreciation to the many students I have taught at New College and Teesside University who have had to suffer my passion for the study of managerialism and ICT in social work - and who continue to inspire me more than they realise.

x

<u>Declaration</u>

I declare that the work in this thesis is entirely my own and arises from the research undertaken.

In the course of undertaking and writing up the research on which the thesis is based, two conference papers were given and one single-authored and one co-authored (with my supervisor) articles were published as follows:

Coleman, N. (2006) 'Resolve, Re-Direct or Refer: a Case Study of a Social Services Contact Centre.', Paper given at the *24th International Labour Process Conference*: University of London, 7th April 2006.

Coleman, N. (2007) 'Slowing Down or Seizing Up? : Social Work Practice in a Call Centre Environment', Paper given at the *Third International Conference on Technology, Knowledge and Society*, University of Cambridge, 9-12th January 2007 and subsequently published as:-

Coleman, N. (2007) 'Slowing Down or Seizing Up? : Social Work Practice in a Call Centre Environment' *International Journal of Technology, Knowledge and Society*, vol. 3, no. 5, 1-10.

Coleman, N. and Harris, J. (2008) 'Calling Social Work', *British Journal of Social Work,* vol. 38, no. 3, 580-599.

Coleman, N. (2009) 'This is the Modern World! Working in a Social Services Contact Centre,' in J. Harris and V. White (eds) *Modernising Social Work: Critical Considerations*, Bristol: Policy Press.

The thesis has not been submitted for a degree at another university.

Abstract

The use of technology has been a feature of public sector managerialism since its introduction by the Conservative government in the 1990s. Subsequently, New Labour's modernisation agenda embraced and promoted the use of information and communication technology (ICT) through its drive towards 'electronic government' ('e-government'). The target set for all services to be 'e-accessible' by 2005 put pressure on local authorities for their services to be 'open all hours' and encouraged them to utilise call centre technology to achieve this. As a result, 'contact centres' (as they were re-designated) are now in use by local authorities to deliver a diverse range of services including social services.

Call centres emerged as one of the most widely adopted organisational forms in the private sector in the last two decades of the twentieth century, and have been utilised in a number of ways, primarily in the communications and service industries. The working conditions in call centres gained a reputation for being harsh and exploitative of employees in the pursuit of efficiency and economy and the labour process in them has attracted a considerable amount of academic interest and research. The principal approach underpinning this research has been Braverman's (1974) labour process perspective. The use of call centre environments and technology for social services was pioneered by Liverpool City Council in 2001 in partnership with British Telecom. The introduction of contact centres in this context epitomised 'new public management'. The use of contact centres to deliver social services is now widespread and the thesis presents an in-depth case study of one such contact centre, 'Northshire Care Direct' (NCD) in the North East of England. It identifies how social work practice has been affected by an organisational form, which, until recently, had not been utilised in this context. In addition to its being used to underpin call centre research, Braverman's (1974) labour process perspective has also been used to analyse the social work labour process and, in this sense, was apposite as a means of shedding light on a setting that conjoined social work and call centre technology. The thesis therefore uses Braverman's labour process perspective as an overarching conceptual framework to shed light on the labour process at NCD and how it impacted on social workers from professional and personal perspectives. The findings challenge the dominant view of call centre environments, which represents them as highly controlled and inherently stressful settings that inevitably damage employees' well-being. The thesis argues that contact centre social work represents a new (and, thus far, neglected) development that further extends the incursion of ICT into the organisation and management of social work practice. The emergence of the twin phenomena of 'e-social work' and 'e-management' is identified. The thesis argues that the contact centre context takes the role of ICT in social work further than before. In acknowledging that it is a snapshot of only one such centre, and that different practices may exist elsewhere, it argues that the findings can only be indicative of the direction of travel. It concludes that the social work profession needs to engage with further developments in order to mitigate potentially negative effects for service users.

SETTING OUT THE GROUND: THE ORIGINS AND FOCUS OF THE THESIS

Introduction

This thesis is an exploration of the use of call centre technology in public sector social services and the implications of this for social work practice. Whilst commercial call centres have become part of everyday life, social services 'contact centres'[1] are a relatively new phenomenon and one that has remained unexplored in a British context until now. The thesis examines the impact that this form of information and communications technology (ICT) has had and is currently having on social work practice and considers the potential implications of its long-term use. It documents the findings from an eight-month period in an in-depth case study of 'Northshire Care Direct' (NCD), a contact centre in the North of England. The study highlights the professional and technological demands made on social workers in this environment and reveals how they are affected by the experience. The data from the study are used to shed light on the potential implications for social work of an increasing reliance on ICT generally and the use of the contact centre model in particular. This chapter will introduce the thesis by outlining the background and origins of the thesis, the rationale for undertaking the research and how the thesis and its focus have developed over time.

Background to the thesis: New Labour, managerialism and modernisation

This thesis is written against the background of an increased use of ICT in the public sector, which was actively promoted by the New Labour government after its election in 1997, as

---

[1] The term 'contact centre' rather than call centre has been in use since 1996 (Employers' Organisation and Development Agency, 2001). This term is used throughout the thesis when referring to public sector facilities, as it has become firmly established.

part of its modernisation agenda and 'e-government' strategy (Chapter 2). The development of contact centres was embedded in those approaches to reforming the public sector, which are consistent with the managerialist discourse of the public sector needing to learn from the private sector:

> Information Technology is a powerful enabler but the starting point should always be to identify what the customer wants and then look to how we use IT to achieve this. The public sector must embrace new ways of thinking, new ways of doing business, new alliances and new technology. This is vital in order to give people the services they want, when they want them and with the minimum cost and bureaucracy. Electronic access to government services will become increasingly important to citizens and by 2005 we plan to have all of our services available in this way.
>
> (Cabinet Office, 2000a)

The idea of using the private sector to act as a mentor was already well-established when New Labour came to power. The possibility that a Labour government would venerate the private sector in this way would once have been anathema and was a prominent signifier that this was indeed a 'new' form of Labour government. Managerialism had been introduced by the Major and Thatcher Conservative governments in the guise of New Public Management (NPM), a way of reforming public services by introducing a neo-liberal philosophy that was both anti-bureaucratic and anti-professional and claimed to give control to consumers of services (Langan, 2000; Harris, 2003).

NPM was promoted as *the* way to address the shortcomings of public sector services which were portrayed as wasteful and inefficient and failing in their responsibility to the public

2

(Chapter 2). During this time social services, in common with the NHS, were subjected to radical reforms, that introduced a quasi-business ideology (Harris, 2003; see Chapter 2). One of the principal elements of this was the introduction of consumerist principles in the public sector which reframed 'clients' as 'customers' who would henceforth be empowered to choose the services they wanted and to access them in the way they wanted. Three principles formed the ideological foundation of this approach: reducing public expenditure; the pursuit of efficiency, effectiveness and economy; and a quasi-market approach to service development and delivery in order to achieve these goals in the public sector (Langan, 2000, Harris, 2003). The managerialist legacy of the Conservative governments was developed further under New Labour, which incorporated into it the discourse of modernisation (Newman 2000). A notable consequence of this was the increased use of ICT in combination with consumerism, as policy drivers to achieve both political and social outcomes.

E-government and ICT in the public sector

The use of ICT in the public sector reflects its omnipresence in society generally with its prominence being portrayed as signifying a new epoch in social relations, analogous to the impact of the industrial revolution (Castells, 1996). The use of public sector contact centres can, therefore, be seen as consistent with the increased use of ICT generally and its routine employment in social work to collate, record and transfer information for over twenty years (Regan, 2003: 83). Contact centres can be seen as the latest development in the use of ICT and as a demonstration of New Labour's faith in technology to deliver public sector reform. 'E-government' (see Chapter 2) represented the epitome of this faith in the ability of ICT to 'transform' public services (Cabinet Office, 2000a; Cabinet Office, 2005). E-government is based on the notion of making all central and local government services 'e-accessible' via a range of electronic media and the idea that 'e- citizens' should be able to interact and engage

3

with them (Richter et al., 2005; Coleman, 2006). E-government's pursuit of increased accessibility, consumer control and public interaction could therefore be seen (alongside economic imperatives) as the principal motivation for the introduction of contact centres in the public sector (see Chapters 2 and 5).

Call centres, contact centres and social work

The term 'contact centre' has been routinely used in the public sector context since 1996 and its use, rather than 'call centre', can be seen as a deliberate attempt to portray it as something different. It may have been intended to disassociate public sector centres from the negative image that call centres have attracted in the years since their introduction (Coleman and Harris, 2008; see Chapter 2). Call centres are a ubiquitous feature of modern life and have grown rapidly since the late 1980s with their introduction into the service industries. By 2004, 435,000 people were employed in British call centres and it was predicted that by 2008 the number of employees would exceed 500,000 (Management Issues, 2004).The exponential growth of call centres is illustrated by the fact that this prediction was exceeded within two years and by 2006, 581,000 people were employed in 5,700 UK call centres, with the industry having grown by 250% since 1995 and the value of the industry being put at £13.3 billion (Health and Safety Executive, 2006: 5). Call centres were developed in a commercial context and their use (until relatively recently) has principally been in the 'service' industries. Within this the biggest user has been the financial sector, represented typically by telephone banking or credit card companies, and the retail and distribution sector selling goods directly or by mail order catalogue (Health and Safety Executive, 2006: ibid).

With the rapid increase in call centre employment came universal portrayals of them as poor working environments in relation to pay and conditions and as being oppressive and

4

damaging for employees. This has been routinely documented in research (Chapter 3) with call centres cast as the new 'satanic mills of the 21st century' where:

> [w] orkers have to raise their hand to go to the lavatory and pay for a drink of water...where your work rate is monitored by an invisible Big Brother [and] where you must continue to toil even when you are abused and insulted.

> (Boggan, 2001)

It has been argued that the term 'contact centre' has not always been clearly defined and that this has resulted in assumptions being made about its operation. Suomi and Tähkäpää (2003, and see Chapter 5), writing from a Finnish perspective, have argued that contact centres can be distinguished from their private sector counterparts by the degree to which a range of ICTs is integrated in transactions with callers, particularly the use of web-based tools. They argue, therefore that a contact centre uses ICT to:

> Manage and integrate the conversation flow with ...customers, aiming at perfect customer service and organizational efficiency [by] communication through electronic means most usually the telephone and [with the] internet at least partly substituting the former with the later (*sic*)

> (Suomi and Tähkäpää, 2003: 2)

Contact centres when employed in a social services context embody the concept of the 'one stop shop' approach to public services; a legacy of managerialism and the increasing

5

rationalisation of social work which began with the introduction of care management under the NHS and Community Care Act (1990) (Chapter 2).

Having set out the ground for the thesis by establishing the political context for the introduction of contact centres and distinguishing them from private sector call centres, the chapter now turns to the rationale for undertaking the study.

The origins of the thesis: why undertake research in a social services contact centre?

The initial motivation for undertaking this research arose to some extent out of a degree of incredulity that the government was encouraging local authorities to adopt this approach, given the way commercial call centres were generally perceived. Discussion with students about this idea, when it was first mooted, generated a great deal of debate and doubt as to how social work could be carried out in such a setting. At the outset my interest was primarily concerned with the practicalities of adopting such an approach to social work and in exploring the organisational implications of using contact centres in this context. As a result of debate with my students and my supervisor, my interest began to focus on how social work practice would be affected (see below and Chapters 5, 6 and 7).

Interest in the subject also arose as the result of a parallel and growing interest in managerialism and my personal experiences of it as a team manager, following the implementation of the NHS and Community Care Act (1990). In this respect I had already identified with the academic literature (notably Harris, 2003) and had personally witnessed the extent to which managerialism had affected social work. The nascent discussions with my students were often framed by the notion that managerialism positions care as a 'business' in which service users are positioned as 'customers'. Debate was often initiated with and within

6

student groups by my asking them if that notion could be supported. If this were the case, then was it not feasible to employ the same methods and tools as those of the private sector to give social work 'customers' the same access to social work as any other 'business'? This challenge was taken further by considering whether it would be possible to adopt other commercial approaches such as the practice of 'outsourcing' social work contact centres to other areas or even to other countries? Although this often attracted a good- humoured questioning of my sanity, it is perhaps a measure of the degree to which managerialist discourse has dominated the public sector that these questions were not rejected outright. There is, moreover, anecdotal evidence to suggest that this idea was contemplated and actively promoted to local authorities by commercial call centre companies.[2]

The initial interest in managerialism was coupled with an acute awareness of the degree to which ICT was being utilised in social work. As a team manager I had witnessed firsthand how quickly it had become an accepted and central feature of social work practice. I was also intrigued by the extent to which ICT was now influencing the way social workers carried out their work. I had first experienced this phenomenon when managing staff who, having been re-designated as 'care managers', were forced to use computerised assessment systems. The nature of these systems limited the amount of information they were able to record and codified it to satisfy both technical and organisational requirements (Chapter 2, and see Harris, 2003). As a manager my work was increasingly aligned with my personal computer, which not only directed my work in the form of email and/or requests for information, but also required me to monitor my team's work on a daily basis and to submit regular feedback on their performance to a central department at County Hall. The tendency of ICT to be used

---

[2] My supervisor recounted attending a conference alongside Directors of Social Services where this was indeed mooted as a possibility.

in this way is a prominent feature of managerialism and the potential for surveillance and the control of staff has attracted a significant amount of attention, particularly in the commercial call centre context (Chapter 3; and see, for example Fernie and Metcalf, 1998; Bain et al., 2002; Taylor et al., 2002). Contact centres potentially encompass these aspects of the control of work and being able to carry out my research at NCD offered the opportunity to study them in-depth and in real time. The fact that it had been established in the local authority where I had been previously employed added additional interest and I believed this connection would help facilitate access for the research, as proved to be the case (Chapter 4).

Development of the thesis

In engaging with the call centre literature two things became apparent: first, that there was an almost total lack of research into comparable public sector settings despite their being relatively well-established as an organisational form and, secondly, the existence of an orthodox (negative) view of call centres that was rarely challenged. This dominant view did not allow the possibility of any benign form of call centre environment and any author that argued this might be a possibility (such as Glucksmann, 2004) was subject to vigorous and sustained challenge (Chapter 3). The lack of available research in the public sector presented both a challenge and an opportunity for me to contribute to the debate. My motivation was further increased as it became apparent that NCD did not in fact resemble other call centres as the literature had predicted. In the initial phases of the research I became aware that there were two distinct influences on the decision-making process in Northshire and other local authorities with regard to adopting the contact centre model; the ideological/political and the pragmatic/structural, (see Chapters 2 and 5). As the research progressed, I became more interested in the labour process at NCD and the experience of individual social workers (Chapter 6). This is where Braverman's (1974) labour process perspective provided a

conceptual framework (Chapter 3). The scope of the research began to widen from organisational features and managerial imperatives towards the effect on individuals' practice and lives. In the event, it became clear to me that social work in this setting was not merely the 'traditional' form transferred to a different setting or modified to adapt to a more e-enabled and demanding public. Rather, it amounted to something quite distinct from traditional practice and had its own defining features. The call centre environment and technology extended the use of ICT beyond that in any other social work context. This epiphany further sharpened the focus of my research and for the first time flagged up the possibility that a new conceptual framework was emerging. This had wider implications; I began to consider the possibility that the social work interface with this form of technology in this context might, eventually, redefine social work practice in the twenty-first century (Chapters 6 and 7).

In summary, the thesis is a critical examination of a number of different but interconnected themes and questions set against a backdrop of public sector managerialism and New Labour's modernisation programme and the use of Braverman's labour process perspective. It began with a number of issues: first, why did Northshire decide to adopt the contact centre model for its social services? Secondly, how would NCD affect the social work labour process and what role would the contact centre environment and the use of sophisticated ICT systems play? Thirdly, how would NCD affect the management of social work practice and social workers, including the role of surveillance? Finally, why might social workers be motivated to work at NCD, and how would it affect them on a personal and professional level?

Structure of the thesis

In this chapter I have briefly outlined the political and professional contexts that form the background to the origins and development of the research. Two primary themes have been identified as having impacted on the use of ICT in social work: managerialism in the public sector and New Labour's modernisation agenda. Social service contact centres have been differentiated from their private sector counterparts and have been represented as a development arising from a combination of political and economic constraints. The demands of e-government (see Chapter 2) and the central role of ICT in social work have been identified as the most significant aspects in this respect. This chapter has also described the the motivation for the case study of NCD and the underlying rationale for the research. In doing so it has as described how the thesis and its focus developed over time.

Chapter 2 provides the political and policy context for the development and adoption of contact centres in the public sector. It revisits the principal themes raised in this chapter in detail, with reference to the existing body of literature on managerialism and modernisation and the influence these phenomena have had in shaping the public sector experience. It also has a critical examination of NPM and of consumerism as a key element of NPM, as well as considering how NPM has encouraged the increased use of ICT in the public sector in general and in social work specifically. The chapter looks at how social work has been affected thus far by an increased reliance on technology, which resulted from managerialist reforms initiated principally by the NHS and Community Care Act (1990). The need for local authorities to identify on-going savings is another feature of NPM that is examined in this chapter and the association of this cost-consciousness with ICT. It is argued that this, in combination with the drive to modernise the public sector as epitomised by e-government, encouraged the development of contact centres in local authorities such as Northshire.

10

In Chapter 3, Braverman's (1974) labour process perspective is introduced as a conceptual framework within which the available literature and the labour process at NCD can be located. Three principal themes arising from Braverman's thesis are used to review the research on call centres in the private sector and contact centres in the public sector. His thesis is then used to discuss social services contact centres and in introducing the specific research questions.

Chapter 4 outlines the research questions, the research design in more detail and the methodology employed. The case study approach is described in detail along with the significance of 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973) in this context. In doing so the chapter outlines why a case study approach was selected and why it was suitable to address the research questions. It goes on to give an account of how NCD was identified as the study site, how access was gained and reflects on the ethical considerations and other implications arising from the 'privileged access' I enjoyed as a former employee of Northshire County Council.

Chapters 5 and 6 draw on Braverman's (1974) account of separation of the conception and execution of work respectively. Chapter 5 examines the conception of the labour process at NCD its work and how it was structured and organised. This chapter provides the thick description for the case study by outlining the context for the development of NCD by Northshire County Council. It offers the reader insight into the decision-making processes and subsequent development of the contact centre. In doing so, it explains why Northshire chose to develop NCD and why it was suitable as the study site. Using documentary analysis, it details how Northshire's situation illustrated the impact of managerialism and the modernisation agenda on local authorities. In exemplifying this, NCD is shown to be an ideal

11

site to study the effects of these developments on the social work labour process. It thus illuminates Northshire's decision to establish a contact centre by drawing together the different elements of national and local policy that influenced the decisions of the local authority and in doing so describes the principal actors and the operation of NCD.

Chapter 6 looks at the execution of work at NCD, focusing on the labour process, and describes the findings of the study. It uses social workers' narratives of working at NCD and considers the implications of this context for their work and overall wellbeing. It gives an account of the motivation of social workers to work at NCD and how working at NCD affected them professionally and personally. A particular concern is in the interface with technology and the constraints the technology imposed on professional discretion. The issue of deskilling, a central element of Braverman's work, is also considered in this context. The data are used to support the notion that social work in this context is not merely conventional social work in an unconventional setting but extends the effects of ICT in social work beyond that which has gone before. It is argued that the combination of specific location and call centre technology denotes the emergence of a new form of work which is characterised as 'e-social work' and its defining features are set out. It also argues that there is a concomitant managerial form which arises alongside e-social work: e-managerialism.

The thesis concludes with Chapter 7, which it is in two distinct parts. The first part revisits contact centres as a form of work and the concept of e-social work through the lens of the labour process perspective. It then moves on, in the second part, to review the content of the preceding chapters and considers the implications of e-social work, taking an overall view of the thesis and its contribution. In doing so it examines the strengths and weaknesses of the research methods and findings of the study and assesses the significance of the empirical data

12

and whether it might influence policy. It concludes by suggesting areas for further research and considers what the thesis has contributed to knowledge of the subject area.

RESPONDING TO SOCIAL WORK'S CUSTOMERS: ICT AND THE

MODERNISATION AGENDA

Introduction

Chapter 1 noted that call centres have become a ubiquitous feature of modern life; they are well-established as a way of conducting business and are seen as embodying the ideals of consumerism. By being open outside of normal weekday 'office hours' and at weekends, contact centres offer consumers of social services the same flexibility of access to that experienced by users of commercial call centres.[3] This approach is characterised as empowering for social work's 'customers' by allowing them to access services how and when they choose to do so. The initial motivation for the study at NCD was a curiosity about how this organisational form, normally associated with commercial services, could be made to deliver social services. This also led on to the question of how their introduction would affect social work practice on micro (local) and macro levels.

This chapter will provide the background to the development and adoption of contact centres in social services. It will consider in more detail the political and policy context that gave rise to the 'New Public Management' (NPM) which introduced a consumerist ethos in social welfare. NPM, it will argue, facilitated the introduction of contact centres. The chapter will

---

[3] This pattern of delivery was supported by the findings of the 'People's Panel' focus group established by New Labour and asked to report on issues such as this (see Chapter 5).

show how, as a result of New Labour's modernisation agenda, the use of information and communications technology (ICT) was actively promoted in the public sector generally and in social work in particular.

Managerialism and Modernisation

As we saw in Chapter 1 the public sector had already been subjected to a concerted managerialist programme by the previous Conservative administration prior to New Labour's election in 1997. This was in response to the putative failings of the public sector, particularly social services, which had been depicted as wasteful and ineffective after being implicated in a number of high profile scandals. Public sector services had been characterised by the Conservatives as inefficient, inflexible and unresponsive to the needs of their 'customers' (Clarke and Newman 1997, Langan, 2000). Furthermore they were seen as being wilfully resistant to change and sluggish as a result of crippling bureaucracy (Clarke et al., 2000a; Clarke et al., 2000b; Pollitt, 2003). The Conservative government had sought to remodel social services using key elements of the managerialist discourse: consumerism, technology and the use of free market principles, such as choice and competition, in 'quasi-market' systems. The importation of private sector practices into the public sector signalled a period of fundamental change in social work amounting to it being managed thereafter as a (quasi-) 'business' (Harris, 2003). In embracing managerialism the Conservative government sought to subjugate professional power to that of managers and consumers by bringing:

> [W]elfare professionals firmly under political and managerial control, to enhance
> consumer power, to induce greater professional responsiveness, to improve efficiency

and effectiveness by various strategies [which amounted to] a three-pronged attack on them using the pincer-like disciplining mechanisms of increased political control, tighter managerial control and empowering of consumers.

(Foster and Wilding, 2000: 146)

This was seen as the way to achieve progress with regard to the '3 E's' which underpin managerialism: efficiency, effectiveness and economy (Audit Commission, 1983). The managerialist discourse portrays managers as having a particular expertise as well as being objective and, therefore, able make the difficult decisions needed in social or health services. Managers were contrasted with professionals who, it was argued, were self-serving and would have their judgment influenced by such distractions as patient care or service user need. The private sector was used as an exemplar to illustrate how the application of these principles could deliver what were portrayed as much-needed improvements. The mentoring of the public sector by the private sector was represented as a way to 'triumph over bureaucracy,' and as a way to transform the public sector. In this scenario the public sector was likened to 'a dinosaur, too big, too slow-moving, too insensitive, insufficiently adaptable, and seriously underpowered as far as brains were concerned' (Pollitt, 2003: 32).

Managerialist principles were embedded in social services for the first time by what is still arguably the most influential legislation in this respect: the NHS and Community Care Act (1990). The Act introduced working practices that have had an enduring effect on social work by seeking to implement principles taken from the private sector. The separation of the purchasing (or commissioning) function and the provision of services (such as residential, home and day care) within local authorities was one example of this. An explicit intention of

the Act was to introduce the public sector to the notion of competition. Local authorities had until this point been the near-monopoly providers of such services and these reforms sought to allow the private sector to tender for services on what was characterised as 'level playing field'. This was in fact somewhat misleading as the private sector were initially favoured by the '85%' rule relating to the 'Special Transitional Grant' (STG). This was transferred from central government's social security budget to local authorities and made available to set up community care. Under this rule local authorities were required to spend 85% of the STG on private sector providers and remained the case until it was finally abolished in 1998 by the New Labour government. This dramatic change was an introduction to the 'contract culture' of the business sector that would serve to dismantle the alleged 'cosy, self-serving collaboration' that had hitherto existed within social services departments (Harris, 2003: 46). It also heralded the arrival of managerialism in social services.

Managerialism characterises the role of management as a distinct organisational activity, with a distinct knowledge base and expertise. This confers it with the status of a panacea, which is able to address any organisational problem regardless of the setting (Pollitt, 1993; Pollitt, 2003).The adoption of business practices clearly signalled a change of culture in local authorities and saw job titles and language employed in everyday work reflect commercial rather than welfare interests. It also resulted in an increase in the number of jobs that were designated as 'management'. This was consistent with the new business status of social services and the cultural capital that the role of 'management' had acquired in society (Jamous and Peloille, 1970). In the private sector, management had been associated with success and power and attracted a cachet that had previously not been a feature of public sector management. Social services managers had traditionally been appointed as a result of

17

their social work qualification and experience, not their business acumen. The management ethos also extended to front-line social workers who were now rebranded as 'care managers'. This can be seen as indicative of the government's intention to rationalise social work by ensuring a more business-like and systematic approach to meeting the needs of its 'customers'.

Care management underlined the centrality of assessment in determining eligibility for services and was seen as the 'cornerstone' of good (and consistent) community care (Department of Health, 1990). Care management and assessment were represented as the 'core tasks' of community care. Care management was a clearly defined process, which originally had seven steps; publishing information, determining the level of assessment, assessing need, care planning to meet that need, implementing the care plan, monitoring and finally reviewing the care plan (Social Services Inspectorate, 1991: 1-2). This was meant to introduce greater transparency and accountability, alongside more consistent and measurable responses from local authorities. This it was argued would ensure better 'value for money' and more efficient use of resources. The rationalisation of social work that ensued coincided with the introduction of computer systems that facilitated the standardisation of the care management process and its associated procedures. This development, more than any other, facilitated the passage of managerialism into social services by allowing greater managerial scrutiny, the introduction of performance management and the delimiting of professional discretion. It also added the final component of what has been described as the 'McDonaldisation' of social work (Bilson and Ross; 1999, Harris, 2003; Dustin 2008). This was identified by the presence of four main components: efficiency, predictability,

calculability and (as was becoming more evident in social work) control through non-human technology (Ritzer, 2000: 11-15).

When the New Labour government was elected in 1997 it not only maintained, but strengthened, the Conservative government's managerialist legacy. Under New Labour the business discourse assumed an even higher profile and greater prominence. Its avowed intention was to secure 'Best Value' for taxpayers (Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, 1999) and it became clear that one of the ways it intended to do this was by harnessing the power of technology (Cabinet Office, 1998; Cabinet Office, 2005). As a government that actively sought to portray a modern image, one of the principal features of New Labour was its willingness to embrace 'leading-edge' ICT as a way of delivering change within the public sector and improving social outcomes for citizens (Selwyn, 2002: 1-4). For New Labour, ICT was not only a way of transforming public services, but also a way of changing societal relations and enhancing citizenship. In this sense it was viewed as a 'strategic asset not [merely] a tactical tool' (Cabinet Office, 2005: 3). The Prime Minister, Tony Blair was quite explicit in this regard, stating that:

> Within the public services we have to use technology to join up and share services rather than duplicate them. It is a simple fact that we are stronger and more effective when we work together than apart. It is also self-evident that we will only be able to deliver the full benefits to customers that these new systems offer through using technology to integrate the process of government at the centre.
>
> (Foreword to Cabinet Office, 2005)

19

New Labour also looked to the private sector to act as a mentor to local authorities. Partnership with the private sector was viewed as a strategic alliance capable of achieving key social outcomes. New Labour's take on managerialism therefore favoured collaboration and partnership with the private sector rather than the Thatcher government's emphasis on competition (Newman 2000: 47). It was argued that this alliance would bring not only technical expertise, but also additional resources. The 'private finance initiative' (PFI) schemes used to build new hospitals or schools were typical of this approach. A prominent example of this was a PFI partnership between Liverpool City Council and British Telecom (BT) in 2001 in the form of 'Liverpool Direct Limited' (LDL), which established one of the first local authority contact centres. The partnership included the secondment of 800 BT and Council staff to LDL (British Telecom, 2003).This perfectly matched New Labour's vision and can be seen as the definitive model for its 'modern' social care services. Under this arrangement 80.1 % of the company was owned by BT and 19.9% by Liverpool City Council (*ibid)*. One of the attractions of this arrangement was the opportunity for Liverpool to make predicted savings of many millions of pounds over the five year contract. The partnership was not without an incentive for BT, however, which would be guaranteed £30m over the same period (Milner and Joyce, 2005: 137). Given the pressures on local authorities to make savings this was evidently an incentive. However it is not clear how much the 'headcount' loss of 6000 Liverpool City Council jobs contributed to that figure (Coleman and Harris, 2008: 584). By 2003 'Careline' (the social services contact centre) was handling on average 200,000 calls a month and claimed to have 'resolved' 90% of these calls at first contact. In 2008 LDL announced further expansion of 'Careline' with additional funding of £33m (British Telecom, 2008b). From an economic perspective it has lived up to expectations, being named second in the top six local authorities for 'efficiency gains' (i.e. savings) of £46m over the three year period 2004-7 (British Telecom, 2008a).

20

Collaboration with the private sector was also seen as the way of improving practice and one aspect of this was the notion that the public sector could learn from commerce about processing information more efficiently. Another benefit was seen as stemming from the private sector's experience of customer care or 'customer resource management' (CRM), which is routinely employed in the private sector. In this context CRM is defined as:

> [A] set of management philosophies and technologies which enables customer requirements and preferences to be central to any supplier's activities and operations. In practice, both within the public and private sectors, CRM means a significant change to traditional business approaches, and involves wholesale changes in products, services, delivery channels and processes.

(Jones, 2002: 1)

A strategic alliance with business was also seen as helping tailor the technological solutions needed to deliver the 'joined-up' services that would counter and change what was perceived as the 'silo culture' of departmentalism (Coleman and Harris, 2008: 582).This was part of a concerted campaign by New Labour to associate 'new' with 'better' in the public mind and this theme underpins the modernisation agenda. ICT-based solutions and joined-up working were presented as 'modern' alternatives to the 'old' systems of central and local government organisation that had existed previously (Cabinet Office, 1998; Cabinet Office, 1999). The exposure to private sector practices was also a fundamental influence in shaping what can be seen as the spearhead and principal vehicle of modernisation: e-government (Bloomfield and Hayes, 2004: 3-5).

21

New Labour, after their election in 1997, made clear their intention to 'modernise' social services (Department of Health, 1998a) and to 'transform' them using technology (Cabinet Office, 2005). As we have seen a key feature of the modernisation agenda was the active promotion of ICT as the principal means of achieving this (Cabinet Office, 2005). The most visible and influential development in this regard has been the facilitation of 'electronic government' (e-government).This is intended to provide public access to local and national government services via computer and telephone, as well as allowing the public to engage with these services (Coleman, 2006). This interaction was envisaged as being made possible via other forms of technology as they became available, such as the increasing capabilities on third-generation ('3G') mobile phones (Pleace et al., 2003: 183) and digital television (PIU 2000)[4]. E-government was a top-down initiative that compelled local authorities to rethink and reorganise their services. Local authorities were left in no doubt about the government's commitment to this interactive approach when the original target date (2008) set in 1996 for all services to be 'e-accessible' was brought forward by three years to 2005 (Cabinet Office, 2000a; National Audit Office, 2002). New Labour's commitment to e-government can be seen as the ultimate demonstration of its faith in ICT and technological solutions. Seen as the way to reinvent government, the e-government discourse is both comprehensive and powerful as it:

> [A]ffects every aspect of how an organisation delivers service to the public. It is not just technology; it is not just business processes; it is not just human resources. It is all of these areas combined [and] at the heart of it is the customer

> (Silcock, 2001: 88).

---

[4] An example of this in action is the ability to interact with NHS Direct via the controls for Sky television.

22

In addition to the need for e-accessibility local authorities were expected to provide services outside of the traditional 'office' hours every day of the year (Cabinet Office 2000).

E-government then became a powerful signifier of modernity and technological approaches to everyday problems. The prefix 'e' in everyday language can be seen as having gained a degree of 'symbolic power' (Bourdieu, 1991) over the last decade or so by becoming synonymous with modern, sophisticated 'leading-edge' solutions, services or institutions. New Labour was anxious to promote its 'modern' approach to government by using this prefix to denote key government functions or posts. Thus an 'e-minister', an 'e-envoy' and 'information champions' were created to promote this vision (Hudson, 2003: 271). This (in keeping with managerialism) consciously mirrored developments in the private sector where 'e-commerce' was already an established feature. We have seen how e-government was the significant driving force behind the integration of ICT in local authorities and how it forced them to reconsider how their services were delivered. One example of this was the requirement for Social Services Departments to provide 'e-social care records' by 2005 to facilitate information sharing with partner agencies '24 hours a day, 7 days a week' (Social Care Information Policy Unit, 2003: 4). Social work can be seen as having undergone a major cultural change as a result of NPM and its business ethos. The most significant and enduring legacy of NPM in this respect has been the use of ICT to mediate many of its functions.

ICT and social work

Social work is not alone in being fundamentally affected by ICT and its use in all areas of social work practice is evidence of its 'modernisation'. Other professions such as medicine

23

(in the form of 'NHS Direct') and nursing have seen ICT being used to underpin professional practice in a way that would have previously been inconceivable. Initial face-to-face contact with professionals, once seen as essential, is no longer guaranteed, with ICT (in the form of 'expert' software) often being used to supplement or even replace professional input. This underlines the affinity of ICT with managerialism and its anti-professional stance. Further development of expert software appears to be inevitable and the replication of professional judgement by technology has profound implications; not least for social work (see Chapters 6 and 7).

From an organisational perspective, ICT has changed the way that work is organised and delivered. In social work (in common with other private and public sector settings) one of the most visible effects of this has been the 'mobility' it offers. This is illustrated in the phenomenon of 'home-working' where transactions are e-enabled and workers are directed and managed by web-based means and/or via email. This increased mobility and flexibility in social work has been described as 'liquid social work' (Ferguson, 2008) and is very much a feature of the 'modern' workspace. An example of this is the practice of 'hot-desking' where a worker no longer has a desk allocated to her/him exclusively and comes into the office infrequently or for a specific reason such as meetings. Wireless technology enables email to be accessed almost anywhere and the 'office' therefore is increasingly becoming a virtual location. Thus, as a result of ICT, the office work space, where social workers have traditionally been able to link up with managers and colleagues for advice and support, could disappear altogether. Social work has been significantly affected by ICT and it is now regarded by some as totally dependent upon it (Postle, 2002; Harlow, 2003; Garrett, 2005). The need to be conversant with and competent in the use of ICT was seen as essential for

24

social workers by the GSCC and until 2009 evidence of this competence was required from student social workers in order to qualify for practice (GSCC, 2002).

As a consequence of these developments, managerialism in social work has increasingly been the vehicle for the promotion of technological (over professional) solutions and the displacement of what were once seen as core skills. Some see this as signalling the 'death' of the traditional social work role and argue that for social workers the need to be technically proficient has become a matter of survival. Social work's future is therefore:

> tied to 'mastering' scientific knowledge and new technical skills, the latest and most glamorous forms of expertise that provide the grounds on which, in a world of uncertainty and occupational competition, social work can stake its claim to professional competence.
>
> (Davies and Leonard, 2004: x)

The increasing prominence of ICT in social work generally has been recognised for some time (see, for example, Harlow and Webb, 2003; Garrett, 2005). Given the degree to which ICT has permeated wider society this was perhaps inevitable and an indication that social services, like others, are now fully integrated into the 'information society' (Steyaert and Gould, 1999). ICT has affected social work practice and management in a number of ways that go beyond the more obviously pragmatic use of computers for recording, data storage or

25

communication. ICT has been used to curtail social workers' autonomy and discretion, rationalise service provision and encourage managers to engage in the surveillance of their teams as part of performance management (Harris, 1998a: 856-8). Social workers now engage with ICT on a daily basis and are routinely subject to direction by on-screen prompts and record their work on electronic *pro forma*. These screen-level controls have increasingly been used to regulate and control public services, including social work, as a result of New Labour's modernisation programme. The continued development and increased sophistication of ICT brings with it increasing potential for surveillance and control (Fernie and Metcalf, 1998; and see Chapter 6).

Using technology in social work can also impact on practice in more subtle ways. As a feature of managerialism, ICTs are 'not "neutral"; they are a reflection of the economic trends, cultural influences and power relations in which they exist' (Harlow, 2003: 19). Expertise in ICT is based in the private sector and the design of assessment and other tools reflects private sector practices and priorities. The ability of technology to influence practice in this way has been described by Sapey (1997: 806), who compares the computer to an artist's materials or musician's instrument in being able to influence the way that data is recorded. Sapey gives the example of the 'tick-box' assessment formats used by local authorities for care management to illustrate this. This seemingly simple tool has had a disproportionate influence on practice (see for example, Postle, 2002). Its use forces social workers to record data in an overly concise reductionist form, which is exacerbated in some (particularly early) systems that only allow elaboration of data entry within non-expandable fields. Reflecting the lack of practitioner input into the design of expert software and other systems this is a significant factor and may be seen as another example of managerialism

26

affecting professional autonomy and discretion. This is consistent with what is happening in the wider context where 'the *work* in social work is increasingly being ordered, devised and structured by academics, policy makers and e-technicians far removed from the day-to-day encounters which practitioners have with the users of service' (Garrett, 2005: 545, *original emphasis*).

Using ICT to cut costs

We have seen how as a result of the e-government initiative local authorities were compelled to make all of their services e-accessible within a relatively short timescale. Alongside this requirement, which was onerous enough, there was the need to expand their service provision outside of office hours. In an obvious parallel with the private sector, and employing its consumerist language, local authorities were now being urged to provide services on an 'open all hours' basis with '24x7' access (Cabinet Office, 2000). This target was set amid a financial climate that imposed severe restrictions on local authority spending, based on their evidencing 'Best Value' for the tax-payer and introducing the notion of continuous improvement (Department of the Environment Transport and the Regions, 1999; and see Chapter 5).The Gershon Report (2004) detailed the findings of the 'efficiency review' undertaken by Sir Peter Gershon in 2003 and required all local authorities to identify 'efficiency gains'. The report set a target of 2.5% savings to be achieved by all local authorities year on year until 2008. The rationale behind the drive for greater efficiency was offered by one minister who made clear the expectation that the public sector would (as had now become the norm) follow the example of the private sector. He argued that from hereon in

27

[L]ooking for efficiency savings must become the norm for organisations in the public sector-as indeed it is for the private sector already. I know many local authorities are now looking at this Gershon agenda already in this way and making it a cultural change in the day-to-day management and the strategic planning within the public services.

(Woolas, 2005)

This 'cultural change' was equated with 'thinking big' and transforming service delivery in such a way that local authorities would be able to continue to deliver this level of saving 'year after year' (*ibid*). This was a stringent formula that, when combined with the need to achieve the e-accessibility targets three years earlier than anticipated, forced local authorities to consider radical solutions (see Chapter 5). One way this could be achieved was the use of contact centres, something actively encouraged by the government both philosophically (via e-government) and practically, in the form of 'modernisation grants' (Regan, 2003: 92). The use of call centre technology was not entirely novel in the public sector. As we saw in Chapter 1 the term 'contact centre' has been in use in this context since 1996 (Employers Organisation and Improvement Development Agency, 2001). The use of such an approach for the delivery of social work certainly was, however, and apart from high a profile examples, Liverpool Direct Limited, very little was known about how it would work in practice. In the absence of any specific research, and in order to understand the organisational dynamics of contact centres, I had to rely primarily on research that had been undertaken in the private sector. As a rapidly expanding social phenomenon, commercial call centres had attracted academic interest and a significant body of research on their organisation and operation had been generated. In consulting this literature, I hoped to gain some insight into how the use of this model might affect social work and social workers.

28

Conclusion

This chapter has described how specific policies and government initiatives were significant in promoting the use of ICT in social work and led to the adoption of contact centres in social work. We have seen how e-government played a particular role in establishing a modern 'futurist' agenda (Moss and O'Loughlin, 2005). NPM changed the conception of the users of social services from 'clients' to 'customers' who are able to exercise choices in transactions that are supposed to resemble those that take place in the business sector. In adopting business practices and language local authorities have been subject to change from both the 'supply' and 'demand' side of what has been characterised as the 'social work business' (Harris, 2003). The chapter has shown how local authorities have been subjected to twin pressures; the pressures from the supply side have seen the demand to achieve on-going efficiency savings and cut costs, whereas the demand side has seen the need to completely change the relationship that Social Services Departments have with the users of their services. Thus political pressure has forced ideological and structural changes. Both can be seen as playing their part in influencing local authorities in their decision to adopt contact centres (see Chapter 5). The chapter has located the development of contact centres as part of New Labour's modernisation agenda and as a consequence of the imperatives of managerialism that were reinforced under New Labour via NPM. In this respect, the consolidation of consumerism and the use of ICT to achieve policy aims are the most visible aspects of the managerialist discourse.

Chapter 3 will introduce Braverman's (1974) thesis and the labour process perspective. This perspective will be used as a conceptual framework in the thesis and underpins the research questions, which are also introduced in Chapter 3. The chapter will then move on to review

29

the available call and contact centre literature, using themes taken from Braverman's work, and consider what significance the findings of this literature may have for social work in contact centres.

CHAPTER 3

BRAVERMAN AND THE LABOUR PROCESS IN CALL AND CONTACT CENTRES

Introduction

Chapter 2 showed how the political context prepared the ground for the introduction of contact centres by introducing a business ethos into the public sector. We saw how NPM encouraged local authorities to work within a quasi-business framework and introduced private sector practices and business language. The chapter also showed how local authorities were subjected to twin pressures: from the 'supply' side, in being forced to exercise increasing fiscal restraint which saw them having to identify on-going savings, and from the 'demand' side where the ideological imperative of consumerism had assumed increasing prominence.

This chapter introduces Braverman's (1974) highly influential labour process perspective which has been used as a conceptual framework to analyse developments in the labour process in both social work and call centres. Research from both areas will be reviewed to shed light on a setting that for the first time marries elements of both: the social services contact centre. The chapter will also consider the contribution of later developments in labour process theory (LPT). Three central themes from Braverman's thesis are used as a guide to review findings from the available literature and its significance for the labour process at NCD. As others have noted (see for example Harris; 1998a; Carey 2009; White, 2009) Braverman's ideas have acquired a renewed resonance as a result of the fundamental changes

31

that have occurred in the social work labour process and they now exhibit a remarkable prescience in many respects.

Braverman and the Labour Process Perspective

Braverman's (1974) analysis of the labour process perspective revisited Marx's elaboration of the nature of work within a capitalist system. It has been described as a 'rediscovery of the labour process,' the first reworking of Marx's thesis that provided a detailed examination of the labour process itself (Thompson, 1989: 67-71). The essence of Marx's original analysis was that the worker's labour power was controlled and owned by the capitalist owner/manager and used to generate 'surplus value' (or profit) for them (Harris, 1998a: 5-6). Braverman applied Marx's principles to modern monopoly capitalism arguing that by the mid-twentieth century managerial domination had come to be maintained by systematically controlling elements of the labour process; usually described as 'proletarianization' (Burghardt and Fabricant, 1992: 85). How managerial control is established and maintained is the key focus of Braverman's thesis (Harris 1998a: 7-8). The principal manifestation of this is seen in the strict separation of the 'conception' and 'execution' of work as epitomised in 'scientific management' or 'Taylorism'. Control of the intellectual aspects of the conception and planning of work gives management monopoly of the knowledge relating to the labour process and confines the workers' role merely to performing routine tasks. A consequence of this, as Braverman highlights, was a progressive deskilling of the workforce. He regards this as deliberate and sees it as essential in establishing and maintaining managerial control, or what Marx called the 'subordination' of the workers in a complex and constantly changing capitalist system. Thus the significance of deskilling in Braverman's analysis is its use to

32

sustain managerial power and control and it is this which epitomises monopoly capitalism (Braverman, 1974; Fabricant, 1985; Harris, 1998a; Carey, 2009).

Braverman's (1974) thesis describes three 'principles' of scientific management, all of which serve to reinforce deskilling of the workforce:

1) 'The dissociation of the labour process from the skills of the workers': managers gathering and developing knowledge of all aspects of the labour process.

2) 'Separation of conception from execution': dehumanising the labour process whereby managers control the planning and design of work tasks and workers carry them out. This leads to the simplification of job tasks which workers have a 'duty to follow unthinkingly and without comprehension of the underlying technical reasoning'. This is an essential element of controlling the workforce.

3) 'Us[ing] this monopoly over knowledge to control each step of the labour process and its mode of execution'.

(Braverman, 1974: 112-119)

These three themes have underpinned nearly all of the available research into call and contact centres. They have also featured prominently in work on the social work labour process.

Braverman compared the position of modern workers under capitalism with that of artisans before the industrial revolution. Prior to industrialisation the labour process was controlled by the workers by virtue of their monopoly of particular areas of expertise and specific skills. As the goods were also made by the artisan there was no separation of conception and execution

33

and they therefore retained control of the process. Under monopoly capitalism, the complex tasks that were once the sole preserve of the artisan were broken down into their component parts in order to make them amenable to mechanisation eventually on the assembly line. This routinisation of work ceded control of the rate and type of labour from worker to owners/managers.

There have been a number of developments in the Labour Process Perspective (LPP) since Braverman's work; sometimes referred to as 'second wave' LPT. Despite attempts to address what some consider as 'gaps' in Braverman's thesis, second wave LPT retains much of his insight and critical response to managerial control. Thompson (1989:2-3) identifies two distinct phases: the work of Edwards and Burawoy in the late 1970s, and from the 1980s 'a sharper break' which sought to address the criticism of Braverman's work being seen as the only way of conceptualising the labour process (for example, Littler and Salaman, 1982). There are core Bravermanian themes in Edwards and Burawoy's work, with the issues of control maintaining continuity with his thesis. However, revisionists have given more attention to legitimation and consent as part of the labour process, alongside the possibility of worker resistance. The principal contribution on managerial control in second wave LPT was made by Edwards (1979). His thesis explored the exercise of structural control within what he described as the 'contested terrain' of the workplace.

Edwards argued that direct control resulting from the personal power of employers or their agents was no longer possible under competitive capitalism and this resulted in a period of managerial 'experimentation' utilising different means of control including workers' welfare

34

schemes and company unionism. These were not successful and therefore resulted in a managerial shift towards structural, rather than personal, forms of control. Structural control was exercised via technical (or mechanical) and bureaucratic means in hierarchical command structures (Thompson, 1989:144-5). The advent of computers has increased the potential for more advanced technical control with a distinction being made between design and direction of the process and mechanisation of the process. Second wave LPT emphasised the 'social construction of technology' (Callaghan and Thompson, 2001: 20) with Edwards referring to mechanisation as 'the result of the *particular* [capitalist] design of the technology and not as an inherent characteristic of the machinery *in general*' (cited in Callaghan and Thompson, *ibid*, emphasis in original).

Edwards assumed that structural measures were sufficient to exercise control. Others however, have recognised that control is a more complex phenomenon and that workers can be co-opted if they 'own' or identify with management's goals. This is an aspect of control that Braverman's thesis did not address and the importance of subjective and relational elements of work are now considered to be crucial components in contemporary settings. Direct personal control is unnecessary if the subjective and relational experience of workers is addressed and their consent to working practices is gained. The labour process inevitably generates informal rules which workers use to manage the reality of their work experience. Subjective elements can therefore be important in gaining control of the workforce by achieving consent. Burawoy reinforces this notion in critiquing Braverman's lack of attention to the 'psychological and other factors through which subordination to capital is secured, the processes through which workers come to comply with and otherwise advance their own dehumanisation'(Burawoy, 1981, cited in Thompson, 1989: 153).

Thus, although the means are different the end is the same; alienated or 'dehumanised' labour. However, Thompson argues that Braverman is not alone in ignoring this aspect, as labour process theory has focused primarily on structural aspects of work or traditions of resistance at the expense of considering worker consent (Thompson, 1989:154). As we will see, these are also consistent threads within the call centre literature, much of which either consciously adopts an LPT perspective or owes an intellectual debt to it.

We have seen that LPT can offer a way of understanding labour process issues in different contexts and that specific aspects of work organisation under capitalism reinforce the control and subjugation of workers. However, those who have developed LPT argued that Braverman offered an over-simplified notion of control in the workplace and that it is subject to both negotiation and challenge through the interplay of structural and personal elements. This is coupled with recognition that psychological factors are at least as important as physical control of the workforce. However, some structural aspects such as bureaucracy and, particularly, technology have assumed greater prominence in modern-day work environments. Edwards argued that technology is not inherently controlling and can in fact be benign; it has only become controlling as a result of deliberate (capitalist) design. To control workers effectively some degree of consent is essential and to ensure their compliance they also have to 'own' the aims or goals of the organization to some extent (Burawoy, 1981).

Prior to the introduction of scientific management and managerialism into the public sector there was a clear distinction between private and public sector contexts and working

36

conditions (Chapter 2). This rendered state services such as social work less amenable to an LPT perspective. Since the introduction of managerialism LPT has been used to analyse the social work labour process.

The labour process perspective and social work

A consistent critique of Braverman's work is that it is a snapshot of a specific period in the history of the labour process and is, therefore, unable to accommodate contemporary developments in the nature of work (e.g. Burawoy, 1981; Thompson, 1989; Spencer, 2000). In contrast, an indication of the strength of his thesis has been that at differing times it has been hugely influential in a number of diverse contexts. This includes social work. Fabricant (1985), Harris (1998a; 1998b) and Carey (2009) have all used Braverman's thesis in specific social work contexts (see below). They argue that parallels can be drawn in modern work settings such as state social work, where the nature of work has made similar demands of the workforce to those which Braverman described. In examining the effects of changes in the nature of their work on social workers, some have asked whether they have been forced to adapt to more subordinated forms of work. The application of Braverman's work in a social work context has attracted interest at different times and cycles of interest have coincided with three main eras: the so-called radical social work era of the 1970s, as exemplified by Leonard and Corrigan (1978); the nascent managerialist era from the 1980s (Fabricant,1985); through to the conception and twenty-first century consolidation of managerialism (Harris, 1998a; 1999b; 2003); and, more recently, in what might come to be viewed as a post-managerial context(Carey,2007; 2009). The contribution of these writers will now be considered in turn before considering developments in the social work labour process as a result of the introduction of contact centres.

Fabricant (1985) was the first writer since the radical authors of the 1970s to explicitly apply Braverman's ideas to social work, albeit in a North American context. He used Braverman's concept of deskilling as part of managerial control to highlight the extent to which social work practice had changed since the introduction of Taylorist principles in the 1970s. He described the experience of social workers in the United States in similar terms to Braverman's account of artisans in the pre-industrial age and saw their work being similarly degraded as a result of the way social work was structured and organised, referring to this as its 'industrialisation'. Fabricant argued that social work has always contained what could be considered as elements of 'craft' work, in that social work has a distinct set of skills and a body of knowledge that are further developed in practice. In working with people social workers have always had to 'absorb and synthesize the information necessary to understand the intra-psychic dynamics of an individual or the complex forces at work in the community' (1985: 389). In doing so, they then chose an approach that suited an individual's needs or circumstances rather than working to a laid-down practice model. Fabricant saw this 'differential diagnosis' approach as being consistent with the artisans' desire to 'fully comprehend the component parts of their work' (*ibid*). He concludes that the demands for efficiency and financial austerity that began to impact as a result of managerialism led to a dilution of social work's craft elements. This resulted in an increased emphasis on bureaucracy and financial accountability.

Fabricant sees this emphasis as geared towards meeting the aims of efficiency, economy and effectiveness, aims that necessitated more overt control of the social work labour process. He argued that increased control was achieved by the same process of deskilling that Braverman had described, with social workers being distanced from their craft and 'a gulf [that] has

38

been created by the workers' loss of control over their own labour and the management of their performance [resulting in] routinized practice' (Fabricant, 1985:391). Fabricant contended that this 'debasement of craft' could be seen as part of the historical 'trivialisation' of work, which inevitably leads to progressive deskilling. He stated that as a result of this 'atomization' of the labour process social work practice had been, and would continue to be, undermined and, if unchecked this could ultimately lead to 'assembly-line practice'(1985:391-4). It could also be argued that Fabricant's craft analogy is further reinforced by the fact that artisans' work, like social work, has a core set of skills but there remains an intuitive element in practice also.

Harris (1998a; 1999b) was the first to apply Braverman's labour process perspective in a British social work context. He sought to address the critique of Braverman and to support its continued relevance in analysing the social work labour process at the time of writing. He argued that Braverman's work was initially influential in ensuring that managerial control of the labour process was central to any discussion of work after the publication of *Labor and Monopoly Capital* in 1974 (Harris, 1998a: 8). However, as others have noted, the lack of attention that Braverman gave to public sector work (and its distinguishing features) saw its influence wane. Harris critiqued radical social work authors' attempts to apply Braverman's thesis to social work in the late 1970s in portraying the establishment of Social Services Departments as evidence of an increase in managerial control via scientific management. His critique related to three specific areas: first, they had 'followed Braverman in not considering specific labour processes within the state's welfare sectors'; secondly, they had failed to 'fac[e] up to the difficulty of analysing the labour process of an occupation that had retained a considerable degree of autonomy over the carrying out of its work'; and thirdly, their

39

assertions in relation to the application of scientific management, with concomitant increased control of social workers, did not contain any empirical evidence of the controls that had allegedly been implemented. Harris concluded, therefore, that in the radical social work literature, 'Braverman's scientific management thesis was neither contextualised nor researched' (Harris, 1998b:841).

Harris argued that, notwithstanding radical social work authors' allegations of 'scientific management' being used to control social workers, in contrast to most other occupations social workers enjoyed a considerable degree of discretion in carrying out their work (1998a; 1998b). In his study he found that the relationship social workers had with 'team leaders' (the original job title employed prior to the introduction of managerialism) was exclusively one of consultation, rather than overt control and (echoing Burawoy) was founded on consent and shared, rather than antagonistic, interests amounting to a 'parochial professionalism' (Harris 1998a: 98-99). Parochial professionalism involved team leaders and social workers 'attempting to construct a shared view of social work as a key aspect of their working relations' (Harris, 1998b: 849)[5]. Within this culture, social work 'management' was characterised by team leaders having faith in the ability of workers to make professional judgements about how they carried out their work. The attitude of the team leaders in Harris' study, which was conducted in the early 1980s, to supervision clearly illustrates the different ethos that prevailed prior to the incursion of managerialism:

---

[5] It has been argued that examples of this feature of social work remain to this day, despite the consolidation of managerialism (Evans, 2009).

Supervision is about giving people a large degree of autonomy about what they do and how they get on with their work. I can't think of an example of a worker going so obviously wrong that I have had to intervene against their wishes.

(Harris, 1998a:100)

Harris (1998a; 1998b) argued that these crucial features were ignored by radical social work authors who, in using Braverman's work, adopted an overly structuralist stance to the social work labour process Their approach caused them to neglect the 'distinctiveness' of social work at this time, and to ignore the importance of process as well as structure in the social work labour *process* (Harris, 1998a: 36). Given that social work combined elements of both professional and bureaucratic features, Harris went on to argue that an alternative 'bureau-professional' model was more appropriate in analysing the social work labour process in this period. This acknowledged the influence of both structural (managerial) and normative (professional) elements in the social work labour process (1998a: 48-9).

Others have noted that in a social work context the apparent utility of Braverman's thesis was, until recently, relatively short-lived (Carey, 2009: 507). Carey's work (2007; 2009) is an attempt to use Braverman's thesis in a contemporary social work context; although much of this is derivative of Harris's earlier work. Carey's argument for once again revisiting the labour process perspective is that the current social work labour process is subject to increased managerial control, regulation and deskilling and now more closely matches the situation that radical social work authors described. As a result of neo-liberal managerialist reforms, one of the key features of the current era has been a significant reduction in social workers' discretion, ironically at a time when wider interest in Braverman's work was

41

evidently declining (Carey, 2009: 510). Carey argues that the current iteration of social work is fertile ground for a re-examination of Braverman's work. In doing so, he identifies three 'eras' relating to the social work labour process: a period of 'controlled discretion', a period of 'procedure and management-led discipline' and the current era which he characterises as 'hyper-regulation and surveillance' (2009: 506-7). Echoing Harris's work, he depicts the first period of 'controlled discretion' as being underpinned by the faith of team leaders in the ability of social workers to make professional judgments and use their skills. In this era social workers were able to exercise a degree of professional discretion and the management role was largely supportive rather than overtly controlling (2009: 513). Carey argues that these features make any links to Braverman's thesis somewhat 'tenuous' due to the apparent lack of managerial control over the social work labour process. The second (managerialist) era is characterised by 'procedure and management-led discipline' as well as 'markets and managers' (2009: 514). This period saw extensive reform of social services following criticisms of local authorities and of social work by the Thatcher governments As we saw in Chapter 1, NPM had introduced a different culture of work to the public sector in general, and social work in particular, emulating business sector practices and incorporating its language. The result, as we have seen, was that social services were structured as quasi-businesses (Harris, 2003) and that social work practice was rationalised by the care management process, which epitomised this approach. Chapter 2 showed how care management replaced what had until then been the conventional approach to social work. This saw a move from face-to-face 'hands-on' relationships between social worker and service users to a more bureaucratic, instrumental and detached engagement with 'care managers' that bore little resemblance to conventional social work (Carey, 2009: 506).

Carey draws on Harris's 'social work business' (2003) to describe the process of establishing neo-liberal reforms, including increased regulation and marketisation, and the introduction of care management. The current period witnessed the consolidation of these features and he argues that contemporary social work is more consistent with Braverman's thesis than social work was in earlier eras. This is reflected in more managerial direction and a corresponding perception of a loss of control over everyday activities by social workers, which is consistent with Braverman's depiction of the nature of work; much of the 'brain work' in social work has been replaced by procedure and routine practice. In tandem, there is also evidence of the deskilling that Braverman predicted. As others have argued this only becomes evident 'when conditions allowed it to develop' (Spencer, 2000:228). As we have seen (Chapter 2), the introduction of managerialism saw managers employed in strategic planning without any involvement of their staff and increasingly using ICT to monitor and control team activity. Evidently this separation of the conception and execution of work equates to that which Braverman described and offers some support for the concerns raised by Fabricant about the loss of control over the skill elements of social work. This is in stark contrast to the previous era, and 'within the new supply-led organization of the social work labour process, the previous symbiotic conception and execution bond ...beg[an] to separate' (Carey, 2009: 517).

Although his analysis of the first two eras largely recycle other authors' work (notably Harris, 1998a; 2003), Carey's analysis of the current era has resonance for my thesis given its contemporary focus and its link to the call and contact centre literature (see below). This is notable for its emphasis on the control and surveillance aspects of this form of work. The link to Braverman's work and my thesis is exemplified by his depiction of 'the extensive use of ICT to facilitate the deskilling and control of the [state social work] workforce and the

43

separation of conception and execution of disparate welfare labour processes' (Carey, 2009: 524).These features of current practice are particularly pertinent to contact centres such as NCD. In highlighting New Labour's 'hyper-regulation and surveillance' a link is also made to another central theme of the thesis; that of surveillance and control. Carey argues that these technological reforms were of equal significance to those initiated by the Thatcher governments and may yet prove to have more profound long-term effects and act as signifiers of a new electronic era (and see Chapters 2 and 7).

These features were consistent with the two of the defining characteristics of the New Labour period: an intensification of regulation and rationalisation. Under New Labour monitoring the performance of local authorities became a priority with 'a new emphasis placed on performance indicators, audit, inspections, rating systems [and] competition (between departments [and] local authorities)' (Carey, 2009: 518). As has been noted elsewhere (see Chapter 2) *the* prime example of rationalisation in social work has been the establishment of contact centres; which represent the most fundamental change to accessing social work ever to have taken place (Coleman and Harris, 2008: 595). For Carey, therefore, the characteristics of this era represent the closest match to Braverman's vision with:

> [E]xtensive employee deskilling, task fragmentation, a greater than ever employee/managerial conception and execution distinction, and augmented (yet detached) forms of managerial control
>
> Carey (2009: 519).

44

In revisiting the relevance of Braverman for explaining changes in the current social work labour process, Carey conceded that Braverman's lack of attention to the public and skilled service sector could have limited the degree to which it had been applied to social work. The apparently unambiguous distinction (as both Fabricant and Harris had observed) had been the difference between how the public and private sectors were managed at this time. The failure to accommodate this difference had been the principal reason for scepticism in relation to the utility of Braverman's thesis in this specific context. Although Braverman had largely neglected 'state' work such as social work this was understandable given that until relatively recently there had indeed been a clear distinction between the private and public sector in the way in which work has been organised and managed. This changed however, with the introduction of managerialism into social work after the NHS and Community Care Act (1990).

The (pre-1990s) public sector had not been subject to market pressures and public sector workers' situations could not be compared to the private sector experience. One clear difference in private and public sector labour processes is that the demand for labour, and budgetary priorities, is dependent on political rather than market shifts. State subsidy maintains stability and 'reduces or eliminates the unpredictable ups and downs of competitive markets' (O'Connor, 1973: 17). In addition Offe (1985) argues that social services in particular are distinguished from the private sector in 'hav[ing] the double effect of withdrawing from the market the labour power of service workers as well as their clients' (Offe, 1985: 115). Another area of difficulty for Braverman's work that Carey identifies is Burawoy's (1979) view that it is typical of 20th century neo-Marxism in being a reductionist approach that commodifies workers. In this respect as others have argued, not enough

45

attention is given to subjectivity, individual agency and the possibility of resistance, thus leading to a portrayal of the 'all too passive worker' (Carey, 2009: 508).

The current era can be defined by the increasing use of ICT, initially as a tool for recording, and now primarily a tool of managerial control and surveillance. Carey's attempt to apply Braverman's work to contemporary social work acknowledges that social workers have been subject to widespread change over a relatively short period of time. One clear example of this, as we have seen (Chapter 2), is the creation of a distinct managerial identity in social work. Braverman had predicted an increasingly distinct identity and role for managers and workers that until the NHS and Community Care Act (1990) appeared untenable in social services, given the degree to which team leaders worked alongside social workers and shared their tasks without the clear distinction of being a 'manager'. The NHS and Community Care Act (1990) radically changed that relationship. We have seen how NPM, and specifically care management, significantly altered the relationship between social workers and their (now) team 'managers' (Chapters 1 and 2). This signalled an increased emphasis on management as a distinct activity and a clear separation of the role of team *manager* from that of social *worker* along the lines that Braverman had suggested. The division between social workers as care managers and their team managers was henceforth clearly defined, albeit with local variations in the degree to which some managers subscribed to it (Evans, 2009).

Additional aspects of the control of the labour process are the fragmentation of job roles and the use of technology, which exacerbates the deskilling of workers. Braverman was prescient in predicting the role of technology in not only controlling but also increasingly deskilling the

workforce. Although it has been argued that Braverman's view of technology was 'surprisingly deterministic' as to how work is/will be shaped by technological change (Thompson, 1989:106), his analysis chimes with current developments in social work and, in particular, the use of ICT and contact centres. The latter is an arena where the separation of conception and execution of work is clearly defined, and the issues of managerial surveillance and control are a particular concern and fertile ground for new developments. The degree to which ICT facilitates this separation in contact centres is a central point of my thesis and will be discussed in more detail later (Chapter 6).

CALL CENTRES IN THE PRIVATE SECTOR

Braverman was the first to shift the view that scientific management could not be applied outside the manual labour context and this has added to the overall utility of his work. I have indicated that call centre research is primarily conducted from a labour process perspective and emphasises the key elements that Braverman identified as central: the separation of the conception and execution of work, the alienation of workers and their incremental deskilling as a result of scientific management. This holds true even for those studies that do not explicitly acknowledge their debt to LPT but concentrate on the same elements including the use of technology in relation to deskilling (for example, van den Broek, 2003; Fisher 2004; Sederbland and Anderson 2006) and in this respect the intellectual debt is evident. The labour process perspective has been the dominant approach in analysing the organisation of work as evidenced by the annual International Labour Process Conference. This has been the preeminent conference on the sociology of work for over twenty-five years. In the last twenty years ICTs, and particularly call centres, have featured prominently at the conference.

The significance of Braverman's work is such that 'it is hard to imagine contemporary radical research which is not influenced by labour process insights' (Smith, 2009:1). Call centre research is one such area. Where the debt to Braverman's labour process perspective is not declared explicitly it may be due to tacit acceptance of the labour process perspective as the pre-eminent paradigm. This view is supported by many of the papers on call centres being initially presented at the ILPC prior to publication in peer-reviewed journals. In the introduction to this chapter, I argued that the issues that Braverman identifies as being crucial in the debate around the labour process are also the most prominent in call centre literature:

- The nature of work: how work is structured and organised in call and contact centres;

- How surveillance and managerial control is used in this context: the role that legitimation and consent play in maintaining it, and the potential for employee resistance to it;

- How the labour process in this work setting impacts on employee health and well-being.

These themes will be used to guide a review of the available call and contact centre literature.

The nature of work in call centres: how work is structured and organised in the private sector

The rapid expansion of call centres as an organisational form has seen a corresponding rise in the amount of research conducted and, in contrast to the public sector form, it is now one of the most widely researched areas of work (Glucksmann, 2004). Research in the private sector has tended to incorporate certain assumptions about call centres and they have acquired a

reputation as the *bête-noire* among organisational types. For some, the rationale behind the introduction and use of call centres in the private sector has been seen as very straightforward and is usually presented in purely economic terms as addressing the need for 'standardisation of the customer interface to optimise efficiency and output' (van den Broek, 2003: 236).

This theme runs through the literature and is an apparent acceptance of the capitalist rationale for the introduction of call centres to increase profit. The increase in efficiency and economy to be derived from the use of ICT and rationalised resources has been seen as the reason for their initial adoption. The characterisation of call centres as 'electronic sweatshops' suggests that their labour process reproduces the intensive working conditions of the production line at the expense of workers' health and wellbeing. This is why LPT has been used so widely as an analytical tool in call centre research. However, the economic conception of contact centres has tended to focus researchers' attention predominantly on business outputs and on the (necessary) lack of control experienced by employees. This has been at the expense of examining qualitative outcomes for either customers or staff. This was recognised by Glucksmann in her plea to 'alter the prism' in order to widen the debate and explore the relational as well as the structural aspects of working in call centres (2004: 795; and see below). In doing so, she argued that research hitherto had had too narrow a focus. Her plea echoes earlier LPT (for example, Edwards, 1979; Burawoy 1981,) work which recognised that in order to manage workers effectively it was not sufficient to merely impose structural controls; personal and normative elements were of at least equal importance. Thus, while scientific management (or 'Taylorism') appears to rationalise work and dehumanise workers, personal considerations remain and, in addition to business outputs, there is an additional dimension: the workforce. Personal aspects, including empowerment (i.e. some apparent

49

choice and control) and overall job satisfaction also need to be considered (Frenkel et al., 1998). Increased (technical) managerial control has, therefore, to be combined to some extent with a 'soft[er] discourse [of] caring in order to maximise efficiency' (Mulholland, 2002: 283). Bain et al. (2002) recognise the dilemma of having to address both quantitative ('hard') and qualitative ('soft') aspects. They give the examples of managerialist preoccupation with targets and the quality of interaction with customers as illustrative of this dichotomy. Furthermore, they suggest it 'is the key factor in understanding the growing evidence of both fundamental managerial dilemmas and high levels of employee dissatisfaction' as a result of management's failure to address these elements (Bain et al., 2002: 172). There is then a need to consider the customer perspective and to reconcile what might appear to be competing elements, namely the 'dual logics' of cost effective outcomes and customer satisfaction (Korczynski, 2002). These apparently contradictory aims arise out of the need to achieve lower unit costs while simultaneously improving the 'quality' of customer service; a paradox that in a commercial context is seen as 'unavoidable' (Bain et al., 2005: 2). One way of trying to understand the complex dynamics of call centres has been the various attempts to construct models and there have been numerous attempts to do so (see for example, Frenkel et al., 1998; Batt and Moynihan, 2002; Deery and Kinnie, 2002; Houlihan, 2002; Glucksmann, 2004). Batt and Moynihan (2002) explored the viability of such models and how they impact on workers. They identify three models of call centre organisation: the 'mass production' model, the 'professional service' model and coming between them, various 'hybrid' models which they classify generally as the 'mass customisation' model. (Batt and Moynihan, 2002: 15-18). The models are distinguished along four dimensions: the use of technology, skill requirements, the organisation of work and the use of human resource incentives. Furthermore, they characterise these models as being on a continuum in relation to investment in human resources and with regard to the degree of discretion that employees are

50

able to exercise, rated as 'low' in the mass production model to 'high' in the professional

model and (Batt and Moynihan, 2002: 19-28). The principal focus of studies has been in

relation to how call centres affects employees; callers have not been subject to the same

scrutiny. The customers of call centres have rarely been the subject of study, which is

surprising given their alleged centrality in the call centre process, and the fact they were

initially used to justify call centres' introduction (Frenkel et al., 1998; Korczynski et al.,

2000).

The interface with customers clearly plays a significant part in how work is structured and

organised and it is odd therefore that they have been largely ignored. The work of

Glucksmann (2004) and Bolton and Houlihan (2005) is an exception that recognised that

customers could take on different roles at different times, being:

> [M]any-faceted, complex and sophisticated social actors who can take on a number of
> guises as 'mythical sovereigns [seeking to] exercise their perceived right to demand
> not just service but servitude from service providers; [and as] functional transactants
> want[ing] to carry out a transaction in the simplest manner possible; [or as] moral
> agents [able to] fully engage with service providers, recognizing that service providers
> and customers are economic and social actors and that customer interaction is a
> socially relevant activity.

(Bolton and Houlihan, 2005: 686)

The approach taken by Glucksmann and Bolton and Houlihan is unusual in offering a

humanistic rather than mechanistic perspective on call centre operation. They acknowledge

that despite the constraints of technological mediation, interaction with customers is still a significant factor. It might be imagined that research conducted in the public sector would be more likely to focus on this aspect; however, there is a remarkably limited amount in this respect (Bain et al., 2005 and see below).

Management control and surveillance in call centres

The negative portrayal of call centres has positioned them as an environment which, as a result of using sophisticated technology, is able to facilitate a higher degree of control over the workers. In its most extreme form it has been argued that ICT has allowed managerial control to be rendered 'perfect' (Fernie and Metcalf, 1998). This has resulted in the research undertaken tending to have a particular focus around three key issues: managerial control, particularly via the use of surveillance, employee resistance to those controls and the personal cost to employees. Control via electronic surveillance relies on a 'neo-Foucauldian' panoptical perspective (typified by Sewell, 1998 and Fernie and Metcalfe, 1998) that includes notions of normative control and self-surveillance.

It is evident that call centres have to accommodate diverse and at times contradictory forces, but the overwhelming portrayal of them has been in simplistic economic terms as virtual factories (Coleman, 2006).This positions them as a form of 'production line' (Batt and Moynihan, 2002) or 'assembly lines in the head' where the integration of telephone and computer technologies has led to new developments in 'the Taylorisation of white-collar work' (Taylor and Bain, 1999: 115). As we have seen a key signifier of this characterisation is the degree to which employees are controlled by new technology and the potential for

52

managerial (and self-) surveillance using ICT. Taylor and Bain see this as the key feature for workers; if anything distinguishes a call centre worker 'it is both the extent to which they are subject to monitoring and the unrelenting pressure to conform to acceptable forms of speech, whether scripted or not'(Taylor and Bain, 1999:109).

The 'production line' analogy and its allusion to Braverman is extended with the recognition of the scale and type of direction and control by ICT in this context. An obvious example of this is the use of 'automatic call distribution' (ACD) to direct calls to the next available operator; an efficient use of resources that eliminates operator agency. A more subtle example is the use of the 'calls waiting' board to increase the speed at which calls are dealt with. This has been seen as another way for managers to exercise more control as workers are aware of the psychological pressure of the 'power of the call queue in maximising pace - the workers are almost seen as part of the machine which continuously "fires" calls at them' (Callaghan and Thompson, 2001: 20-21and see Chapter 6). Thus (echoing Edwards) control is strengthened by the combination of technical and subjective elements. Others, (see, for example, Fernie and Metcalfe,1998; Sewell, 1998) have argued that in call centres the combination of technical means, peer surveillance and peer pressure results in a degree of control that exceeds conventional methods and amounts to 'perfect' or 'chimerical' control. Braverman's labour process perspective emphasises the fact that technology is not neutral as 'control (Taylorism) is incorporated into the very nuts and bolts (or to be more precise the wires and chips) of the technology' (Wood, 1987: 1-2). It is evident that there is more scope in call centres to assert some forms of control and surveillance over workers, as evidenced by ACD and the ability to listen in to calls. However, without equal attention being given to

53

personal and psychological elements control can only be partial. In order to maximise its effectiveness it also has to be legitimised and internalised by the workforce to some extent.

Consent and resistance to managerial surveillance and control in call centres

As we have seen the issue of control of the labour process is complex and involves both structural and personal elements. In describing managerial control in this environment there are two broad schools of thought: more 'traditional' controls of the labour process, such as overt managerial and bureaucratic controls that have continuity with the processes described by Marx and Braverman, and a technological variant amounting to 'panoptical' control by ICT and self-surveillance. Subsequent to Braverman's work much has been made of the degree to which employees need to identify with institutional norms and goals in order to be managed effectively in contemporary settings. In doing so they legitimise that control and implicitly consent to control mechanisms. Thus, in order to effectively control call centre workers we have seen that both technical and normative controls are essential. As we have seen, it has been argued that normative control effectively reduces the need for overt control by creating an 'assembly line in the head' (Taylor and Bain, 1998). This also draws on second wave LPT writers such as Edwards and Burawoy in recognising that normative effects can result from technological control mechanisms. The ability to initiate normative controls underpins the neo-Foucaldian thesis, which suggests that control can be made 'perfect' by the combination of actual surveillance via ICT and the workers' belief that they are subject to surveillance. This normative aspect, it is argued, is more powerful than actual surveillance in its ability to exert control over the workforce (Sewell, 1998; Fernie and Metcalfe, 1998). Whilst initially beguiling, this argument has been challenged and effectively undermined by many authors (see, for example, Bain and Taylor; 2000; Taylor et al. 2002;

54

and particularly, Thompson, 2003) who have pointed to a serious flaw in this control paradigm in failing to acknowledge individual agency or indeed the collective power of employees. Workers in any setting have the ability to undermine and resist the most sophisticated or coercive managerial controls with both overt and covert practices (see Chapter 6). Thus while Sewell and Fernie and Metcalfe largely accepted the Foucaldian perspective on the futility of dissent and resistance, others have argued convincingly that even in 'panopticism' 'there are blind spots in the rationalising gaze and limits in capital's ability to standardise knowledge and innovation' (Callaghan and Thompson, 2001: 140).

Resistance to managerial subordination can take individual and collective forms (Knights and McCabe, 1998, Taylor and Bain, 1999). Individual agency will always exist no matter what control mechanisms are utilised and individual resistance can be exercised in different ways. The degree to which resistance is manifested may relate to the degree of physical and psychological discomfort experienced, but agency exists in the ability to undermine the efficiency of operation by sabotage or indifference. Workers in call centres can choose 'pretence, boredom, sympathetic dialogue' or to leave (Callaghan and Thompson, 2001: 3; and see Chapter 6). Another way to resist managerial control or to mitigate its effects and, therefore, effectively subvert it, is the use of humour (Bain and Taylor, 2003 and see Chapter 6). Specific examples of resistance often rely on the very sophistication of systems designed to control the workers which enable them to undermine those controls. Townsend (2005) describes a call centre in Australia where workers were able to gain more break time to have a cigarette or go to the toilet despite technological controls which were initially described as 'impossible' to circumvent. It was only after gaining their trust that the workers were willing to share their strategy with him:

55

We can take a call, and if they need to pay a bill then we transfer them into the computer interactive system 'cardgate'. What we can do is hit transfer but we don't release the button. So then we go on mute while the customer does the interactive computer processes. And that really gives you three or four minutes. Sometimes I go for a cup of tea or maybe go to the toilet, every now and then I go out for a cigarette.

(Townsend, 2005:56)

Similar individual ruses are reported in other studies, including using the threat of resigning in order to change shift patterns when staff shortages were an issue (Taylor and Bain, 1999). In one extreme example of individual power to subvert the systems, and even to exploit them for individual ends, Townsend describes how one employee pursued a vendetta against his girlfriend's former partner by getting his electricity disconnected (2005:57).Whilst the ability of individuals to resist management coercion has often been underplayed, this is also true of collective resistance and the role that trades unions have in this context (Taylor and Bain, 1999, Bain and Taylor, 2000). Collective bargaining and the ability of the workforce to withdraw its labour (more difficult though that has become as a result of the Thatcher government reform of trades union law) are still features of call centre environments. The ability of unions to negotiate conditions and rates of pay and health and safety issues are examples of collective resistance in operation. In call centres trade unions are also able to mitigate managerial control by making representations at both local and national level on workplace practices such as overuse of call monitoring and other oppressive measures (Taylor and Bain 1999:114).

There now seems to be general agreement that the analysis of the surveillance aspect of call centre work has become a 'tired category' that has been overplayed to some extent in this context and that Fernie and Metcalf's use of 'the electronic panopticon [and] total control metaphor [was] ...much quoted but fortunately less imitated' (Thompson and van den Broek, 2010:6). In summary, the critique of surveillance asks three main questions: How effective is electronic surveillance? How new or distinctive is this form of control? How credible is it to frame surveillance as the dominant form of control in call centres? The conclusion drawn is that whilst surveillance is a feature of the increased rationalisation of work, it should only be regarded as another managerial tool, not a managerial panacea, and one that is also subject to negotiation (Thompson, 2003:144-8).The panopticon is anything but perfect, then, given the ability to contest, avoid or undermine its scrutiny. However, as with any other intensive, repetitive and often monotonous labour processes it inevitably impacts on individuals' health and wellbeing.

How working in a call centre impacts upon employees

Call centres are invariably described as being detrimental to employees' health and wellbeing (see, for example, Taylor and Bain, 1999; Bain et al., 2002; Holman, 2002).This may be seen as part of what Braverman described as the 'alienation of the process of production' where the workers are forced to surrender any control of the labour process via the strict separation of the conception and execution of their work with progressively damaging implications for the workforce. Call centres are invariably described as work settings that epitomise this and are characterised as one of the least attractive places to work. The *general* view of the negative effect on employees' wellbeing is well documented (see, for example, Fernie and Metcalf, 1998; Garson, 1998; Taylor and Bain, 1999; Holman, 2002; Batt and Moynihan,

57

2002; Deery et al., 2004; Bain and Taylor, 2005). This is in contrast to the *specific* effects on employees, which are rarely articulated. The negative effects tend to be expressed generally with a blanket acceptance of their harmful nature with no room for an alternative view. Although high staff turnover rates are a consistent feature, they are generally seen as evidence of the damaging effect of working in this environment without offering a specific aetiology. There is actually surprisingly little written about the specific physical or mental health effects on employees which might be expected to be primary causes of high staff turnover. Only two studies address these areas in any detail: Holman (2002) and Taylor et al. (2003).

Holman's study focused on the psychological effects of working in a call centre whereas the study by Taylor et al. had a primary focus on physical symptomology such as musculo-skeletal and eye problems. Their study supported and reinforced Holman's findings on stress. Holman's study was the first to comprehensively document the detrimental effects on call centre workers' mental health and overall wellbeing in this context, based on a survey of 557 customer service representatives (CSRs). He looked at the effect of structural factors (job design, performance monitoring, HR practices and team leader support) in this context and whether call centre work was any more stressful than other comparable settings. He focused on four specific aspects of well-being: anxiety, depression, intrinsic job satisfaction, and extrinsic (pay, prospects etc.) job satisfaction (2002:35). Although I would argue that his choice of the term 'depression' was ill-advised given the specific nature of symptoms associated with a diagnosis of clinical depression, it is typical of the misuse of the term by the lay public. His study actually used self-reported measures of *unhappiness* which does not equate to clinical depression; that said his findings are still useful and at least try to identify

58

context-specific health issues. His findings showed that where workers were unable to exercise any control or experienced little support, levels of anxiety and 'depression' rose and intrinsic and extrinsic job satisfaction dropped. His findings supported other studies in confirming a correlation between greater control, job variety and increased wellbeing. One finding that was unexpected however, was the lack of direct association between the control exercised over the amount of time of CSRs conversations with customers. What was significant was the degree of *choice* they had in what they said to customers or how they completed a task. His results also confirmed that high levels of monitoring were associated with poor wellbeing scores (see Chapter 6 with reference to NCD).

Holman's findings challenged the notion that working in a call centre has to be damaging and offered the possibility of being able to incorporate features to counter this. One of the important conclusions drawn from his study was to reinforce the generally held view that greater worker control equals greater job satisfaction. At least one earlier study argued that this control would actually be achieved by an increased use of technology (Blaumer, 1964, cited in Thompson, 2001:16). This, it was argued, would increase workers' control of their environment and lead to a reduction in their alienation. Thus, the benign model of technological control as posited by Edwards (1979) would actually lead to more 'belonging' and 'social integration'

We have seen that Holman argued that control and the degree of variety of demands on the workforce were predictors of wellbeing. He also acknowledged the importance of discretion and the differential effect of scripted and non-scripted work. A lack of discretion and a

reduction in workers' control and a more overt managerial direction, as epitomised by the enforced use of scripts, was strongly associated with what has been described as 'emotional exhaustion'. This concept is based on the more familiar 'burnout' syndrome and is described as the first stage of that process. Deery et al. (2002) and Taylor and Bain (1999) characterised call centre work as being consistent with other forms of 'emotional labour' and as such saw employees as prone to this condition. This is characterised by tiredness, fatigue and lack of energy and is a form of stress that arises in professions where constant and/or intense interpersonal contact is a feature. It is argued that situational rather than personal factors such as 'role conflict and role confusion' arising from a lack of training, are also predisposing factors for emotional exhaustion, which in turn leads to high staff turnover rates (Deery et al. 2002; Taylor and Bain, 1999; and Chapter 6).

The study by Taylor et al.(2003) was far more comprehensive in describing the occupational ill-health effects associated with call centre work and detailed both physical ('visible') and psychological ('invisible') ailments. A wide range of self-reported problems were documented that included physical and mental tiredness, headaches, ear ache, back ache, sinus problems and voice loss. In addition to these physical problems, stress featured significantly with more than fifty per cent reporting feeling stressed at least several times a month and a quarter experiencing stress daily or several times a week (2003:442). All of the literature from the private sector supports the view that working in a call centre is therefore 'incontestabl[y] inherently demanding and frequently stressful' and leaves workers 'mentally, physically and emotionally exhausted' (Taylor and Bain, 1999:115). The overwhelming view of the call centre, therefore, is that is inherently oppressive, stressful and damaging for its workforce (Coleman, 2009: 44). As we shall see, this view has also been promulgated within

60

public sector settings, with little being written thus far to distinguish contact centres from the private sector in this regard.

Key themes in call centre research

We have seen that there are some central themes which emerge from the private sector research:

- Call centres have an economic rationale based on rationalising resources and maximising profit.

- Call centres are regarded as unpleasant, stressful and damaging places to work .

- Call centre employees are routinely exposed to electronic surveillance, monitoring and control via ICT.

- The work in call centres is repetitive and routinised, and the conception and execution of it is separate.

- There is a relative lack of attention given to the issue of deskilling (which Braverman saw as inevitable) in private sector call centres but this could result from an overly narrow definition of skill.

Three key themes from Braverman's thesis have been shown to be central in understanding the labour process in call centres and these issues have featured prominently in research. We have seen that the separation of the organisation and experience of work is a feature of the call centre labour process and is used to exercise and maintain managerial control in common with other work contexts. Managerial surveillance and control has been identified as being

more effective than in other settings due to its facilitation by ICT. The degree to which it can be effective has identified two schools of thought in this context: the 'perfect' panoptical control envisaged by Fernie and Metcalf (1998) and Sewell (1998); and those who highlight the fallibility of current technology, making it less able to exercise absolute control over workers (for example, Mason et al. 2004). This imperfect view of technology also develops Braverman's perspective on control in taking into account and acknowledging the role that consent and legitimation have to play in controlling the workforce. Others (see, for example, Taylor and Bain, 1999; Taylor et al., 2002) have argued in support of employees' ability to resist either individually or collectively. We have seen that all of the studies within the labour process paradigm agree about the pernicious nature of call centres and the detrimental effect of working in them (see, for example, Holman et al. 2002; Taylor et al. 2003). As we have seen, the paradigm is well established and, as a paradigm, has been rarely challenged. Only one study moves outside of the labour process paradigm; Glucksmann (2004) approaches the study of call centres from an alternative 'relational' viewpoint. She makes clear her intention to look at how call centres are configured through a different lens by 'building on recent writing in a complementary but different direction' (Glucksmann, 2004: 795). This was a deliberate attempt to widen the focus beyond the conceptualisation of call centres as 'electronic sweatshops' (Garson, 1988) and beyond the debate around 'surveillance versus resistance'. Her analysis is a broader sociological one, which, she argues, can reflect the inherent complexities of call centre organisation. Glucksmann's framework incorporates perspectives on process, 'relationality' and divisions of labour, in order to show how different components of call centre labour and process connect and interact. In doing so she seeks to: 'develop a relational conception of the call centre as one phase in an integral process of production or provision through to consumption, that relates upstream to production and distribution, and downstream to delivery and consumption' (Glucksmann, 2004: 796).

62

The significance of this approach is that it allows for greater flexibility within different fields of activity in acknowledging the widening diversity of call centre application. In doing so, it begins to question the view (see for example, Kinnie et al., 2000) of call centres being essentially the same. Glucksmann describes five permutations of call centre configuration which reflect purpose, function and the amount of direct interaction between operator and caller. The interactive element has particular significance for my study and Glucksmann's model was the first which explicitly acknowledged it as a feature. The five configurations she describes capture current call/contact centre usage: providing information to callers, connecting consumers to third parties, selling goods and products, emergency services and help lines (Glucksmann, 2004: 801-808). Although Glucksmann's work is decontextualised and underplays the significance of neo-liberal context and reforms, her model allows for a more nuanced and dynamic view than the conventional labour process paradigm. An example of this is the fact that it is able to accommodate the customer role. It therefore highlights the significance of the customer type, and the role they play in the process; something which most studies have failed to address.

We have seen that LPT has underpinned research on call centres; this might be seen as consistent with Braverman's thesis as in the private sector profit is the incentive for the introduction of rationalised systems of work. We now turn to the more limited amount of research in the public sector, using the same themes.

CONTACT CENTRES: THE PUBLIC SECTOR CONTEXT

The nature of work in contact centres: how work is structured and organised in the public sector

Chapter 2 showed how NPM brought private sector working practices and consumerism into the public sector. It also introduced a 'quasi-market' system into state services such as social work and healthcare that separated the roles of 'provider' and 'purchaser' (Harris, 2003). As we have seen, this was supposed to have increased consumer choice and power. Consistent with this wider trend, the use of contact centres in the public sector has been represented as responding to rational consumer-led demands for services that are more accessible, flexible and diverse (Cabinet Office, 1999; Clarke et al., 2000b; Asgarkhani, 2005; Cabinet Office, 2005). This has also been the case in other countries under pressure from NPM such as Sweden and Australia. Sederbland and Andersons' (2006) research, for example, shows that the rationale for the introduction of telephone advisory nursing (TAN) in Sweden, as in the UK, was driven by NPM and its consumerist philosophy. This is made clear in the rationale for the service which stated that 'citizens shall get the same condition (*sic*) and pay the same for a service irrespective of whether it is provided by the public sector or by a private actor' (Sederbland and Anderson, 2006: 16). Until now, research undertaken in public sector settings has been very limited; this might be seen as commensurate with the relatively limited amount of contact centre deployment in the public sector until recently. The research that has been published thus far is notable for the lack of identification of specific differences in public sector settings. Only one study (van den Broek, 2003) is comparable to that of NCD in looking at a contact centre that employs qualified social workers with a primary social work focus (Coleman, 2009).

Research undertaken in public sector settings has focused on the British civil service (Fisher, 2004), police control rooms (Bain et al., 2005) and health service contexts particularly 'tele-nursing in a number of countries, including the UK, Canada (Collin-Jacques, 2004; Collin-Jacques and Smith, 2005), Sweden (Sederbland and Anderson, 2006) and Finland (Suomi and Tähkäpää, 2003), which looked at a public health contact centre used to coordinate primary care responses. There has been a marked lack of published research into social services, however, with only two examples that are social work related, both of which are set in an Australian context (Humphries and Camilleri, 2002; van den Broek, 2003). Until now, literature in the UK has tended to focus on more general themes relating to the incursion of ICT into social work practice, rather than the setting in which it is employed (Postle, 2002; Harlow and Webb, 2003). However, the absence of specific British social work research may merely reflect what was, until recently, the relative novelty of this approach.

The research from public sector settings is striking with regard to the extent to which it downplays differences between private sector call centres and contact centres. This in turn reinforces the notion of the call centre as a 'unique' environment capable of exerting hitherto unimaginable controls over the workforce. Alongside this notion, the conclusion is drawn that despite suggestions by some, (for example, Glucksmann, 2004) that 'non-economic' settings may yield a more benign working culture, such settings seem just as stressful and damaging for workers (Bain et al. 2005; Taylor and Bain, 2006). In exploring whether there are differences, the studies of Australian centres that employed social workers might seem an obvious starting point, but even here there are context-specific differences that need to be considered.

65

Humphries and Camilleri (2002) describe a national, semi-autonomous organisation ('Centrelink') that was set up by the Australian federal government to 'create a one-stop shop for the delivery of social security and welfare services' to replace the Department of Social Security, with its own Board of Directors appointed by the government (Humphries and Camilleri, 2002: 251-2). However although it provides a 'one-stop-shop' its primary focus was not on social work as we would understand it in the UK. The work that Centrelink undertook may be more accurately described as social welfare as it delivers 'social security and employment services' as well as processing income support payments (Humphries and Camilleri, 2002: 252). A small section (500 out of 23,000) of the overall workforce is described as 'social workers' but not made clear whether they are qualified social workers at the same level or in the same way that we would understand that term in the British context. The study seemed to show that the social workers in Humphries and Camilleri's contact centre were engaged primarily in welfare benefits work and the 'social work' element seemed to be a by-product of this rather than a primary function. However, the examples given illustrate that the workers did at times, work outside of these narrow confines and engaged in recognisable social work activity. As a result the conclusions drawn may have more relevance than at first appears.

The controls exercised over the workforce were similar to those in private call centres and workers were just as accountable for their use of time. An example given in the study was the requirement to provide a monthly call log and commentary on call activity. They were also pressurised to complete calls quickly, although the social workers routinely exceeded guidelines in this respect. However, despite similar controls, Humphries and Camilleri's study seems to offer some evidence to challenge the conventional view. The social workers

66

appeared to experience a degree of job satisfaction and their principal complaint seemed to be that they were insufficiently trained in using the ICT. Humphries and Camilleri did, however, like van den Broek, (2003) and others, recognise the dangers of rationalised and routinised work and the resultant deskilling (also see Chapter 6).

The second Australian study by van den Broek (2003) describes a centre ('Childline') that did employ qualified social workers with a primary focus on social work, but the exclusively child protection context differentiates it from my study[6].Childline is portrayed as being typical of what Batt and Moynihan (2001) described as a 'professional' model in that the technology was (ostensibly) complementary to the expert labour of the workers who were expected to have retained discretion over their work tasks. Van den Broek found that workers at Childline were actually subjected to pressures and labour processes more often associated with 'low skill' commercial call centres. She also found marked similarities to private sector settings where the management 'invoked private sector ideals of cost-efficiency by focusing on business objectives linked to individual output with quantifiable performance indicators' (2003: 239).This comparison with private sector call centres was reinforced by one worker being told by her manager that her work there was 'about quantity not quality' (*ibid*: 245). Despite the differences to NCD, van den Broek's study offers the closest comparison and will be subject to further consideration below.

---

[6] NCD is a generic service that deals with all calls across the entire range of service users, whether adults or children.

Management control and surveillance in contact centres

We have seen that thus far there have been very few differences identified in relation to how work is organised in public sector settings. Given that the examples that have been studied relate to the 'professional' model it could be assumed that there would be a corresponding 'light touch' in relation to managerial surveillance and control and the degree of discretion that employees might be expected to have (van den Broek, 2003; Sederbland and Anderson, 2006). Contact centres that employ nurses, engaged in triage (Collin-Jacques, 2004; Collin-Jacques and Smith, 2005) in a 'telephone advisory nursing' (TAN) context (Sederbland and Anderson, 2006), or childcare social workers (van den Broek, 2003) could be expected to conform to this professional ideal, as (like NCD), they employed professionals who had a high degree of interaction with callers.

The studies by van den Broek (2003), Collin-Jacques (2004) and Collin-Jacques and Smith (2005) were among the first to look at contact centres through the lens of a specific profession. They were a response to the lack of research into contact centres that employed professionals. They allowed a focus on a 'qualified workforce with more status and authority than a standardised clerical occupation' (Collin-Jacques, 2004: 154). The studies also highlighted the lack of research in this area and the lack of a framework in the existing literature that could be used to consider 'wider contextual factors such as national institutions, the role of technology suppliers and varying historical conditions' (Collin-Jacques and Smith, 2005: 9). The role for tele-nursing that they advocate sees it as an adjunct to traditional nursing not as a replacement. In doing so, they do not appear to acknowledge the possibility of tele-nursing ever playing a substantial role in clinical intervention, let alone having the potential to supplant it. This optimism seems misplaced, however, when viewed against the

68

backdrop of the greater use of technology as a diagnostic aid and, increasingly, as a treatment option. In another study of a professional contact centre van den Broek (2003) looked at social workers engaged in childcare.

Van den Broek's study concentrated on social workers who were professionally qualified to degree standard. However, despite this 'caseworker discretion over workflows was... shaped as much by call centre technology as by occupational status, and by managerial policies and practices embedded in public sector reforms'(van den Broek, 2003:238). This apparent lack of discretion highlighted the fact that professional qualification and a strong professional identity does not necessarily offer increased protection from technological rationalisation, suggesting that the benign view of technology cited above is over-optimistic. Not only did it not protect them from rationalisation it also did not insulate them from managerial surveillance and control. The use of expert software is a clear indication of the direction in which nursing (like other professions) is moving. One example of ICT being used to control professionals in this context is the use of the 'computerised clinical assessment system' (CAS) in NHS Direct. This is used to direct professional intervention and to 'provide expert clinical reasoning'. In terms of managerial control and surveillance however, the implications are very clear given that 'senior management make no secret of the fact that they are attempting to use this system to limit the extent to which [the] conduct and outcomes of nurse triage depends on the professional clinical judgement of the individual nurses' (Gann, 2002, in Greatbatch et al., 2005: 803).This feature was significant in terms of both managerial control and in undermining professional discretion and autonomy. This finding echoes the response given by the manager at Childline in van den Broek's study who appeared to be less interested in the quality of the professional response than the quantity of calls answered.

69

In the Swedish context the nurses do appear (thus far at least) to have rather more autonomy than their British or Canadian counterparts (Sederbland and Anderson, 2006), but it appears that this may be changing as a result of managerialism as the title ('*who has got the control in telephone advisory nursing?*') suggests. Outside of human services the only articles that describe a public sector environment are Fisher's (2004) study of a civil service contact centre and Bain et al.'s (2005) study of a police control room.

Fisher (2004) documents the introduction of call centre technology into the civil service in response to the 'Modernising Government' agenda (Department of Health 1999, and see Chapter 2). Two specific factors emerged in this context to persuade the civil service to consider 'radical change'. These were year-on-year demands from the Treasury for efficiency gains and cost-savings and the demands from the newly-elected New Labour government for the employment of technology to deliver 'joined-up' government (Fisher, 2004: 161 and Chapter 2). The financial services sector was held up as an example of being more efficient, accessible and, in contrast to the civil service, less likely to duplicate work across and between departments. Fisher describes how ICT was used to 'reconstitute basic labour processes' in the civil service (Fisher, 2004: 163). In order to emulate the private sector and to increase efficiency, ICT was deployed owing to its ability to 'facilitate the separation of and reassignment of the qualitative and quantitative dimensions to work, while rendering these dimensions subject to more systematic measurement and control'(*Ibid*).

Bain et al.'s (2005) study of a police control room was specifically designed to test the hypothesis that a public sector setting would yield a different type of call/contact centre. It

was suggested that the lighter touch of the professional model would equate to less managerial control and more discretion (Batt and Moynihan, 1998, and, see Glucksmann, 2004). Bain et al.'s study began by suggesting that in the absence of market pressures and commercial considerations, quality would (as Glucksmann predicted) be expected to take precedence over quantity. The 'public sector call centre might be expected to approximate to the high discretion, lightly monitored, professional services paradigm' (2005: 3). However, Bain et al. did not take account of the quasi-business pressures that the public sector had been exposed to via managerialism, such as Best Value or the Gershon efficiency savings, and in that sense perhaps overplayed the freedom to pursue qualitative rather than quantitative goals in the public sector. Bain et al. do acknowledge the lack of research into public sector contact centres and warn that any optimistic view of them that has arisen has been based on scant evidence. Having said that, they concede that the limited studies that have been undertaken appear to show some positive aspects (for example, reduced staff turnover in comparison with private sector call centres as Fisher's, 2004 study shows) and acknowledge the possibility that some of the more negative aspects of call centre design may be able to be 'designed out' (Bain et al., 2005: 5). However, they temper this by citing the results of Fisher's (2004) civil service study, suggesting that although the civil service contact centre was at the 'high' end of the continuum it was still part of the same quantity-quality configuration seen in private sector call centres. As such, it was still about increasing output and efficiency and subject to the same control and rationalisation of work. They note that Fisher suggested that the apparent emphasis on quality, over quantity, which he observed at the time of the study, might only be temporary and linked to establishing the contact centre. Bain et al. are far less forgiving of Glucksmann's (2004) analysis which they dismiss as 'theoretically flawed and undermined by empirical evidence' (i*bid*). Their study of a police control room is used to deconstruct and dismantle Glucksmann's thesis in arguing that

71

despite the public sector setting employees were subject to the same degree of control and surveillance, with the same damaging effects to their wellbeing.

The problem with Bain et al's criticism of Glucksmann is that it has to be set against the backdrop of what they themselves identify as a lack of public sector research. The public sector is diverse and call centre technology is now utilised in many different contexts. Their conclusions are drawn from one piece of research in a very specific location. It is overstating the case to imply that a police control room is both typical and representative of the public sector as a whole. This is evidently not the case and in undermining Glucksmann they merely continue to support the 'one size fits all' view by 'treating all call centres as the same' (Kinnie et al., 2000: 983).

Consent and resistance to managerial surveillance and control in contact centres

In some respects the public sector could be expected to be more fertile ground for testing the consent and resistance aspects of this form of work. The public sector trade unions have traditionally been more powerful than their private sector equivalents and able to negotiate more favourable working conditions. As a result the public sector workforce has enjoyed relative job security. Fisher (2004) argued that this led to an uncritical acceptance and defence of the bureaucratic and managerial systems that existed in state work at that time (and see Harris, 1998a). In that sense 'consent' was often institutionalised and reinforced by the public sector trade unions.

72

As Braverman observed, workers exposed to the more aggressive style of management in the private sector might be more amenable to unionisation as they are engaged in a continuous struggle to improve, rather than consolidate working conditions (Bain and Taylor, 2000). This might therefore be the case in private sector call centres given their characterisation as profit-driven electronic sweatshops. However, the type of work undertaken by public sector employees in contact centres and the working conditions they enjoy would perhaps make them more amenable to control by consent rather than coercion (see Chapter 6) and therefore less receptive to collective action. Fisher's (2004) study of trade union activity in a civil service contact centre should, therefore, be fertile ground for examining the issue of consent and resistance in this context. This is brought into even sharper relief by the fact that 'there are arguably few workplaces where trade unions have less experience of contesting and redefining the frontiers of labour process intensification and control than those within the British civil service'(Fisher, 2004:158).

In addition, this was a description of how a public service union dealt with being confronted by the development of a call centre approach in this context for the first time. All of Fisher's interviewees advocated active cooperation (reinforced by union officials) which confirmed that consent was the principal means of control. This had been achieved by management convincing the unions (and the workforce) that the contact centre was actually *preserving* their work. They had done so by positioning it as 'intelligent work', which call centre technology would facilitate rather than undermine. Fisher sees this as an example of trade unions failing to anticipate the effects of increased use of technology and the introduction of ICT as part of the ongoing 'Taylorisation' of white-collar work. He characterised this failure as symptomatic of the 'on-going crisis of civil service trade unionism' (Fisher, 2004: 173).

Fisher noted that while the work did appear to have some qualitative differences to the private sector, this was largely due to the (as yet) inability of the technology to cope with the complexity of the work. Also more importantly, he recognised management's need to avoid upsetting the workers in order to keep their consent and cooperation (see Chapter 5 with reference to NCD). He argued, therefore, that it was too early to make definitive judgements but was pessimistic about future developments. Although not directly comparable to the introduction of call centre technology in a social work context, there are parallels in terms of the scale and complexity of the operations: the implications for the workforce that Fisher highlights in relation to how the working day was organised, managed and remunerated and, perhaps more interestingly, how the workforce cooperated with this. This is directly comparable to the changes introduced for social workers by NCD (Chapter 5).

How working in a contact centre impacts upon employees

As we have seen, van den Broek (2003), not unreasonably, suggested that a distinct skill set and strong professional identity would be expected to offer some protection for the social workers in the contact centre she studied. Their professional status had been expected to insulate them from the high intensity, low-skilled work of the 'mass-production' model (Batt and Moynihan, 2002). This did not prove to be the case, however, and her findings offer a challenge to Batt and Moynihan's typology, which suggests that 'high skill' workers enjoy high degrees of discretion. In the event, van den Broek found that despite their qualified status and a 'strong occupational and professional identity' this was not the case (2003: 236). The subsequent effect upon their social work practice was apparently noticeable, with workers at Childline reporting that working there had significantly deskilled them (*op.cit.* 236).The conclusions van den Broek draws are pessimistic in relation to social work in this

74

environment and appear to support the pessimistic view from research in the private sector as well as the broad conclusions of the two British studies of public sector settings (Fisher, 2004; Bain et al., 2005). In addition, as we will see, the social workers' perception of being deskilled by working at Childline chime with the responses by workers at NCD (Chapter 6). Colin-Jacques' (2004) and Collin-Jacques and Smith's (2005) studies of tele-nursing appear to be the only ones that are optimistic in this respect. As I have already indicated, however, the increasing use of ICT to direct and control nurses will inevitably impact on their practice and skill mix.

Fisher's (2004) study was the only research prior to my own that gave some support to the notion that a public sector contact centre might be less deleterious to employees' wellbeing than the private sector (Chapter 6). Despite the employees' hours of work and remuneration being changed to accommodate the demands of the call centre model, he showed that sickness rates were lower than the private sector equivalent (Fisher, 2004:170). His findings in this respect differed from Bain et al. (2005) who found comparable rates of ill health and sick leave. Fisher's evidence in this respect also gives some credence to Glucksmann's argument that the public sector can, and may be, different. From her perspective, a contact centre should not be subject to the same degree of surveillance and control and, therefore, is less likely to conform to the negative portrayal other studies have promoted.

As we have seen this conclusion has not been accepted by the more prolific contributors to the debate. It was rejected outright by Bain et al. (2005), who argued that police control rooms epitomised non-economic public sector centres that should, but did not, equate to the

high skill/high discretion model. This is supported by the function of the police control room, which is described as an example of a call centre that deals with 'life or death' decision-making rather than sales. Despite this qualitative difference they argue that their findings show the same conditions and pressures exist as in commercial call centres. As a result police control rooms appear reminiscent of private sector call centres rather than the idealised public sector scenario. They argue that workers here are as likely to suffer from stress and physical ailments as in the private sector and list the same ailments as Taylor et al. (2003) and Holman (2002) describe. They dismiss Glucksmann's attempts to re-evaluate call centre configurations and use their findings to conclude that she is:

[M]istaken, for while superficially and in terms of formal logic these emergency workers occupy a different space to other call centre workers, there are remarkable similarities between the contextual imperatives that structure their respective labour processes, and their work experiences. Notwithstanding unique features, police control rooms are essentially a variant of the mass and lean production call centre model (Batt and Moynihan, 2002), situated at the...quantitative end of the quality/quantity spectrum.

(Bain et al., 2005: 21)

In drawing this conclusion they reinforce the notion that all contact centres will have negative effects on the employees who work in them.

76

Conclusion

As we have seen Glucksmann had at least tried to alert us to the possibility of widening the perception of call/contact centres. It is not unreasonable to raise the possibility that working in a public sector contact centre would be different to working in a commercial call centre setting. As we have seen, some have made this point by arguing that the lack of pursuit of 'surplus value' in the public sector defines it as a 'different (non) economic space' (Glucksmann, 2004). Prior to 1990 this position would have been easy to defend and as Harris (1998), Carey (2009) and others have noted the distinctiveness of social work in this regard made it less amenable to Braverman's thesis at that time. We have seen that the changes in social services, as a result of managerialism and the increased use of ICT, have blurred this distinction and the separation of the conception and execution of work that Braverman (1974) envisaged is now evident. I have shown that the literature on call and contact centres focus primarily on themes which have originated from a labour process perspective and broadly support Braverman's thesis. Although there is as yet, a relatively limited amount of research from the public sector it appears thus far, to be consistent with that arising from private sector call centres. Given the amount of research undertaken into private sector call centres the absence of comparable research in a public sector context might appear puzzling. It is conceivable that this might arise from an implicit acceptance of the orthodox view of call centre environments. As some have recognised (see, for example, Kinnie et al., 2000; Glucksmann, 2004), this has characterised them as driven by the need for profit and/or greater efficiency; where employees are subject to overt and covert controls; and as being unpleasant, stressful and damaging places to work. I have argued it could also reflect the (thus far) relative lack of deployment of contact centres in comparison with the scale of the private sector's use of call centres. We have seen that professional status apparently does

77

not offer any protection for workers from surveillance and control, and neither, apparently, does a public sector context. Bain and Taylor (2005) have argued that in essence the context is unimportant; it is the unique working environment that makes working in a call or contact centre so damaging. There is some dissent from this view, however, from Fisher and Glucksmann, albeit with the warning in Fisher's case that it was too early to draw any conclusions from a single study.

This chapter has shown how a number of assumptions are routinely made about call centre environments: first, that the rationale for using call centres is always to increase efficiency by standardising working practices and responses to customers (see for example, Taylor and Bain, 1999; van den Broek, 2003); secondly, that debate about the call or contact centre as a working environment should focus primarily on managerial surveillance and how that might be resisted (Fernie and Metcalf, 1998; Callaghan and Thompson, 2001,Bain and Taylor 2002); and finally that the overwhelming conclusion of call centre research is that, regardless of the context, this type of work environment is stressful, oppressive and damaging for employees (Taylor and Bain, 1999; Holman, 2002). Apart from some notable exceptions (see, for example, Kinnie et al. 2000; Glucksmann, 2004), these assumptions underpin the available research and inform what has become the labour process paradigm. There is considerably more debate around appropriate working models. We saw that while some authors suggest there are a number of 'variations' of what is essentially an electronic 'assembly line' equating to function (Batt and Moynihan, 2002), others seek to address the apparent contradictions of the 'dual logics' of customer satisfaction and service efficiency (Korczynski, 2002).

Glucksmann's (2004) research stands out in attempting a relational analysis of differing

levels of operator discretion and interaction with callers. This offers the possibility that there

may be an alternative conception of call or contact centres which does not conform to the

restricted private sector conception. It suggests that at the 'quality end' of the continuum, the

'professional' model might be realised with higher levels of discretion and more meaningful

interaction with callers (Glucksmann, 2004). We have seen how this view has been dismissed

as mistaken by some who support the near consensus view of call centres as being

intrinsically unpleasant and pressurised places to work, regardless of context (Bain et al.,

2005). This, as has been suggested, may reflect the fact that the labour process paradigm is so

well established that it is difficult for some writers to break free from its constraints. My

study attempts to shed some more light on what is evidently an under-researched area and to

consider whether there are grounds for supporting either perspective: Glucksmann's view that

public sector contact centres occupy a 'different space' which challenges the labour process

paradigm, or Bain et al.'s support of the paradigm (Chapters 6 and 7).

The study of NCD offered the opportunity to consider this dichotomous perception of

call/contact centres in a British social work context for the first time and offered the chance to

examine the nature of work, how it was organised and managed, consent and resistance and

the effect on social workers' wellbeing. We have seen that despite a large body of work

pertaining to call centres in both the private and (to a lesser degree) public sectors,

surprisingly little has been written about the actual impact on employees of working in this

way. In addition the work that does relate to this focuses exclusively on the private sector.

The view of it being a negative and stressful experience has largely been accepted

uncritically, and attributed to the dehumanisation of the labour process that Braverman saw as

an essential element of control. Working within the labour process paradigm, it seems that many authors are unable (or unwilling) to contemplate a labour process that is not inherently exploitative. Where profit is clearly the motive, as in commercial call centres that is understandable, but in contact centres in the public sector this is not the case and at NCD and similar social services settings their *raison d'être* is to contain or **reduce** demand not increase it (Coleman and Harris, 2008). Despite the establishment of a quasi-business ethos in social services over the last two decades income generation is not a feature of front-line social work.

One of the strengths of Braverman's thesis was that it allowed for the evolution of different forms of the labour process and could be applied outside of an industrial context. The reluctance of some to accept the possibility that a different form may be possible seems at odds with Braverman's perspective. We have seen that Glucksmann's analysis may allow a more nuanced view of this type of work setting that can accommodate non-profit organisations more readily. It is also able to consider the dynamics of the relationship between caller and operator and how this impacts on the organisation. Another central feature of Braverman's thesis was his argument that deskilling was an intrinsic feature and inevitable consequence of scientific management and control. However, this element has go largely ignored in the private sector research, once again perhaps, evidence of an uncritical acceptance of the labour process paradigm, but it has emerged in the nascent social work contact centre research, although thus far only in an Australian context (van den Broek, 2003). My thesis aims to contribute to this body of knowledge and to illuminate and reflect the worker experience in the execution of work in this very specific setting and addresses the concerns raised by the literature from both the private and public sector.

Chapter 4 will revisit the key themes within the context of the methodology employed to investigate them. It will offer a rationale for using a case study approach at NCD and describe the practical aspects of gaining access to the study site as well as highlighting the ethical considerations arising from the study.

CHAPTER 4

NORTHSHIRE CARE DIRECT: A CASE STUDY

Introduction

In Chapter 2 the introduction of contact centres was located within a specific political and policy context and examined against the backdrop of New Public Management. Two dimensions were identified that underpin the context of my research, the ideological and the material, and how local authorities have been subjected to a two-fold pressure as a result. In Chapter 2 we saw how the ideological dimension was underpinned by New Public Management. This reframed Social Services Departments as having 'customers' in the same way as any other 'business' and as being able to learn from the private sector how to manage their services efficiently. The modernisation agenda, epitomised by e-government, provided the material dimension forcing local authorities to consider new ways of delivering their services as they were obliged to make all of their services e-accessible by 2005.The agenda was reinforced by the Gershon Review (2004) with local authorities having to demonstrate on-going 'efficiency savings' year-on-year resulting in increased pressures on resources. As we have seen, the coalescence of the material and ideological dimensions, represented by the need for local authorities to balance the books and incorporate a consumerist business ethos, resulted in their adopting the contact centre approach.

Chapter 3 introduced Braverman's (1974) thesis to analyse the labour process in contact centres. Three key themes from this perspective were utilised to consider the available research on commercial call centres and public sector contact centres. As we have seen, my research considers from a labour process perspective the implications of introducing this

innovation in social work and explores organisational and practice implications. Chapter 3 introduced the themes underpinning the specific research questions:

1. How was work organised and structured at NCD? This considers what Braverman terms the 'conception' of work;

2. To what extent were employees at NCD subject to managerial control and surveillance, and to what extent could they resist it? This question focuses on Braverman's 'execution' of work;

3. What impact did working at NCD have on social workers from a personal and professional perspective? This question covers one of the key contentions of Braverman's thesis; that the separation of the conception and execution of work inevitably leads to deskilling of the workforce. It also considers the overall effect on employee well-being. Braverman drew attention to this 'fashionable topic' in relation to worker dissatisfaction, or 'blue collar blues' in modern work settings (1974: 31-6).

Furthermore, in order to approach the research questions in the context of Northshire it was important to consider at the outset why Northshire County Council made the decision to establish a contact centre for its social services and what motivated staff to work there.

This chapter provides an account of the research design and methodology employed and explains why this approach was taken. It begins by focusing on the rationale for using a case study approach and the design of the case study identifies the caseand sets out the practical aspects of gaining access to the field site. The remainder of the chapter examines the methods employed in detail and outlines the process of data collection and analysis. In doing so, it

portrays my research 'journey' for the reader and shows how the research strategy was refined in response to reflection on the issues encountered.

The research design: using a case study approach

My research questions relate primarily to actors in a specific context and a case study approach is particularly suited to this form of enquiry in which 'how' and 'why' questions are posed about events that are outside of the researcher's control (Yin, 2003: 1). In-depth case study can offer the reader a degree of vicarious experience which facilitates understanding of behaviours in relation to context (Stake, 2000) and allows the researcher to explore the meaning of them via the actors' narratives.

A case study can be defined as 'an empirical study that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident' (Yin, 2003: 13). The research design started with the assumption that the call centre environment could have a significant effect on the actors and in this respect a case study approach is helpful in being able to gauge the effects of social processes within an organisation. A distinct advantage of case study method is its flexibility and eclecticism, offering the ability to employ a variety of methods of data collection. This makes it responsive to data that is generated spontaneously as well as allowing for more formally planned data collection. The case study approach allows the researcher to explore the research questions in a real-life setting and can help make sense of the complexity of the social relations that exist in an organisation. The contact centre is a relatively new organisational form and this made it more difficult to predict how data might arise and with the defining features, organisational imperatives and organisational boundaries in flux, the flexibility offered by a case study approach was an important factor. The

84

consideration of the impact of working in a specific environment also pointed to case study as the most appropriate method as it is particularly well suited to understanding context and its relationship to organisational behaviours (Hartley, 2004).

My research focuses primarily on the actors in the contact centre and social work in a call centre environment, which as we have seen is a relatively new phenomenon (Chapters 1 and 2). What Geertz (1973) called 'thick description,' and its strong emphasis on context, contributes to a case study approach and delivers data in a form which is readily accessible. This helps the reader understand how and why behaviours occur in context (Stake, 2000). As we have seen, the case study is an eclectic approach; relying primarily on qualitative research that involves interpretation and usually employs a combination of methods, such as direct observation, semi-structured interviews and documentary analysis. It is, then, concerned primarily with people and the meaning they attribute to their interactions and behaviour. A case study approach emphasises the need to 'plac[e] an interpreter in the field to observe the workings of the case, one who records objectively what is happening but simultaneously examines its meaning and redirects observation to refine or substantiate those meanings (Stake, 1995: 8-9). As we will see, however, 'objectivity' in this context is misleading, given the interaction of observer and observed and the relationship that inevitably develops (Chapters 5and 6).

Case studies are able to provide a way of understanding the everyday experience of a situation from the actor's perspective and allow others to share it. Studying the case in-depth allows the researcher to gain a 'full and thorough knowledge of the particular,' which can capture the uniqueness of a situation (Stake, 2000: 22). This provides the reader with some insight into the lifeworld of its participants. Stake (1995: 3) differentiates between 'intrinsic'

and 'instrumental' case studies. The instrumental case study is undertaken with a specific goal in mind, which is 'something other than understanding' (*ibid*). The data might then be used to 'generalise' (see below) about other cases. Intrinsic case study has understanding of all aspects of the case as its goal with no specific aim for the data or expectation that it will be used to inform other situations. The differentiation between the two approaches can be defined by how much the study considers the uniqueness and generalisability of the case. It is debatable, however, whether case study research can ever be purely intrinsic as it almost certainly will have some instrumental application (Hartley, 2004: 326) or relationship to theory.

The case study has sometimes been viewed from a positivist perspective as an imprecise tool that is unsuitable for generalisation, being characterised as the 'weak sibling' of research methods by its critics (Yin, 2003). Despite this, there is 'growing confidence in the case study as a rigorous research strategy in its own right [and one that] can be theoretically exciting and data rich' (Hartley, 2004: 323 -324) and the advantages it offers for social research support this. It offers the researcher a tool to make sense of very complex data and it can be used to establish or develop theory *in-vivo* as the study progresses.

As we have seen, the use of case studies offers many advantages for the researcher who is exploring phenomena that are largely unknown or unpredictable, which suited it to the study of NCD. The degree of flexibility it offers and the eclectic mix of methods allow it to capture spontaneous phenomena, making it more likely that the data captured is rich and insightful. We have seen that the case study is particularly suited to facilitating understanding of the link between organisational context and behaviours by being able to paint a picture for the reader that is both detailed and multi-dimensional. Describing the setting and the transactions within

86

it in detail helps the reader to experience the setting vicariously. This also serves to establish and delineate the parameters of the case being studied. One of the principal ways of doing this that has become associated with the case study is by using thick description.

Thick description and case study

Although Geertz was not referring to case study methodology his ideas have become associated with it and have been used to offer support for using case study method. Geertz begins from culture, which for him is a 'semiotic' concept:

> Man (*sic)* is an animal suspended in webs of significance that he has himself spun and [he] take[s] culture to be those webs, and an analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning.
>
> (Geertz, 1973: 5)

Thick description is based on the notion that detailed description of the context of behaviour is essential in order to understand (rather than merely observe) the behaviours that occur within that context (*ibid).*Geertz suggests that like a literary critic the role of the researcher is to discover the meaning hidden within the 'manuscript' which may be 'foreign, faded and full of ellipses, incoherencies, suspicious emendations and tendentious commentaries' (Geertz, 1973: 10).

Geertz is very precise in establishing the difference between 'doing ethnography,' which he describes as the basic acts of the researcher's techniques of selecting informants, establishing a rapport, transcribing tapes and so on, and the 'intellectual effort' that is involved in producing thick description reflection and reflecting on it (*op cit:* 6) . He underlines the

87

importance of understanding the context and motivation of behaviours and what might act as signifiers of these. Geertz is particularly critical of grand generalisations (the 'size up and solve' approach) that have arisen as a result of some single studies which he characterises as the 'Jonesville-is-the-USA' approach and which he suggests is 'palpable nonsense'. Another (for Geertz equally risible) example is the use of a 'test case' approach where a case is used to test theoretical ideas. Geertz argues instead for a clear distinction between what is being studied and why and the importance of the context (Geertz, 1973: 21-22). He seeks to clarify and differentiate between the 'locus' and the 'object' or focus of a study by arguing, for example, that anthropologists do not study villages *per se*, they study *in* villages and observe social behaviours that may also occur elsewhere and perhaps more importantly throw up the same questions. The fundamental point he makes is that they are all 'interpretations or misinterpretations' (*ibid*). The role of thick description, then, is to aid this interpretation by shedding some light on the arcane or occult meanings of behaviours that are observed *in situ*. Geertz identifies deeper understanding as the goal and supports an eclectic approach arguing that this level of knowledge and understanding can only be achieved by utilising all of the theoretical apparatus that other studies have produced, rather than supplanting them.

Whilst being dismissive of the 'Jonesville-is-the-USA' type of grand generalisation, Geertz does support the use of generalisation as a useful tool in some respects. He rejects the positivist critique of the case study as being unsuitable for generalisation as he argues that the social processes that occur are the most significant aspect rather than the context. The fact that similar social processes will occur in other settings can be used to further understanding of them by providing a degree of vicarious experience for the reader.

Case study and generalisation

'Generalisability' is the notion that in-depth study and knowledge of one case can be used to help us better understand and respond within other case scenarios (Donmoyer, 2000: 54). Generalisation is usually characterised as falling into two main types; 'scientific' (or inductive) generalisation and 'naturalistic' generalisation which can take different forms such as analytic, exemplar or case-to-case transferability (Sarantakos, 2005).

Case study relies on analytic generalisation in helping to explain the significance or meaning of behaviours rather than merely recording the frequency of their occurrence. Like Geertz, Stake (1995) describes 'petite' and 'grand' generalisations and argues that one of the uses of case studies can be to 'refine' understanding and modify what are deemed as 'grand' generalisations. This again underlines the suitability of this approach for studying a call centre environment. As we saw in Chapter 3, this is a context that has been studied extensively (see for example, Taylor and Bain, 1999; Callaghan and Thompson, 2001; Bain et al., 2002; Taylor et al.; 2003; Deery and Kinnie, 2004) and call and contact centres have certainly been subject to grand generalisation with regard to researchers' views on the way work is structured and organised (for example, Batt and Moynihan, 2002), the degree of managerial control or surveillance (for example, Fernie and Metcalf, 1999; Callaghan and Thompson, 2001) and the effects on employee well-being (for example, Holman, 2002). Using a case study approach at NCD offered a way of interrogating the generalisations about this form of work.

Donmoyer (2000) offers further support for case study in this context, arguing that it is an approach that is able to capture the unique relationship that social workers (and other human service workers) have with the users of their services. He characterises this relationship as

89

'joint action', rather than a one-way transaction, with skilled practitioners often adopting a dual role:

> … they must not only be the stranger who stands outside the action and analyses and acts on subjects; they must also act as a friend who *interacts* with and, in the process jointly constructs meanings with …clients.
>
> (Donmoyer (2000: 56-57)

As we have seen the case study offers the degree of flexibility necessary to allow the researcher to respond to events as they unfold. As a result, it is more likely to capture the different aspects of that interaction and the type of relationship that social workers have with service users. It is the detailed scrutiny of social processes in context that are central as an understanding of these can be used to generalise to some extent about other actors in similar situations. We have seen (Chapters 2 and 3) that the use of contact centres continues to grow and the lessons learned from the study of NCD will have relevance for other contact centres.

Social processes are dependent on context and another way of conceptualising generalisability that considers this aspect is 'fittingness' (Guba and Lincoln (1981) in Schofield, 2000).This relies on consideration of the similarity of the settings being studied and the 'case-to-case transferability' of results. This is seen as a more realistic and practical way to utilise research findings (Schofield, 2000: 75).The degree of 'fit' relies on detailed information (thick description) in order to equip the reader with sufficient detail to appreciate not only the context but as far as possible the experience of the various actors, albeit vicariously. (Chapter 5 will provide the thick description in relation to NCD).

Identifying the case study site

A case is defined by boundaries and function, and is selected in order to address the research questions (Stake, 1994). Some cases appeal to researchers by having a particular resonance for them and this was the case in selecting Northshire Care Direct (NCD) as a research site. NCD offered the opportunity to address the research questions in a setting that is becoming increasingly common with a view to being able to consider the implications of the findings in a wider context .We have seen that 'the aim [of case study] is to thoroughly understand' (Stake, 1995: 8-9) and I wanted to gain insight into the way social work and social workers might be affected by the mediation of technology in an environment that is normally associated with the delivery of business objectives. In order to do so, I had to ensure that the case study selected would offer a degree of 'fit' in relation to other contact centres and this made the selection of the case site critical. The fact that NCD was an established contact centre and one that had been cited in independent review as an example of good practice (IDeA, 2004) suggested that it would offer a good 'fit' in this regard.

Getting in: accessing NCD

Gaining and (crucially) maintaining access to the research site is obviously a vital element of any study and this is facilitated via the 'critical gatekeepers' in the organisation where the research is to be undertaken (Hartley, 2004: 327; Sarantakos, 2005). I was fortunate in that I was able to identify the gatekeepers in Northshire as a result of having been employed there from 1989-2000 in various social work posts and as a manager for the last seven years of that period. Being familiar with the organisational politics and having insight into the demands made on middle managers I knew that the first point of contact selected was critical as 'individuals often immediately acquiesce if a superior has granted permission' (Stake, 1995: 57). I also knew that the study had more chance of being given permission if it was perceived

91

to be of benefit to the organisation and that middle managers were unlikely to respond favourably if it appeared to involve any more demand on their time. This had been reinforced when prior to my doctoral study I had approached a middle manager to ask permission to interview some of his staff and was rebuffed despite my reassurances. This was a sobering lesson as once entry had been sought at this level and refused, there was no way back due to the nature of hierarchy and control in bureau-professions (Harris, 1998b). I was anxious therefore to avoid this happening again, being especially careful in my choice of critical gatekeepers.

Hartley (2004: 327) advocates making use of contacts within an organisation to gain access and I approached the Director of Social Services in Northshire with whom I had always enjoyed a good working relationship and, mindful of Stake's observations on hierarchical relations, I thought that this contact would give me the best chance of gaining access. My insight into how the organisation worked, its values and the changes that public service managerialism had brought (see Chapter 2) gave me a 'keen (and continuing) sense of the politics of the organisation' (Hartley *ibid).* My request to the Director was directed to the Divisional Commissioning Manager, who was responsible for the contact centre, and we made contact via email and arranged to meet to discuss my research. Mindful of my previous experience of trying to gain access to a small group of staff, I was apprehensive as the meeting approached but I was pleasantly surprised at how receptive and helpful the Divisional Manager was. During our conversation (and later when interviewed), there was a sense of the 'political' element to which Hartley refers. It transpired that there was a possibility that the contact centre (which only dealt with social and health care calls) might become part of the planned corporate call centre. The manager stated that:

[Northshire County Council] are moving to a corporate call centre, with one number

for the County Council and [are] looking at setting up call centre staff to deal with the

different departments within the County Council and the concern to us as social care

and health, was oh what does that mean to us?

(Interview with DM)

This uncertainty occurred at a time when Northshire was adjusting to the fact that, as a result

of the government's push toward integration with health for adult services (see Chapter 5), its

social services teams (including NCD) had changed their procedures (and the name of the

teams) to reflect the closer relationship with health authorities. This was very much a 'live'

issue at the time of our interview and she felt that NCD had found this particularly difficult to

adjust to, having only been established for a relatively short time: 'I have got to say that we

are at a point where we are not 100% sure what it means to social care and health and [NCD]

in particular' (*ibid*).

It became clear that although she felt that it was unlikely that NCD would be incorporated, at

least in the near future, she felt that my research would be helpful in gathering evidence,

should it be needed, of the value of NCD's work and its unsuitability (in her opinion) for

inclusion in a system that would deal with 'highways and roads and lollipop ladies [and]

whatever' (*ibid*). I did not ascertain whether her view on the usefulness of my research in this

regard was shared by the Director of Social Services but I was certainly welcomed with a

degree of enthusiasm that I had not anticipated. The Divisional Manager went on to consider

what implications might come with the possible change that had been mooted, feeling that it

might actually have a positive effect as it might bring

93

Recognition within the County Council that our business is very special. It is very complex, it takes a high level of expertise to be able to do it and [therefore] the forecast is we will certainly be the last department that is looked at because of the complexity of our work [and] the forecast is that [NCD] will remain as is and be [merely] linked to the County Council's corporate centre.

(Interview with DM *ibid*)

There was, then, the perception of mutual benefit and this, combined with my knowledge of and past experience in the department, helped me gain access via what was clearly one of the critical gatekeepers. Assurances were given regarding ethical issues, particularly around the issue of confidentiality, and I explained that my research would be subject to scrutiny and approval by the university's ethics procedures. I believe my previous experience as a team manager helped in this regard, as the Divisional Manager knew that I was acutely aware of the protocol of the department.

Following our meeting, the manager of the contact centre was asked to liaise with me directly and I set up an initial meeting with him to gather background information and to negotiate access to the site to gather data. My meeting with the manager of NCD also went well and I was given a tour of the contact centre and a comprehensive summary of its evolution and day-to-day running. We discussed the practical aspects of my research and negotiated the terms of my attendance at the centre to gather data. We agreed that I would spend one day a week there for at least six months from a date to be arranged and that we would keep in touch in the interim. In the event, I actually spent eight months at NCD gathering data. The remainder of the chapter will focus on the data collection process, methods employed and the analysis of the data.

94

Gathering the evidence

As we have seen one of the features of case study research is the employment of a number of methods of data collection and a flexible view about how a case should be studied. This is the key defining feature and elevates it beyond an approach to a 'distinct research paradigm' (Hammersley and Gomm, 2000: 5). Data collection is the key activity in case studies and careful selection of methods and preparation is essential as 'If not done well, the entire case study investigation can be jeopardised' (Yin, 2003: 37).

The contact centre is a complex and busy environment and a rich source of data where multiple behaviours and interactions are on display at any one time. In order to capture that data it was essential that a variety of methods were employed and this once again underlined the advantages that the case study approach offers. I used a number of methods that were carefully chosen in order to allow me to reveal the experience of working in a contact centre.. The methods that I utilised will now be described in more detail.

Participation and observation

I had from the outset of the study intended to use non-participant observation as a method of gathering data. However, it is debatable whether it is possible to ever be fully non-participative (see below). I will briefly describe the pure forms of participant and non-participant observation in order to explain why I concluded that I actually used a mixture of both of these methods at different points in the study.

In its simplest form participant observation allows study 'from the inside' where a researcher becomes part of the group they wish to study (Sarantakos, 2005: 220).Participant observation allows the researcher therefore 'to study first-hand the day-to-day experience and behaviour

95

of subjects in particular situations, and, if necessary, to talk to them about their feelings and interpretations' (Waddington, 2004: 154). Non-participant observation, by contrast, sees the researcher looking at the subject 'from the outside' and clearly defines the researcher's role(s) as being distinct and different from the subjects being studied, with the researcher becoming 'invisible' (Sarantakos, 2005 *ibid*). It is commonly accepted that observation rarely falls neatly into either extreme, and this proved to be the case in my research at NCD.

Participant observation contrasts with other approaches in considering the observer's own knowledge or experience as a legitimate part of the data (Brewer 2000, in Waddington, 2004: 155). At the outset I had the intention of being unobtrusive and 'part of the furniture' (aiming for the 'invisibility' of non-participant observation) in order to observe behaviour that was as 'natural' as possible, but I was acutely aware that my presence would inevitably have some effect. For example, I was conscious of the possibility of the 'Hawthorne effect', at least in the early days of the study, where the actors' behaviour might be subject to change as a result of their being aware that they were being studied. This made me reflect on the degree to which I was actually participating as an observer and how I would define my approach. This conundrum has been addressed by Burgess (1984) and I found his suggestion that researchers adopt different 'research identities' helpful in this regard. He categorises the relationship between participation and observation as follows:

1) The *complete participant,* who operates covertly, concealing any intention to observe the setting;

2) The *participant-as-observer* who forms relationships and participates in activities but makes no secret of an intention to observe events;

3) The *observer-as-participant* who maintains only superficial contacts with the people being studied (for example, by asking them occasional questions); and

4) The *complete observer* who merely stands back and 'eavesdrops' on the proceedings

(Burgess 1984, in Waddington, 2004: 154, *emphases in original*)

The complete observer role is consistent with an ethnographic approach to research, and a 'modern' development of this has been described as 'the observation of participation' (Tedlock 1991, 2000, in Tedlock, 2008: 151). This sees reflection on and critical engagement with the researcher's degree of participation as fundamental and has the researcher 'engaging with cultural forms that are directly involved in the creation of culture' (*ibid*). This echoes Geertz's cultural 'webs' and this type of observation is clearly ideally suited to providing thick description.

On reflection my research identity was often an amalgam of the different roles and over the eight-month study period oscillated from one to the other. One such shift was moving from the participating/ observer role into the interviewing role. However, at no time was one identity adopted exclusively. By the end of the study, my research identity was probably more akin to the complete observer role to which I had initially aspired, as I had acquired a degree of 'invisibility' that was probably inversely proportional to the novelty value of my presence.

When considering my approach to observation, I had to acknowledge the degree of insight that I already had in relation to the context, politics and processes that were being observed. In addition, I had known several of the workforce in my previous incarnation within Northshire. This distinguished me from most researchers and prevented the complete detachment of non-participant observation, but almost certainly helped me to access a richer data stream in some instances. This is recognised as a potential problem for participant

97

observers and can in some situations lead to the researcher being faced with ethical dilemmas and difficult choices (Waddington, 2004: 160). It is evident that these dilemmas are more likely to present in practice-based settings such as social work. As a result of what could be seen as more privileged access, I had to pay particular attention to the phenomenon of observer bias and this made the need for meticulous recording and careful reflection paramount (Rossman and Rallis, 1998: 41-42). I believe that my ability to delve deeper into practice issues, as a result of my own knowledge and experience, and to be able to immerse myself quickly in the culture of the contact centre more than compensated for the risks attached to this form of observation. I found Waddington's views on this aspect reassuring as he passionately defends this type of approach and its potential benefits accepting that:

> Some degree of researcher bias is not only inevitable [but] can also prove extremely beneficial to the study; and that while a researcher's presence is bound to have an impact on his or her data, it is preferable to address the possible effects head on than to merely pretend - as positivists do - that research can be carried out in a social vacuum.
>
> (Waddington, 2004: 162)

The most obvious advantage of participant observation, as he suggests, is the ability of the researcher to establish more quickly a degree of trust and confidence with the participants in his or her research (ibid), something which I certainly found in my research.

I have discussed how my previous experience of and employment by Northshire had opened doors for me and had given me privileged access to personnel and key informants. Throughout the study, I was aware of the effect that I, as a researcher, might be having and

the part I played in the process. The reflection process has been described as 'reflexivity' which is defined as:

> The recognition that the involvement of the researcher as an active participant in the research process shapes the nature of the process and the knowledge produced through it.

(King, 2004: 20)

As we have seen recognition and open acknowledgement of this can be a strength of qualitative research and, on occasion, the 'researcher as participant' role has been crucial in uncovering issues that may have otherwise remained hidden.

Field notes and spontaneous interviews

Throughout the eight-month study period when I was based at NCD, a 'running record' (Rossman and Rallis, 1998) of contemporaneous field notes was kept. In addition, workers were asked spontaneous questions in relation to events or behaviours that were observed. The field notes were written in long-hand, making use of abbreviations, and, in addition to recording events, comments and observations were also noted throughout the day, as well as the number of calls received, calls that were waiting to be answered and problems encountered with technology. I also recorded observations on the working atmosphere and the use of humour, which was a frequent feature and something on which other authors have commented (for example, Kinnie et al., 2000). The aim was to try and record the 'everyday' experience of working in a contact centre and to gain an overall picture of the volume and pressure of work in this environment. Examples of '*ad-hoc*' questions were gauging reactions to calls which had an obviously distressing effect on workers ('how did that make you feel?)

99

or, where there was obvious anger or frustration, trying to identify the cause of that reaction (what happened there? Was there a problem?). All notes were typed up every evening prior to my leaving the centre to ensure that the situations recorded were still 'fresh' in my mind, that I could reflect on that day's observations and that the risk of forgetting the meaning of hastily-used abbreviations was lessened. The field notes also contained 'reflective remarks' which Miles and Huberman (2004) see as helpful when converting 'raw' data from field notes into a written account, recognising the value of the researcher's insight, reflection and commentary on events. This was a technique that I employed throughout. Miles and Huberman suggest that during the research process 'reflections of several sorts typically swim into awareness' such as what the person being interviewed is *really* saying, cross-references to other data, personal reactions to what is being said, second thoughts about interview questions or a note to pursue an issue further (Miles and Huberman, 1994: 66). An example of the use of this form of observation, reflection and self-direction is given below:

> …asked [name of First Contact Officer] about training-she had had the six weeks – she was initially employed as a team clerk but all the team had received the same training-she felt the intense training *was* needed and had been helpful. She said that some social workers in one district office had remarked that information they received from those who had not received that training was not so good (-*checked with [Manager] who had received the six week in-house training (8 had 9 hadn't-including [name of] SW who is obviously skilled and highly valued-[manager] describes as a 'star') and observe if any differences*

When these occur Miles and Huberman suggest incorporating these reflective remarks in the write-up as 'remarks such as these add substantial meaning to the write-up, not least for other

100

readers. And they usually strengthen coding, in pointing to deeper or underlying issues that deserve analytic attention' (*ibid*). Reflective remarks can also be seen as an aid to developing reflexivity in the researcher, which encourages reflection on their role as much as on that of the participants (see below).

Interviewing the workforce

Interviews are 'one of the most important sources' of data (Yin, 2003: 89) as well as being the most common (King, 2004) and an essential part of many case studies. There are different methods of interviewing but, in common with other areas of qualitative research methodology, precise definition is often problematic. King notes that they share common characteristics and have one main aim. The qualitative research interview is, 'an interview, whose purpose is to gather descriptions of the life-world of the interviewee with respect to interpretation of the meaning of the described phenomena' (Kvale, 1983, in King, 2004: 11). The aim is to understand an interviewee's social world in relation to the research topic and to gain an understanding of how and why they have developed their perspective (*ibid*). As we have seen, case study researchers are interested in the individual's interpretation of events and, therefore, the interviews they undertake are not amenable to a rigid structure. Case study interviews usually require the interviewer to be able to conduct a 'conversation' with their respondents whilst maintaining their line of specific inquiry. Thus

> The interviews will appear to be guided conversations rather than structured queries.
> In other words, although [the interviewer] will be pursuing a consistent line of
> inquiry, your actual stream of questions in a case study interview is likely to be fluid
> rather than rigid.
>
> (Yin, 2003: 90)

101

A semi-structured format is best suited to this, as it offers a guide or checklist for the themes or issues that the researcher wants to cover while allowing the participant a degree of freedom in how they approach them. The format also allows the researcher to follow and develop particular strands or issues that arise during the interview, particularly when unanticipated or new information is elicited. This demands a particular type of skill of the interviewer, requiring her/him to maintain direction, albeit without the help of a definite structure, and relax their interviewees simultaneously. It also highlights what for me was an important element of the interviews that I conducted as part of my case study; it is essential to establish a relationship with the interviewee rather than treat them as a 'subject' for study. This affords an active role and dynamic status to the person being interviewed, as in this form of research

> There can be no such thing as a 'relationship-free' interview. Indeed the relationship is part of the research process, not a distraction from it [and] the interviewee is seen as a 'participant' in the research, actively shaping the course of the interview rather than passively responding to the interviewer's pre-set questions.
>
> (King, 2004: 11)

This relational form of interviewing not only establishes the trust and confidence that we have discussed, but also allows the interviewer to establish a degree of credibility which can be an important factor in professional settings in eliciting particular types of information. I believe this was critical for me in identifying what Yin describes as 'key informants [who are] often critical to the success of a case study' (2003: 90). It can also provide access to other forms of data or evidence that would otherwise not be available. In my study I was able

102

to identify two key informants in this way (see Chapters 5 and 6), one of whom ('GL') was the independent consultant commissioned to oversee the development of the contact centre, and they provided me with practitioner insight and documentary access that I could not have gained elsewhere. Both of the key informants were also able to suggest other sources of evidence and my contact with the consultant was invaluable in allowing me to check out issues that arose as part of the documentary analysis (see below).

Consent and recording protocols

I wanted to ensure that the data I gathered was accurately recorded and that I would be able to return to it time and again in order to analyse it. I decided that where possible I would use a tape recorder and fully transcribe all tapes. I recognised that for some people this might present a barrier to communication and was aware of the fact that some people would not be comfortable being tape-recorded. I also was careful to ensure that my potential interviewees were fully informed as to the nature and purpose of my study and all the potential participants were given a detailed information sheet (see Appendix 1), which also contained a contact number for those who wished to discuss the project in more detail before giving their consent to take part. The information sheets were given out several weeks before the study commenced in order to allow time for the information to be read thoroughly and for staff to be able to consider whether they wished to participate. The potential interviewees included all of the staff employed at the contact centre, including the manager and administrative staff, and the information sheets were circulated on my behalf by the contact centre manager.

Mindful of the potential problem posed by the method of recording, I wanted to be sure that if participants were willing to talk to me I would not lose the opportunity as a result of an aversion to tape recording. My consent form allowed for this with two separate categories of

consent, allowing for taped and non-taped participation (see Appendix 2). This decision was fully vindicated by the fact that two of my respondents; one First Contact Officer (FCO)[7] and one Assistant Manager, fell into the non-taped category. Although they were unwilling to be recorded, they were happy to talk to me and provided valuable data that I would not have been able to gather otherwise. The tapes were kept securely in a locked filing cabinet at my home and were erased after full transcription and checking for accuracy, which also involved listening to them again whilst reading the transcript to note the tone of voice. They were assigned random initials and numbers in research records in order to maintain confidentiality.

When the period of field study began I checked with the staff to ensure that they had received the information sheet and consent form and where these had not been completed I offered the staff concerned the chance to do so or to withdraw from the study. I was fortunate in that all of the staff were happy to participate in some form and to sign both the consent to take part and to be interviewed and that all apart from two (above) agreed to their interviews being tape-recorded.

The interview process and ethical considerations

The interviews were conducted throughout the eight-month period that I was based at NCD and, apart from the interview with the consultant, took place between June 2005 and January 2006. The interview with the consultant followed extensive contact via e-mail and took place in November 2007. I interviewed the entire workforce at NCD in some form, with almost all being interviewed on a 'formal' basis (i.e. those who had consented to recorded interviews), and the remainder being subject to conversation and spontaneous *ad hoc* interviewing in

---

[7] First Contact Officers are unqualified workers who take all initial incoming calls and normally deal with them. They can, however, redirect calls to social workers if they relate to child protection, mental health or other complex issues.

response to some issue or event. In addition other key players were interviewed including the Divisional Manager responsible for NCD, the independent consultant ('GL'), an ICT manager and a staff member responsible for overseeing quality assurance in relation to NCD (both based at County Hall) and four service users. In total twenty-four interviews were conducted.

Given the relatively small size of the workforce at NCD I was acutely aware of the difficulties of maintaining confidentiality. I have used a number of tactics to try to protect anonymity, such as job title and the use of randomly assigned numbers (SW1, FCO 2 etc) and have deliberately not used even these in the thesis unless their job role was an important factor that necessitated identification. The fact that most of NCD's staff is female also made it difficult to protect the identity of the male members of staff so I have tried to avoid using quotations where the gender of the interviewee is obvious and/or have randomly reassigned a gender identity to the speaker to offer further protection. In some cases (the most obvious example being the centre manager) it is virtually impossible to offer the same degree of anonymity as to other participants and I have limited the use of this data in line with the guidance issued by the University (University of Warwick Graduate School, 2007). All actual names have been replaced in the text by pseudonyms or when a specific location, team or individual has been mentioned, this has been indicated in square brackets. An example of this is given below:

> The [Northshire] and [name of city] Health Trust expressed the comments that health professionals will probably favour using locality-based access for both telephone and written contact.

The interviews of NCD staff members were conducted in a private 'rest room' area at NCD, apart from the manager who was interviewed in his office, and I made them as informal and conversational as possible. I had made the decision to be visible at NCD for some time before commencing the interviews so that I had begun to form relationships with the staff group before interviewing them. This was an attempt to facilitate the trust and confidence that Waddington has described and that I believed would help the participants to be more open, thus generating more meaningful data.

Prior to the interview, I had produced a list of topic areas (Appendix 3) that I felt needed to be covered, including some standard opening questions, such as 'how long have you worked at NCD?' and 'what did you do before working at NCD?' In keeping with the ethos of the open-ended interview, however, issues or areas of interest were often pursued as a result of comments made by the person being interviewed and questions generated *in vivo* that had not been anticipated. In addition, there were areas of questioning that I wished to pursue with particular workers (for example, the social workers) that were not appropriate for others. One such example was comparing conventional face-to-face social work with dealing with service users via the mediation of ICT. In a similar vein, there were questions posed to different groups that would inevitably elicit very different responses, such as whether FCOs had been part of the initial training programme and how useful it was.

I was conscious throughout of the potential pitfalls associated with qualitative interview techniques and was mindful of Yin's advice that 'interviews should be considered *verbal reports* only [and] as such, they are subject to the common problems of bias, poor recall and poor or inaccurate articulation' (Yin, 2003: 92, *emphasis in original*).Mindful of that, I have where possible, used direct quotations to help reduce misrepresentation and to allow the

106

participants' voices to be heard. This is based on the belief that they are best able to convey their own meanings and senses of the context. I have deliberately chosen to let the participants' voices tell the story, where possible, as I believe that this is more engaging for the reader and helps in gaining insight into the everyday experience of the workers in the contact centre. I share the view that

> Voice engages the reader; it conveys passion and interest –or lack of it. Boring texts and presentations are those in which individual voices have been suppressed and homogenised through professional socialisation into the 'omniscient voice of science.'
>
> (Rossman and Rallis, 1998: 197)

When reproducing material I have also listened to the tapes rather than just relied on the transcriptions in order to be sure that what is being reproduced accurately reflects what I thought the person was trying to convey. When the tone of voice, use of humour, irony or emotion has been a significant feature (and one which changes the meaning of the written word), this has been indicated in the text – by adding, for example, 'laughs' in brackets

When using quotations from interviewees I have refrained from correcting syntax and, where possible, what respondents have said in interview has been reproduced *verbatim* including non-verbal cues conveyed by body-language, or utterances such as 'erm' or 'you know', if they help to convey the rhythm or pace of the interview. If the meaning would have been lost by their inclusion and it has been necessary to omit something, this has been indicated by using a series of dots, and/or the inclusion of linking words in square brackets, as in the example below;

... I just found [the] Children in Need [team] very stressful and I just felt like I needed time away and I just needed to…. not to have a big case load and [be] writing reports and you know, arranging meetings and that sort of thing, and this seemed like a good place to do that, ... just to clear my head of everything, [to decide] where am I going to go and what am I going to do?

Documentary sources and analysis

Another method employed to collect data was documentary analysis. I anticipated that careful study of the procedural and policy documents from Northshire would be essential in order to understand the process that Northshire County Council had followed in deciding to establish a contact centre. This was a marked break from tradition in how services had been delivered and represented a cultural shift for the department. I was aware that the documentation would play a large part in establishing the context for the reader from a local and national perspective and interpretation of the national context at local level would help in providing thick description. As I have explained, I was fortunate to be able to identify a key informant who had played a major part in developing the contact centre and who was willing to help me by providing documents or clarifying process issues, where necessary. This form of study 'deals with data produced by writers and researchers other than those studying the documents, and for a purpose that is possibly different from that of the original writer' (Sarantakos, 2005: 293).

I was aware of the advantages of having a degree of privileged access to source documents and the potential information they could yield. I was, however, also aware of the limitations that this can impose. Clearly the intended audience of such documents can serve to modify the message that is being delivered and having been part of the management structure within

108

Northshire myself some years earlier, I was also aware of the story that *is not* told by documentation. One example of this is how the minutes of meetings relate to actual events. Apart from the need for brevity, they are subject to various 'filters', for example, the perception of the person who is taking the minutes, their editing and the Chair's discretion as to what is finally recorded. However, alongside that caveat it is the fact that 'quite often documents serve as substitutes for records of activity that the researcher could not observe directly. Sometimes, of course, the recorder is a more expert observer than the researcher' (Stake, 1995: 68).

The main use of these documents was to provide description and analysis (Sarantakos, 2005: 294) in order to identify the motivation and strategic thinking of Northshire County Council in relation to NCD, as well as to corroborate and correlate information. Documentary research was also used to gain insight into the genesis and evolution of the contact centre and the process followed. I was able to access a wide variety of documentation to allow me to do so, including planning and cost proposals, records of fact-finding missions to other authorities, team briefings, training programmes and the minutes of meetings, including of the senior management team and Northshire Council's Cabinet proceedings. This proved particularly useful for mapping the development of NCD locally, alongside national policy imperatives as part of New Labour's modernisation agenda (see Chapters 2 and 5). All of the documentation that was used has been included in the bibliography but has been changed to incorporate the pseudonyms employed, such as 'Northshire,' in order to maintain confidentiality.

Analysing and making sense of the data

Data analysis as a process

Miles and Huberman suggested that data analysis 'consists of three flows of concurrent activity: data reduction, data display and conclusion drawing/verification' (i.e. interpretation) (1994:10). The process of qualitative data analysis has, therefore, a number of definite stages at the root of which is exhaustive examination of all of the data in order to ascribe meaning to it (Yin, 2003: 109). Some authors strongly recommend that the analysis of the data should take place as soon as possible and that analysis should be merged with the data collection process (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Sarantakos, 2005; Silverman, 2010). This emphasises that, above all, data analysis is a pervasive activity that is carried out from the beginning of the study (Silverman 2010:218), but undertaken in a sustained manner on completion of the data gathering.

My research at NCD yielded large amounts of data from the outset and, following this advice, analysis of it began at the time it was recorded or transcribed and in that sense it was a continual process. Data display began with the daily transcription of my field notes, which prompted me to consider issues as they arose and to reflect on their significance and interconnection with the research questions. In this way the process of data collection can be viewed simply as a way of linking on-going reflection on existing data with ways of generating new data (Miles and Huberman, 1994: 50).Yin (2003) suggests four principles that underpin good research and high quality analysis:

1) Ensuring that all the evidence has been attended to and that the analytic strategies are exhaustive. Theory 'should account for all of this evidence and leave no loose ends';

2) The analysis should address, if possible, other interpretations of the data;

110

3) The analysis should be the 'most significant aspect' of the case study and retain focus on the most important issues;

4) The researcher should use their 'own prior expert knowledge'. This includes the need to demonstrate an awareness of current thinking and the relevant research literature. Personal experience and past publications on the subject are also regarded as having a role to play.

(Adapted from Yin, 2003: 137)

I found the fourth principle particularly reassuring given my own knowledge and experience of social services. One of my initial concerns when planning my doctoral research was that this might prove to be a barrier rather than an asset.

Yin underlines the importance of having an overall analytic strategy which defines what is prioritised for analysis and why (Yin, 2003: 109). This systematic approach helps to sharpen the focus and 'reduce' the data and it became increasingly important in my research as I began to be exposed to, and accumulated, more data. These data were at times beguiling and seductive, offering as they did the opportunity to research different and often equally engaging areas or issues that were outside of my research design. Although initially unsettling, this is a recognised feature of qualitative research and some believe it to be a necessary stage where one is able to revise or amend one's research strategy in order to retain its prime focus on the research questions (Yin, 2003, Silverman, 2010). Yin reassures that this is normal in the early stages of research, when one engages with the data in an unstructured way. As he suggests, however, 'playing' with data in this way, whilst sometimes useful, does not obviate the need for a clear strategy, as 'without a broader strategy...you are

still likely to encounter many false starts and potentially waste large chunks of your time' (Yin, 2003: 11).

Coding, displaying and analysing the data

There are three main types of coding used in qualitative research: descriptive, topic (or 'pattern') and analytical (or 'interpretive') coding (Miles and Huberman, 1994: 57; Richards, 2005: 87-8) and all three types were employed in my case study. Coding of data is also a function of data display and begins with open, descriptive coding. Descriptive and topic coding was used initially to assign labels to a section of field notes or interview transcripts. This was the inductive stage of the coding process where the data was interrogated and 'spoke' to me, allowing me to generate a large number of categories and additional data. The second, deductive stage required the data to be refined and made subject to a progressively narrow and interpretive focus, as the basis for identifying key themes. Progressive focusing has been helpfully described using the analogy of a funnel in order to show how the meaning of data may emerge over a period of time. It is argued that:

> Progressive focusing has two analytically distinct components. First, over time the research problem is developed or transformed, and eventually its scope is clarified and delimited and its internal structure explored. In this sense, it is frequently only over the course of the research that one discovers what the research is really 'about.'
>
> (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983, in Silverman, 2010: 234-5)

This chimed with my experience at NCD where key issues were identified as a result of thematic coding and systematic evaluation of the data.

Initial coding

The advice to begin analysis as soon as possible by merging data collection and analysis was followed by my adoption of a very basic (colour and/or initials) coding system in the field notebook from the first day at NCD. This was used to identify certain issues or features of work at NCD that I had initially identified as being interesting or relevant to the study. One obvious example of this was 'technology' which, given the context, I had anticipated being one of the most significant influences on work at NCD. As we have seen, alongside consumerism, the use of technology is central to managerialism, which contact centres epitomise (Chapter 2). My field notes also included colour-coded instructions: to follow up information, speak to the appropriate manager or check and cross-reference the appropriate documentation.

I was aware that I would not be able to capture 'all' of the data and this initial focus helped by providing a foundation and structure, and enabled me to avoid losing sight of my research goals through 'data overload' (Miles and Huberman, 1994: 55-56). The primary capture of data which my observations, field notes and interviews gave, provided relatively 'broad' categories that served as a base that I was able to refine and sub-divide as the research progressed. My initial observations of what I considered to be interesting, ambiguous or germane to the study were systematically recorded and eventually incorporated into a matrix (see below). They covered a fairly broad area, having been generated as a result of initial thoughts, observations and discussions with my supervisor. My initial guidance on what to highlight and record related to:

- How work was organised and managed at NCD (the conception of work);
- The use of technology and how it affected work in this context including social work practice (the execution of work);

- The nature of social work practice at NCD in comparison with conventional 'field' settings, highlighting similarities and/or differences (the execution of work) ;

- How working at NCD impacted on employees: this relates to the research question that considers Braverman's thesis on the effects of the separation of conception and execution, including the displacement of craft and deskilling;

- How working at NCD impacted on social workers' professional identity: this also relates to the research question that tests Braverman's ideas in relation to the degradation of work and the alienation of labour;

- Personal and interpersonal responses to working at NCD and methods of coping (for example, the use of humour) this also relates to the consideration of Braverman's explanation of how workers cope with alienation (such as habituation);

- Specific technical issues, or problems relating to the use of ICT;

- Indications of policy 'fit', where actions or events appear to be directly linked to government policy or directives;

- Indications of managerialism;

- Caller types (e.g. whether routine, challenging, distressing, rewarding);

- Anything ambiguous or unexpected;

- Information or issues that needed verification, clarification or follow-up.

In practice the initial coding commenced with five very broad categories within which these issues were subsumed: 'operational issues'; 'social work', 'technology affecting the labour process'; 'challenging callers' and 'changes in work'. Some (such as 'information that needed verification, clarification or follow-up), clearly covered more than one category

As the process of reading the data continued more codes were created, an example being the sub-categorisation of challenging callers (e.g. verbally abusive (CCd) or having mental health problems (CCmh)) some were assigned contemporaneously; others after the initial scrutiny of the notes. The process of manual coding was supplemented by what Miles and Huberman refer to as 'marginal remarks', which they see as similar to reflective remarks (see above) and which they view as a counter to the tedium that they warn is inevitable, 'if you treat yourself as a sort of machine scanning the page methodically, picking out small segments of data and assigning categorical labels to them' (Miles and Huberman, 1994: 66-67).

They suggest that boredom with the process is a sign of having ceased to think and marginal remarks promote on-going reflection and focus within the coding process, as a way of stimulating thought and 'retaining mindfulness' (*ibid*). Such remarks led to the emergence of sub-categories that were developed to capture a particular aspect of the data. After the initial reading and analysis of the field notes and interview transcriptions, this process of sub-categorisation increased the number of categories to 22 (Table 4.1).

	Additional Sub-Categories					
INITIAL CATEGORY						
Operational Issues	Business culture	Working environment and atmosphere	Humour	Location	Management issues	Inter-agency issues
Social Work Issues	Supervision	Managerialism	New Skills	Field work comparison	Quality Assurance	Retaining Social Work Skills
ICT Affecting Labour Process	ICT (Using)	ICT (Problems with)	Recording			
Challenging Callers	Humour	Memorable callers				
Changes in Execution	Change of role	Comment on contact centre	Motivation to NCD	Stress	Inter-agency issues	Training

Table 4.1: *Data reduction and moving from primary to secondary coding*

116

Miles and Huberman suggest that data reduction 'refers to the process of selecting, focusing, simplifying, abstracting and transforming the data that appear in written-up field notes or transcriptions' (1994:10) and leads on from simple coding to the teasing out of themes and data clusters. This combines with 'progressive focussing' (Parlett and Hamilton 1976, Silverman, 2010) which is an ongoing part of the data analysis; choosing which data to select to work on is a key part of the researcher's analytic strategy. Miles and Huberman also emphasise that the process of data 'reduction' is not necessarily a merely quantitative process. The reduction of data by paraphrasing or incorporation into a theme is also a way of sharpening focus and organising data in order to facilitate conclusions being drawn from it (*ibid*).

The data from interviews, field notes and documents were all subjected to repeated, exhaustive and detailed scrutiny. The transcripts and documents were read and re-read time and again in order to identify commonalities, themes or patterns (Sarantakos, 2005: 345) and to highlight any significant (particularly unexpected) issues. Codes continued to be assigned and became increasingly sophisticated, detailed and issue-specific. These were interpretive codes and over time became increasingly thematic. The categories were then presented as a matrix (data display) with evidence from transcripts, field notes and, where appropriate, documentation, recorded and incorporated within these categories and cross-referenced (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Yin, 2003).The matrix (below, figure 4.2) is an example of this and shows how the five original categories were replaced as a result of continuing sub-categorisation. This was the result of more detailed coding assigned to field notes, and included examples of all three types of coding. This yielded a total of 98 categories or sub-categories at this stage.

117

Figure 4.2: Secondary coding assigned to field notes

General Category	Sub Category	Indicator		
Age	Of Callers	AC		
Age	Of Workers	AW		
Age	Influencing interaction	AI		
Business Culture	Language used by workers	BCLw		
Business Culture	Language used by manager & Deputies	BCLm		
Caring	About the job	CJ		
Caring	About callers	CC		
Caring	Demonstration of	CD		
Caring	About social work	CS		
Challenging Callers	Verbally abusive	CCv		
Challenging Callers	Distressing	CCd		
Challenging Callers	Suicidal	CCs		
Challenging Callers	Bereaved	CCb		
Challenging Callers	Tearful	CCt		
Challenging Callers	Demanding	CCd		
Challenging Callers	Mental health issues	CCmh		
Challenging Callers	Sexually provocative	CCs		
Challenging Callers	Regulars	CCr		
Challenging Callers	Confused /demented	CCd		
Challenging Callers	Complex multi problem	CCm		
Challenging Callers	Child care issues	CCc		
Challenging Callers	Identification/Empathy	CCe		
Changes	Procedures etc	Cp		
Changes	Names /types of team	Cn		
Changes	Pace/demands of job	Cj		
Changes	Team Personnel	Ctp		
Changes	Team working morale	Cm		
Changes	Training	Ct		
Changes	Job satisfaction	Cjs		
Changes	Role	Cr		
Consumerism	Language	CMl		
Consumerism	In practice	CMp		
CC concept	Support	CCs		
CC concept	Opposition	CCo		
Experience	Of social workers	Esw		
Experience	Of FCOs			
FCOS	Interaction with callers	FCc		
FCOS	Working with SWs	FCs		
FCOS	Previous experience	FCp		
FCOs	Relationship with SWs	FCrs		
Frustration	With callers	FRc		
Frustration	With colleagues	FRw		
Frustration	With other agencies	FRa		
Frustration	With work opportunities	FRo		
Frustration	With Contact Centre	FRcc		
Geographical Issues	Contact with callers	Gc		
Geographical Issues	And language	Gl		
Geographical Issues	And resources	GR		
Humour	To amuse colleagues	Hw		
Humour	To diffuse tension	Ht		
Humour	To vent frustration	Hf		
Humour	To deal with challenging callers	HCC		
Humour	To deal with stress	HS		

ICT	**Attitudes to**	**ITa**
ICT	**And doing the job**	**ITj**
ICT	**Problems with**	**ITp**
ICT	**Monitoring/surveillance**	**ITm**
ICT	**And frustration**	**ITf**
ICT	**Accessibility**	**ITac**
ICT	**And pressure**	**ITpr**
ICT	**And social work**	**ITsw**
ICT	**And bureaucracy**	**ITb**
ICT	**And recording**	**ITr**
Inter agency	**Communication**	**IAc**
Inter agency	**Problems**	**IAp**
Language	**Medical jargon**	**Lmj**
Management	**And social work**	**Msw**
Management	**Style**	**Ms**
Management	**Communication**	**Mc**
Management	**of CC**	**Mcc**
Management Resistance to	**Resistance to managerial methods**	**MR**
Motivation	**For working in CC FCO**	**MOf**
Motivation	**For working in CC SWs**	**MOs**
'Quality of life'	**'Getting life back' etc**	**QL**
Recruitment	**Initial**	**Ri**
Resistance or subversion of systems	**Recording ICT**	**RSU**
Staff turnover	**ST**	**ST**
Skills displayed SW	**SKDSW**	
Skills displayed FCOs	**SKDFC**	
Skills displayed: Communication-with callers	**SDCC**	
Skills displayed: Communication-with other agencies	**SDCA**	
Skills displayed: Complex/multiple problems	**SDCM**	
Skills		
Skills	**loss of**	**SKl**
Skills	**New**	**SKn**
Stress	**And field sw**	**STsw**
Stress	**And FCOs**	**STfc**
Stress	**Compared to other settings**	**STo**
Stress	**And technology**	**STt**
Stress	**Reduction of**	**STr**
Team	**Perceptions of**	**Tp**
Training	**Initial**	**Ti**
Training	**For CC**	**TRcc**
Training	**Changes in**	**TRch**
Training	**Opportunities**	**TRop**
Working atmosphere	**Reflections on**	**Wa**

This more detailed content analysis helped me reflect on the emerging research picture and to continue to refine data categories as the research progressed. It heightened my sensitivity to potential sources of relevant data within these categories and helped to 'tune in' to important data more acutely, as well as 'tuning out' aspects of data that did not coincide with my principal research focus. The research questions led to broad data categories and coding that were then subject to intensive scrutiny. As this process continued emerging themes began to be identified and highlighted and were subsequently used to shed light on the research questions. This reflects the fact that 'data collection is inescapably a *selective* process' (Miles and Huberman, 1994:56, *emphasis in original)*, something which began to resonate as the volume of data increased.

My research journey continued with further and more detailed coding being used as the data set grew and the challenge of how to continue to make sense of it became more pressing. The problem of storage, and equally importantly, retrieval was also a matter of concern and heightened my anxiety around 'data overload' and the evident inadequacy of simple coding at that point to deal with the volume. My field note transcriptions rapidly became full of codes on the left of the page and marginal remarks on the right and as my data categories grew I felt that I needed to utilise other tools available to the researcher to allow more sophisticated coding, storage and retrieval. It was evident that more systematic data reduction and interpretation was required in order to identify, highlight and explore the themes that were emerging from the data.

At this point I began to utilise the 'NVivo' programme, an example of computer-aided data analysis (CADA) software, which has been specifically designed to work with qualitative data. The use of software is a feature of modern research and appeared to offer a solution to

my coding, storage and retrieval problems that had increased in proportion to the growing complexity of my data categories. NVivo (and other similar research software) supports the analysis of qualitative data by helping to;

- Manage data

- Manage ideas

- Query data

- Geographically model -to show ideas or concepts being built from the data

- Report from the data.

(Abridged from Bazeley, 2007: 2-3)

This tool was indeed initially useful in being able to manage and log the number of occurrences of particular data types. In this respect it was an aid to interpretation, as the coherence and ability to retrieve supporting data it offered helped to highlight particular issues and themes. It was also able to show the frequency of occurrence within all data sources. This was particularly helpful in confirming the seven principal themes that were emerging (see below). An example of this process, and one of the themes, was the issue of life-work balance which had been referenced in some form on 14 separate occasions in interviews and field notes. This alerted me for the first time to the fact that it was a common issue that *all* the social workers had taken into consideration when applying to work at NCD, albeit for differing reasons (see Chapter 6). It also made me consider the wider implications of being able to offer some insight into this issue in a specific social work context, something which hitherto had not happened in any other research (see Chapter 3).

However, as an analytic tool NVivo created its own problems, particularly in relation to over-coding (Richards, 2011: 93). My analysis reached the point where continued sub-classification of categories and themes had produced over three hundred separate 'nodes' and

it was evident that further distillation would have become pointless and confusing. In arriving at this point of data 'saturation,' connection between the data analysis and research questions had diminished, a phenomenon that has been recognised elsewhere as a consequence of over-coding. One of the weaknesses of CADA is that 'the use of computers often displaces the weight of the analysis from theory development to coding, and to technical aspects of analysis' (Sarantakos, 2005: 359); or, more simply, it can lead to an over-zealous coding that obscures rather than enhances meaning, and can actually prevent new ideas emerging (Richards, 2011:100-1). A decision was made, therefore, to return to manual methods of data analysis, with NVivo being used as a data retrieval tool thereafter and as an aid to categorisation. The decision was informed by an awareness of my limited computer skills, which meant I was not fully able to realise the potential of the software as an analytic tool. In addition there was an impression of having reached the point where the tool had 'done the job' sufficiently well in relation to my research questions and had yielded sufficient analytic codes.

Key themes arising from the data

Continued interpretation and analysis helped to clarify and confirm the key themes that arose from the data and underpinned my research questions. As others have suggested, the distillation of data revealed more detail around issues than I wanted to investigate as part of my initial research questions (Stake, 1995, Silverman, 2010:234, and see Chapter 6). One such example, as I have noted, was the issue of life-work balance for social workers. This made me consider more carefully how this was linked to the original research question: what impact has working at NCD had on social workers from a personal and professional perspective? As a result, interest in this subject grew and was subjected to further scrutiny, subsequently developing into a key area of my research. Chapter 3 showed how my research

questions reflected what Braverman identified as critical labour process themes and how this was supported by their prominence in call centre literature:

1   How is work organised and structured at NCD? (Braverman's conception of work);

2   To what extent are employees at NCD subject to managerial control and surveillance? To what extent can they resist it? (Braverman's execution of work);

3   What impact has working at NCD had on social workers from a personal and professional perspective? (Braverman's contention that the separation of the conception and execution of work inevitably leads to deskilling of the workforce, and leads to worker dissatisfaction, or 'blue collar blues' (1974: 31-6);

In-depth analysis of the data revealed seven key themes arising from the research questions :

➢ Contact centre social work as less stressful than field social work (RQ3);

➢ Life-work balance improvement as the motivation for choosing to work at NCD (RQ3);

➢ Life-work balance improvement a result of working at NCD (RQ3);

➢ Screen and system control via ICT (RQ1 and 2);

➢ Subversion of systems by social workers (RQ2);

➢ The deskilling of social workers; their perception of it, feelings about it, and responses to it (RQ3);

➢ Was there sufficient evidence to suggest that these features amounted to a new and specific form of social work? (RQ1 and 3).

These are considered in more detail in relation to the execution of work in Chapter 6.

Figure 4.3: Analyses of NCD Data

INITIAL IDEAS, AREAS OF INTEREST AND PRIMARY CODES

Organisation of Work

Technology and Work

Social Work at NCD

Impact on workers

Impact on SW identity

Responses to working at NCD

Technical Issues or Problems with ICT

Policy Fit

Management and Managerialism

Caller types and experiences

| OPERATIONAL ISSUES | SOCIAL WORK | TECHNOLOGY AND LABOUR PROCESS | CHALLENGING CALLERS | CHANGES IN WORK |

Data Display

Transcribing

Initial coding and analysis   **22 CATEGORIES**

SECONDARY CODES

Secondary coding and analysis   **98 CATEGORIES**

Data Reduction

Progressive Focusing

Emerging themes and issues   **7 THEMES/ISSUES**

| Deskilling of Social Workers | NCD: New Form of Social Work? | *Scre*en and System Controls | Subversion of Systems by Social Workers | NCD Less Stressful than Field Work | Life-Work Balance Reason to Work at NCD | Life-Work Balance from Work at NCD |

Data Interpretation

Analysis

Narrowing Focus

Checking/Validating

124

3 RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND THEMES

Nature of Work: Structure & Organisation

Control, Consent and Resistance

Impact on Workers Wellbeing

Conclusion

This chapter has sought to identify, describe and justify the methodology employed in my case study of Northshire Care Direct. In particular, it has offered a rationale for adopting a single in-depth case study approach and has described the elements of this approach in some detail. It has located the study site and described how and why the case was identified as suitable for in-depth case study. It has also given an account of and reflection on the issues that arose in relation to access to the study site and located the researcher in relation to my previous experience of the organisation and discussed the implications of this. The chapter also underlined the critical importance of choosing the site to ensure that the findings would have the greatest utility in relation to other settings and why that should be the case for NCD. Having described the case study site and the methodology employed in the research, the chapter moved on to describe the key events of the research process, including access to the site and associated ethical considerations.

The chapter concluded by providing an account of the data analysis employed in the research. It described the concurrent streams of activity undertaken in this respect: data reduction, data display and data interpretation. It also described the types of codes employed and how the coding process moved from a primary inductive function to a secondary deductive stage and how this facilitated further interpretation of the data. Finally, it showed how the emerging issues and broader themes related to Braverman's thesis and my research questions (Figure 4.3).

The data will be presented in Chapters 5 and 6. Chapter 5 will concentrate on the conception of work at NCD and also serves to provide the thick description in order that the reader may fully appreciate the context and parameters of the case study.

CHAPTER 5

THE CONCEPTION OF WORK AT NORTHSHIRE CARE DIRECT:

ORGANISATION AND STRUCTURE

Introduction

Chapter 4 discussed the use of case studies as an approach to research that is particularly useful for understanding individuals' interactions and experiences in relation to their context when the 'contextual conditions [are] highly pertinent to [the] phenomenon of study'(Yin, 2003: 13). It also outlined the role of 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973), which, as we have seen, stresses the significance of context in making sense of those experiences. We have seen that the thesis uses Braverman's (1974) labour process perspective to examine three main areas: how work at NCD is structured and organised, to what extent employees are subject to surveillance and managerial control and how working at NCD affects employees. This chapter will outline the case context, providing the thick description and offering support to the choice of NCD as the case study site. In doing so, it will explore why and how NCD was established and why it offered a unique opportunity to explore the effect on social work practice in an environment that relies on technical mediation rather than the face-to-face relationship of conventional social work (Chapter 6). Chapter 3 showed how my research interest was heightened by its being conducted in an environment that had hitherto attracted almost universal condemnation, particularly in relation to employee well-being. This chapter will, therefore, focus on the conception of work at NCD and in doing so, will describe the

planning and development process, and address the first research question: how was work organised and structured at NCD?

The conception of work at NCD

Braverman argued that the separation of the conception and execution of work was the defining feature of Taylorism that was able to 'render conscious and systematic the formerly unconscious [controlling] tendency of capitalist production' (1974: 121). Furthermore it 'provided methods of control that could be applied at any level of technology' (Thompson, 1989: 74). The resultant 'dehumanized' labour process was essential in order to exert absolute control over the workforce (Braverman, 1974: 113). At the time that Braverman was setting out his labour process perspective the separation of the intellectual and manual aspects of work was clearly defined with the conception of work 'removed from the shop and centred in the planning ...department' (Braverman, 1974: 75). In a contemporary context Managerialism uses ICT to maintain that principle with the conception of work being incorporated in software design. As a result, the physical presence of a manager is unnecessary as software seeks to control the precise manner in which work is carried out. This provides managers with the Tayloresque ability to specify exactly what is done, how it is done and to impose time limits on that activity. We have seen that a call or contact centre offers particular opportunities to impose this form of control and a number of devices are employed to achieve it, such as ACD and 'calls waiting' indicator boards. We have seen the significance of this disconnection between the conception and execution of work and how it impacts on, and deskills, the workforce (Chapter 3). Thus, in making the decision to set up NCD, Northshire's senior management had the opportunity to control every stage of its design and to use ICT to implement the most radical change ever seen in the County's social

services delivery. It became evident that management's control of the conception of work at NCD produced some anomalies in the system as a result of it reflecting managerial rather than practice imperatives (Chapter 6).

In describing the origins, organisation and structuring of work at NCD this chapter will also provide thick description for the reader. Chapter 4 showed the importance of thick description, and how it is based on the notion of culture being a semiotic concept represented by 'webs of significance' or signifiers (Geertz, 1973: 5). It has been argued that the principal signifier of New Labour's culture of modernisation has been the use of ICT, epitomised by the use of contact centres. Chapter 2 showed how local authorities had been subject to pressures from both the 'supply' and 'demand' sides and this chapter will show why Northshire, like other local authorities, was persuaded to adopt a contact centre approach for its social services. The planning, organisation and implementation of NCD was a complex and lengthy process and in order to fully appreciate the scale of this undertaking, as well as make sense of it, it is necessary to provide a detailed account of the context in which it took place. To help the reader gain an understanding of how the Social Services Department (SSD) operated prior to the inception of the contact centre, it may initially be helpful to draw out some of Northshire's cultural strands.

Background and context

The authority in which the research was carried out is referred to throughout as 'Northshire County Council'. It is a large, mainly rural two-tier shire county with a relatively young population of almost 500,000 with an average age of 35-39 years. There are seven distinct

128

districts, each with their own district or (one) borough council, corresponding to a geographical area and community. Each district has its own identity and traditions which have been principally shaped by the coal mining or steel industries that dominated the region until the 1990s. The county has twelve major population centres and has a varied landscape that includes areas of 'outstanding natural beauty' and several miles of coastline owned by the National Trust and designated as a 'Heritage Coast' in 2001. The impressive ancient cathedral city at the heart of the County also houses its main administrative centre, 'County Hall' where the Cabinet, the Corporate Management Team (CMT), Executive Management Team (EMT) and Council members are based. Until the end of the twentieth century, coal mining and steel production were the main industries and principal employers. At its peak there were 200 working coal pits and the County was, until 1975, home to the largest steel producer in the country. The last pit finally closed in 1993 with the loss of 1400 jobs. Currently 67% of the working population are employed in the service sector and 25% in manufacturing industry (Northshire County Council, 2007).The County had been the site of the richest coalfield in the country and was one of the main players in the unsuccessful 1984-5 miners' strike. The systematic breakup of the industry by the Thatcher government following the strike caused widespread problems for Northshire, as a result of the mass unemployment that ensued and had a disastrous economic and social impact on the region and the local mining communities. The County has made a significant economic recovery in the last twenty years as a result of sustained regeneration and investment and the arrival of a range of new 'hi-tech' businesses including telecommunications, advanced electronics, pharmaceutical and bio-tech companies which have helped industry to diversify and grow in the County. It now has lower overall unemployment (5.9% in 2005) than the rest of England and Wales (13.8% in 2005) (Northshire County Council, 2007).

129

The County Council was administered by an elected assembly of 63 members with a 'cabinet' of ten members who took executive decisions on behalf of the council (see figure 5.1 below) The elected members were supported and advised in the County decision making process by the Corporate Management Team(CMT) consisting of a chief executive and six corporate directors. In addition an Executive Management Team (EMT) from within the SSD reported to the CMT on matters specific to Social Services. Political control has been held by the Labour party for over a hundred years and this continues to be the case at the time of writing with 53 of the councillors being Labour members (Northshire County Council, 2007). As we shall see, in order for the contact centre concept to become a reality it was subject to a complex planning process, culminating in full approval by the Council and Cabinet.
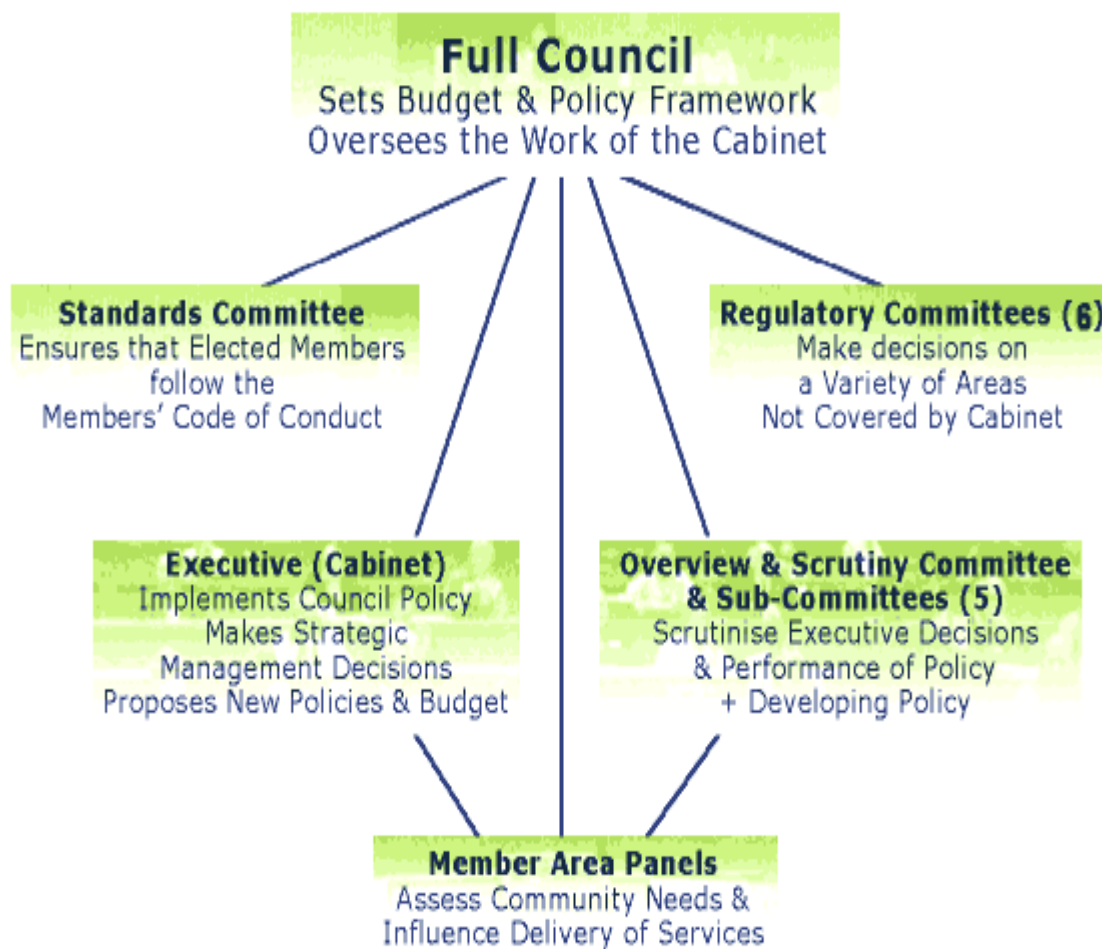
Figure 5.1 Northshire County Council Structure

130

Policy context

The Social Services Department of the Council is a large and busy one and in 2006 was split into Adult and Community Services and Children and Young People's services, employing 2,428 people across the two branches (1613 in Adult Services and 815 in Children's Services). Prior to the introduction of a central contact centre, access to social services and social workers was via five 'Assessment and Information' (A&I) teams operating from within the main locality offices. The A&I teams had several functions: they dealt with callers to the office who required either basic advice or services such as disabled car badges, they dealt with calls from other agencies and redirected those calls as necessary or, as a result of an initial assessment of a caller's needs, referred them on to one of the 'specialist' teams. The teams at that time were composed entirely of social services staff, although the government's intention of moving towards 'integrated teams' with health and other professionals was very clear and made possible by the provisions of the Health Act (1999), the NHS Plan (Department of Health, 2000) and the Health and Social Care Act(2001).The provisions that made possible the integration of health and social services staff within one team came from section 31 of the Health Act (1999) and are collectively known as the 'Partnership Flexibilities'(Department of Health, 1999). They removed the legislative strictures that had putatively prevented the 'seamless' partnership working that the government aimed to establish. Promoting this partnership approach was seen as enabling health and social services to function 'as one care system not two' (Department of Health, 2002: 33), as first described in the Green Paper 'Partnership in Action' (Department of Health, 1998b). The main provisions were:

131

Pooled Budgets - health (Health Authorities or Primary Care Trusts) and social services to bring their resources together into a joint budget accessible to both to commission and provide services.

Lead Commissioners - one authority (Health Authority, Primary Care Trust or Social Services Authority) to transfer funds and delegate functions to the other to take responsibility for commissioning both health and social care.

Integrated Provision - an NHS Trust or Primary Care Trust (that provides as well as commissions services) to provide social care services beyond the level possible under current powers. Or a social services in-house provider to provide a limited range of community health services, for example, chiropody and physiotherapy in contract with the NHS.

(Department of Health, 1998b: 8)

The Social Services Department (SSD) had at this time (as a result of the community care reforms, see Chapter 2) two distinct 'branches' of adult services, corresponding to two specific functions: service 'purchasing' (otherwise known as the 'commissioning' function) and service 'provision'. The commissioning branch had the responsibility for assessing need and planning, implementing, monitoring and reviewing care packages purchased from a mixture of care providers, both internal and external to the department. This mixture of private and public provision was intended to create a so-called 'mixed economy of care' (Griffiths Report, 1988).The workers in the commissioning arm of the SSD who were charged with this task were 'care managers', a change of job title from social worker as a

result of the change in working culture brought about by adoption of New Public Management (Chapter 2) and the incorporation of private sector practices and language. The specialist teams that served a specific service user grouping, such as mental health, learning disability etc., were part of the commissioning branch of the department and consisted of a mixture of qualified care managers and unqualified care manager assistants. Almost all (but not exclusively, as care management opened up the job to other professions such as nurses) were qualified social workers and unqualified 'assistant care managers'. The teams were managed by team managers who were responsible for the allocation of work to team members, the team budget and the team's performance. The job title of team 'manager' was also a new one (it had previously been team 'leader') and was consistent with the increasing influence of managerialism and an obvious mimicry of job titles in the private sector organisations (Harris, 1998, 2003, and see Chapter 3). The change from team 'leader' to team 'manager' can be seen in microcosm as representing a further separation of the conception and execution of work; team leaders generally worked alongside their teams rather than managing them at a distance, which became the norm as a result of managerialism. In keeping with the business ethos, one of the most influential government initiatives introduced at that time compelled local authorities to deliver services that were underpinned by the principle of 'Best Value' (Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, 1998).

Best Value represents clear evidence of pressure from the supply side on local authorities. It was previewed in the *Modernising Social Services* White Paper (Department of Health, 1998a) and was introduced as a duty for local authorities in April 2000. The Best Value initiative required local authorities to review all of their services over a five year period with the aim of securing 'continuous improvements in performance, and to deliver services that

133

bear comparison to the best' (Department of Health, 1998a: 3). This was coupled with a new performance assessment framework and targets for 'improvement in efficiency' that the government expected local authorities to reach. It was made clear that this was not to be a one-off exercise but signalled a new target-driven regime;

> In 1999/00, the target will be a 2 per cent improvement in efficiency. In 2000/01, by which time it is expected that the duty of Best Value will apply, a further 2 per cent improvement will be required, followed by a further 3 per cent improvement in 2001/02. The Government will closely monitor progress against these targets.

(Department of Health, 1998a: 3)

As we saw, the social work labour process had initially been seen by some as less amenable to Braverman's thesis because of the clear distinction between the public and private sectors (Carey, 2009, and see, Chapter 3,). This was attributed to the lack of profit motive and relative job security enjoyed by the workforce. However, as we have seen (Chapter 2) managerialism, and its attendant business culture, radically changed the social work labour process and 'Best Value' was typical of this, given its target-driven pursuit of 'efficiency savings' and effectiveness. This can be seen as analogous to private sector measures to increase surplus value and the concomitant increase in control of the workforce. This parallel was brought into clearer relief in the context of NPM and the quasi-market within which local authorities were expected to operate (Harris, 2003, and see Chapter 2).

The Best Value initiative typified NPM's approach to public sector provision by incorporating overt business principles and practices and 'imposing on local and certain other authorities, requirements relating to economy, efficiency and effectiveness' (Department of

134

Health, 1999). It compelled local authorities to justify their service delivery by subjecting them to scrutiny under the '4 Cs', the four principles that underpinned Best Value. In doing so local authorities had to:

- *Challenge* (why and how a service is provided)

- *Compare* (with other local authorities' performance)

- *Consult* (local tax payers, service users and the business community in setting performance targets)

- *Compete* (as the means to efficient and effective services)

(Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions 1998)

This clearly mirrored the private sector and the drive for 'continuous improvement' and ongoing 'efficiency savings' (in real terms cutting costs) put local authorities under increasing pressure to identify areas that would yield potential savings. In addition to the savings already in place as part of the new performance framework the Gershon Report (2004) identified further 'efficiency savings' of 2.5% that were to be made. The message from the government was clear: local authorities were being asked to make such efficiency savings year-on-year in much the same way as Best Value envisaged the possibility of 'continuous improvement' in performance. The Gershon Report's message was summed up by the minister responsible for local government in a speech announcing the advent of the 'second wave of efficiency in local government':

Local authorities need to start 'thinking big'…..this means that councils must think about projects that will transform the way they do business and deliver services transformations that will lead them to achieving further efficiencies year after year.

(Woolas, 2005)

This message was reinforced with clear direction to local authorities on how they would be expected to achieve this:

We all know that new technologies offer lots of opportunities for more efficient service delivery. And many people - not just the young - now expect to be able to access services this way, at a time and place that fits in with their lifestyle. There are plenty of technical solutions and practical support available to help with e-government…. these can deliver efficiencies in everything from dealing with e-citizens to dealing with e-pay. As the target is 100 per cent of priority services to be e-enabled by the end of this year, all local authorities should be making good progress here.

(Woolas, 2005)

Alongside Gershon's cost-cutting directive, local authorities were being asked to deliver ongoing service improvements under Best Value. As part of this all local authority services were subject to a Best Value Review (BVR) and Northshire's 2000 BVR of care management provided evidence of further pressure from the 'demand' side of what was now effectively being run as a 'quasi-business' (Harris, 2003). The report highlighted the need to improve access for service users and, echoing the sentiments of the minister's speech, identified the need to extend access beyond 'office hours' and at weekends in order to provide a 'more

customer focussed service' (Director of Social Services, 2000: 3). The review identified a number of specific deficiencies in this regard:

1 Inconsistencies in practices in the different local offices

2 Inconsistencies in response capabilities in the different local offices

3 The need to improve response times for all service users

4 The need to improve how information is processed and shared across the services

(BVR 2000, cited in IDeA, 2004)

This also reflected the findings of the 'People's Panel' which had identified similar shortcomings in Social Services Departments generally. These related to: ease of access, speed of responses and the need for [better] information on services available (Cabinet Office, 2000b; Director of Social Services, 2000). The People's Panel was a focus group established in 1998 by New Labour which reported on a number of issues until it was discontinued in January 2002. MORI the market research organisation was tasked to establish this by identifying a group of 5000 people and gathering their views on government aims and initiatives, as part of [the government's] 'increas[ing] use of innovative consultation methods'(Cabinet Office, 2000c).They were to be:

Representative of the UK population in terms of age, gender, region and a wide range of other demographic indicators ... the idea for the Panel was largely prompted by

government recognition of the need to listen to, and learn from, people's views in order to be better able to provide the services that people want.

<div align="right">(Cabinet Office, 2008)</div>

Thus it can be seen that Northshire County Council, like other local authorities, was subjected to the demands of consumerism, the ideological gloss that New Labour used to promote its policies. As a result, Northshire was exposed to both ideological and material pressures. The combination of having to make efficiency savings as well as increase access to services actively encouraged Northshire to look to technological solutions. The establishment of a contact centre appeared to offer the only solution that could satisfy both demands. In doing so, local authorities were forced to follow the lead of the private sector (in keeping with NPM), where call centre technology had been employed to achieve similar goals

In presenting the proposal to establish a contact centre to Northshire's CMT, the Director of Social Services made it clear that the SSD was responding to national imperatives. He acknowledged that 'the proposals to alter and improve the systems for receptivity ha[d] been greatly influenced by the national context' (Director of Social Services, 2000: 1) and in addition to invoking the findings of the People's Panel highlighted the policies, guidance and national standards that were relevant to this issue:

- White Paper, Modernising Social Services

- Partnership in Action Document

- Performance Assessment Framework

- Best Value Principles

138

- 'Open all Hours' SSI report

(Director of Social Services, 2000: 1)

The aim was to: 'Provide a modern front of house service in tune with the needs of the customer in the 21st century in which the majority of contact will be made with the department by telephone and not "face-to-face"' (Director of Social Services, 2000: 3). This clearly underlines the managerialist ethos underpinning the decision by positioning callers as 'customers'. It also signals the move toward more managerial control, and an increasing reliance on technology, and as Braverman argued 'a necessary consequence of management and technology is a reduction in the demand for labour' (1974:236). In order to appreciate the size and complexity of the task facing Northshire in replacing its existing systems with a contact centre it is necessary to have some understanding of the processes that operated prior to Northshire Care Direct.

Access to Northshire County Council's social services before NCD

Prior to the introduction of NCD, someone wishing to gain access to a qualified social worker had to undergo an 'initial assessment' by an Assessment and Information (A&I) team. The staff of the A&I teams operated a 'front of house duty system' consisting of two duty officers who completed a morning or afternoon duty session. The duty officers dealt with office callers, telephone calls to and from members of the public and other agencies, as well as responding to letters and faxes and scheduling appointments. In that sense they largely controlled their workloads themselves. Following a duty session, the members of staff would return to their care management role within the team. The number of times that staff spent on the duty system depended on the staffing situation of the local office but it could result in

139

members of staff being away from their normal duties up to four half-days per week. In 2000, approximately fifty staff across the County were involved in the duty system, which had a considerable impact on the time that they were available for their own casework (GL, 2001a: 2; Director of Social Services, 2000: 2). In addition to the duty functions, the A&I teams also carried out the majority of hospital discharges amounting to 1500 discharge assessments per year (55% of total with the rest being carried out by the Older Persons' Team, the Physical Disability and Sensory Impairment Team and Mental Health Teams (OM, 2002).[8]

A typical duty officer in a Northshire Social Services locality office completed on average 150 activities per day and a typical district office received approximately 4000 calls per month (GL, 2001a; Director of Social Services and Director of Corporate and Legal Services, 2001). In addition, during normal office hours there was a high degree of referral and other activity levels, with referral rates running at 28,732 per annum and 'other activity' (typically giving out advice or information or redirection of calls to other agencies) levels of 7000 per annum). Outside of office hours the 'Emergency Duty Team' (EDT) dealt with crises including child protection and admissions under sections of the Mental Health Act (1983). In 2000, between the hours of 5 and 8 pm the EDT dealt with 2,280 referrals (GL, 2001a: 14). The EDT also provided a limited 'duty' function, offering advice and information to the public, but its principal role was (and remains) that of crisis intervention. Attempts were made to improve the duty systems by creating 'dedicated duty environments', introducing appointments, increasing telephone access, reducing staffed duty points and introducing call centre type headsets. This was coupled with an upgrade of the switchboard facilities in local

---

[8] Children's services operated a parallel duty system and the adult and child care 'branches' of the department were, to all intents and purposes, separate. At this point in time they still came under the overall jurisdiction of the Director of Social Services, something which was to change later.

offices and the introduction of a 'Virtual Private Network' (VPN) to encourage direct dialling in order to avoid having to go through switchboards (Director of Social Services, 2000: 2). Despite these adjustments it was felt by the CMT that they were not sufficient to address fully the priorities that had been highlighted (above) by the People's Panel, Northshire's Best Value Review and the government's e-accessibility imperatives. In addition a further consideration was that of cost and efficiency savings that needed to be identified. As we have seen central government had been promoting the use of call centre technology for some time as a way of addressing these issues (Department of Health, 1998a; Social Services Inspectorate, 1999) and Northshire's Social Services Department saw this as the solution that would address the issues and had the potential to deliver cost-efficiency savings for the County.

In light of the evidence presented and the imperatives facing the local authority, the CMT accepted the proposal for NCD and spelt out the 'business/policy statement and principles' for the contact centre:-

> 1.2.1: Northshire Social Services aims to provide a centralised facility, NorthshireConnect[9] that provides a single point of access, and extended hours of services, for members of the public and other agencies who wish to seek advice and information and request an assessment of social care needs.

---

[9] This was the original name for the project.

1.2.2: This service will ensure that there is an easy, convenient and accessible system that will also provide a speedy response to all enquiries and help to deliver outcomes for clients based on the highest quality standards of social work and customer care.

1.2.3: As most people use the telephone to contact the department already, we aim to improve access through the use of <u>One Telephone Number and One Minicom[10] Number</u> (*emphasis in original document)*, include video camera link up, supported by access through the internet, a website and a single postal address. This gives customers a choice when to contact the department and a variety of methods of contact.

1.2.4: The Contact Centre facility will be a structured environment where the interface and point of contact will be handled by a skilled group experienced in social care issues. They will play a major role in actively promoting the department, creating good impressions and providing good quality information, advice and assistance to the public, particularly the most vulnerable and those with communication problems.

1.2.5: The service will always put Customers (*sic*) first and try to resolve enquiries at the earliest point of contact. The department is committed to helping people resolve their own problems by giving them the right advice at the right time.

---

[10] A system used for the hearing impaired that sends text via the telephone line.

142

1.2.6: In line with government policy to promote 'One Stop Shops' for people who may have a range of problems spanning social, health legal and financial issues, we will endeavour to work closely with a range of agencies and explore ways of providing a joined up service.

1.2.7: We will forge close links with other advice and information services.

1.2.8: The Contact Centre will not be a barrier to the department but will facilitate access to the Departments (*sic*) Specialist Services when appropriate.

(Northshire Social Services, 2001: 2-3)

The role of overall coordination of the project was given to the Deputy Director of Social Services who set up the 'Duty Implementation Group' (DIG) to oversee the consultation and planning process. Having conceptualised this new approach, the detail of how its labour process would operate, i.e. the conception of work, had to be considered.

The Planning Process

The DIG comprised managers of varying rank from across the department who reported to the EMT and CMT, with a remit to: consider the feasibility of a centralised contact centre, consider the options available and to plan the project. The planning process conformed to Braverman's view of scientific management n terms of how it was handled. Managers completely controlled the planning process and the conception of work at NCD, by collating and developing knowledge of all aspects of the labour process before involving any

143

practitioner representatives. When it did so, it engaged the services of an individual who had managed one of the Assessment and Information teams, and who retained a good relationship with front-line social workers. In this sense they were able to utilise her as a champion. The role of champion was reprised when this individual was employed as an assistant manager at NCD; something that the manager was happy to admit (see Chapter 6).

The DIG also employed an independent consultant ('GL') who acted as 'project manager' tasked with 'progress[ing] the project through a planned exploration and design stage, establish[ing] task groups and report[ing] back developments to the group' (GL, 2001b: 1). It met on a regular basis and commissioned work from GL as well as from different sections of the SSD and the local authority. It also had oversight of the wider consultation process that eventually took place. The consultant prepared discussion documents on its behalf for approval by the EMT and subsequently by the CMT. After being scrutinised and approved by these management committees it was subject to final authorisation from the Cabinet. Shaping the conception of work at NCD was a convoluted and time-consuming process, which necessitated consultation with a number of partner agencies. The DIG consulted widely with (managers from): District Councils, Locality Action Groups (LAGs), NHS Trusts, NHS Direct, PCGs (Primary Care Groups), NHS locality commissioners, the Police, the Probation Service, Education, the Benefits Agency and User/Carer forums (GL, 2001b). Research covering different aspects of the contact centre was also undertaken both internally and externally. The external research was undertaken by members of the DIG who attended various conferences, workshops and exhibitions as well as visiting public and private sector organisations, including local authorities that had already adopted this type of system. As has been noted, it is significant that this was driven entirely by managers without recourse to

144

practitioners until there was the need to promote it to the workforce (see below). Separation of the conception and execution of work at NCD was, therefore, explicit and distinct from the outset.

Three sub-groups were established with timetabled tasks and targets for delivery relating to the areas of 'Operations, Information, Human Resources, Communications and Premises' (GL, 2001a: 1). The second report for EMT detailed the progress of these groups and clarified their specific task remit:

> The **Information Technology Group** were given the task of producing a draft 'User Specification', with assistance from members of the A& I team, 'Business Team' *(N.B. previously known as the 'Administration Team' –the change of title is again indicative of the influence of managerialism)* and IT section. The specification was to: 'detail what will be required of a "front end" telephony system and the back up and interface software systems required for the Centralised Contact Centre'(G L, 2001b: 2).

> The **Resources Group** –following the initial report to the CMT in 2000 it was asked to consider suitable locations (see below) for the contact centre and draw up location studies on four principal sites that had been identified, including utilising options within County Hall. It was also tasked with developing a model rota system to ensure coverage between the hours of 8 am and 8 pm weekdays and 9-1pm on Saturday, which had been completed, and it was in the process of drawing up job descriptions for the First Contact Officers (*ibid*: 3-4)

145

The **Operations Group**'s brief included consultation and between December 2000 and March 2001 it had:

As part of the communication and consultation strategy [held] a series of workshops for internal staff, users and carers and the[initial] report has been sent to various agencies for comments [and] the process is being further extended to gain the views of young people.

(ibid: 4-5)

The feedback from external agencies was broadly supportive of the concept but with a number of concerns being raised. The health-based agencies (the local PCG and the local NHS Trust) were particularly concerned that the initial model proposed having only (unqualified) First Contact Officers. They commented on this and the PCG specifically 'Question[ed] providing quality service if there are no qualified staff on team-seen as a "stumbling block" to effective interface [and in addition] Telephone Access (*sic*) points in GP surgeries and other community points could be very costly'[11] (G L, 2001b: 6).The Police also thought there was a need to retain direct contact with Child Care teams 'on a local basis, where information can be shared and decision-making on referrals can be discussed on a local level with colleagues they already know' (*ibid*).This need for direct contact was also seen as necessary by the NHS Trust in relation to the (adult) specialist teams.

The operations group concluded that the communication and consultation strategy had generated a number of internal and external 'critical' issues that had to be addressed:

---

[11] This idea was eventually dropped.

Internally

- Need to deal with personal callers to locality offices

- Loss of local knowledge and networks

- Current call handling of telephone systems by all staff in department

- The need for direct access to Community Integrated Teams by health professionals, thus bypassing the "One Number". In addition they would 'operate their own "on call" systems to deal with referrals, emergency situations and any fast tracking from the Contact Centre of complex advice and information giving

- Lack of qualified staff to deal with complex calls and referral taking

- Increased workload of specialist teams with the loss of the A&I function, plus the need to provide an 'on call' cover to deal with emergencies specific to their specialism.

(ibid)

External Comments

- The [name of city] P.C.G. (Primary Care Group) have expressed support for the initiative but point out the lack of professionally trained staff at the Centre could be a "stumbling block to developing an effective interface"

- The [Northshire] and [name of city] Health Trust expressed the comments that health professionals will probably favour using locality based access for both telephone and written contact

- Local action groups have expressed the need for investigation into developing a locality inter-agency "Contact Centre" as opposed to a Central Centre

(G L, 2001a: 2)

In addition the requirements proposed by Childrens' Services and Integrated Mental Health and Learning Disability Teams were considered by the operations sub-group. These related to the provision of additional duty cover for their service areas. The overall cost of providing bespoke services to these branches was estimated at £810,000 per annum (GL, 2001a: 3). The sub-group concluded that they:

believe that this does not appear to represent the principles of Best Value nor did having this separate and additional (*emphasis in original*) duty meet the objectives of the original Contact Centre:-

- Easy access-one number

- Extended hours of service

- Consistent use of eligibility criteria

- Accurate or relevant information given

- Quality control and performance management systems established

- Accurate and consistent management information provided from improved I.T. systems

- Improved customer care satisfaction.

(GL, 2001a: 3)

The one issue that appeared to be a constant, both internally and externally, was the need for qualified staff. There was considerable pressure on the local authority to incorporate qualified social workers. In order to gain insight into the practical aspects of contact centre operation and in order to address some of the issues raised a programme of visits to similar facilities was organised by the consultant for members of the DIG.

The visits to operational sites included visits to NHS Direct, a local Police control room and Healthcall (a private sector organisation), as well as a mix of London Boroughs, Shire, Metropolitan and Unitary Authorities. The site visits sought to gather information on the staffing, training, equipment and technology that had been used in what were broadly comparable situations. This information was to inform the decision on the viability of a service that would offer the opening hours envisaged and address concerns about issues such as the interface between the contact centre and specialist (locality-based) teams. The conclusions were favourable and convinced the members of the planning team that the contact centre would be a viable prospect for Northshire. The report acknowledged the help from these organisations which had

> provid[ed] information and guidance on how they established their centralised systems and processes and some of the pitfalls to avoid [and that] some of these organisations have been able to advise on the staffing structure and numbers required, and software systems in use.
>
> (GL, 2001a: 3)

The internal research had also benefited from the availability of some in-house expertise arising from the creation of a very small-scale contact centre in another department of the County Council.

The internal research was undertaken by the operations sub-group and focused primarily on the activity levels of the typical duty officer within the locality duty teams (see above) and what elements of this would need to be reproduced. There was also an audit of the resource/information systems that were in place and the ease of access to them via computer. In addition, the audit considered the usefulness of the social services information database (SSID) and whether it could be integrated with the contact centre. As a result of its research, the group concluded that greater efficiency in referral processes could be achieved by the creation of a contact centre with a 'considerable reduction in staffing costs'. The report suggested that these savings were achievable as evidenced by the information gathered from other Social Services Departments that had already moved to a centralised system (information which had been presented to the EMT previously) and had 'as a result reduced their number of staff by 28%' (GL, 2001a: 4). This amounted to a projected saving of £200,000 per annum in comparison with the locality-based duty system (Appendix 4) and was one of the more persuasive findings in the light of the cost efficiency savings that that

150

had to be identified by local authorities. This, when coupled with the promise of 'an improvement both to quality and consistency of the service and the extended hours of availability to the public' (GL, 2001a: 8), addressed both ideological and structural concerns. It was also consistent with managerialism and its stress on the use of technology to maximise efficiency at the expense of staff numbers. The green light was given to the next phase of the project, which was identifying the potential location of the contact centre, the equipment needed and staffing complement required. We have seen, in keeping with Braverman's thesis, that there was a complete absence of worker input and this resulted in a wholly managerial conception of work at NCD.

Operational issues

The contact centre was originally to be called 'Northshire Connect' but it was changed to Northshire Care Direct[12], as the DIG felt that by adding 'care' rather than 'connect' it would be more readily associated with social services by the public. This indicates, perhaps, the sensitivity of senior management to the negative connotations associated with call centres. A number of options were considered before agreeing on the model described below. The staffing complement was based on the assumption that the 28% reduction in staff numbers identified in the group's external research was equally achievable in Northshire. This, once again, demonstrates how the need to respond to material demands for savings helped shape Northshire's plans. The original plan did not identify the need for qualified social workers to be part of the establishment with the proposal for: 'A small central team of up to 13.5 whole time equivalent "First Contact Officers" who will replace the duty function of almost 50 staff

---

[12] The 'direct' part was taken from NHS Direct, which was already established and recognised by the public and social services felt they would benefit from this.

in the current Assessment and Information Teams across the County' (Director of Social Services, 2000: 3). This is also consistent with Braverman's thesis in reducing both the number of 'skilled' staff, as a result of the use of technology, and reorganising the work into routinised, fragmented tasks. It was evidently envisaged that in this conception of the labour process, qualified workers' judgement would not be required and there was an opportunity for increasing managerial control from the outset.

This initial model met with concerted opposition, particularly from Children's Services[13] and Integrated Teams. The principal objections were the lack of a locality-based service and the lack of qualified staff. The locality issue was particularly acute for the Integrated Teams who indicated that at best they would only make 'minimal use' of the contact centre (GL, 2001a: 1). A key issue for both groups was the lack of qualified staff at the contact centre. The viability of the project rested on the ability of the planning group to address these issues and prompted the DIG to consider the options available and whether to make radical changes to the original model. The 'critical decisions' that were outlined by the project consultant to the DIG were as follows:

1) Is it viable to develop a central service if it will not be used by all of the Specialist Teams? Children's Services and Integrated Teams have indicated that they require minimal use from it and are stressing the need for locality based services

2) The DIG must decide what is the agreed model and their expectations of Specialist Teams to use the Contact Centre

---

[13] Children's services also wanted to retain their independence from adult services and to be able to operate their own duty system. They were opposed to the idea of all calls being initially filtered by unqualified staff.

3) The DIG must debate and decide if there needs to be changes made to the model and, if now, to include Qualified Staff at the Contact Centre.

(G L, 2001a: 1)

Although it is evident that the issue of qualified staff was a critical one, it may be that the planning group had underestimated its importance; or, being dominated by senior managers, had expected the use of ICT to obviate the need for professional judgement. This seems to be the 'tipping point' in the process, as from here on there was no further mention of using only unqualified staff. What was puzzling, however, was the total absence in contemporaneous records of any clear evidence of their having made the decision to abandon the idea of using only unqualified staff. One can perhaps imagine the discussions that would have taken place amongst middle managers and it may well be that the perception of senior management was that (at this stage) it would have been one step too far. Indications and pressure from partner agencies such as health seem to support this supposition. It may also have been the case that this change of direction relating to the conception of work at NCD was not formally recorded in order to maintain the impression of progress (and control of it) by senior management. However, an alternative view would be that this accommodation indicated their recognition of the need to gain the consent of the workforce to effect this radical change. A model was therefore proposed which included qualified social workers (Appendix Five):

'Model 2'

9.5 FCOs

4x qualified Professional Social Workers (*sic*) (skill mix of experience and skills)

2x PO2 grade Social Workers (*i.e. higher pay scale than basic social workers and who were given supervisory responsibilities)*

153

1x Team Manager

1x Administrative staff   (*ibid*)

The second report to EMT gave further consideration to these issues and did at least acknowledge the 'varied reactions to the proposed contact centre'. This had resulted in the changes that were made to the proposed model and suggestions to deal with what were seen as the two main issues: personal callers to the locality offices and the ongoing debate on qualified staff. In relation to those who wished to see someone face-to-face the report suggested:

> Although statistically these are few in number, it is anticipated that many of these could be dealt with through telephone access to the central team. However people insisting on a face-to-face interview, depending on urgency, will be offered an appointment and a member of the central team will visit the person in the local office.[i14]

(G L, 2001b: 11)

The issue of the ratio of qualified staff to FCOs continued to cause debate and the second report aimed for the highest number yet:

> Would wish to increase the numbers of qualified staff on the central team (initially quoted as Team manager and two PO2s) to at least 3 or 4 PO2s thus providing

---

[14] This facility is no longer on offer; according to a member of NCD staff it was only ever used on one occasion.

154

professional staff to deal with more complex and difficult callers and referrals and to

provide additional management cover for the team

The final version of the contact centre staffing complement largely reflected this model (Appendix Six) but retained the original 'model 2' complement of senior supervising social workers paid at a higher grade. The overall number of social workers, FCOs and administrative staff increased somewhat and by 2005 NCD eventually had 25 staff directly employed by the centre. The staff complement at the beginning of the research period (June 2005) was:

1 x Manager

2 x Assistant Managers (SW PO4 grade) - *NB these posts were upgraded from PO2 and saw the assistant managers acting as supervisors to the social workers*

3 x Shift working full-time SWs

2 x Part-time SWs

8 x Shift working full-time First Contact Officers

4 x Day working full-time First Contact Officers

3 x Part-time First Contact Officers

2x Team clerks

By then agreement had then been reached that there was a need for 'specialist staff' who were aware of the SSD's obligations and had the 'experience of dealing with difficult clients with complex needs [that] differ significantly from traditional call centre customers' (Director of Social Services and Director of Corporate and Legal Services, 2001: 1). At this point, however, there was no agreement on the appropriate qualification status of the centre

manager but (crucially) there was no requirement for a social work qualification. The post-holder was to have 'a "professional" background [and] this includes business' (Minutes of DIG 13/11/2001). This was entirely consistent with managerialism and the prevailing business ethos, as a generic set of knowledge and skills that were readily transferable (Chapter 1). The manager was recruited as a result of national advertising and the successful candidate had an armed forces background with expertise in telephony and communications systems, indicating that in addition to generic management knowledge and skills technical knowledge was prioritised. However, knowledge of the particular 'business' and its 'customer-base' was not required. The 'core staff' were designated as 'First Contact Officers' who, as the name suggests would take all incoming calls and were to be:

> 'highly trained communicators, well informed and have the necessary range of experience and skills to:-
>
> RE-DIRECT: Re-direct customers to the appropriate service or agency in relation to their enquiry
>
> RESOL[VE]: Give information and advice, using the information held on the (database) systems and Community Information Database. ……
>
> REFER: To take good quality referrals, ensuring all information is accurately recorded and then passed on to the appropriate specialist teams, including the EDT for action. It is anticipated that all referrals will be taken via the computer and there will be no need for paper based referrals.
>
> (GL, 2001b: 5)

Many of the First Contact Officers were staff who had been previously employed in locality offices or other parts of the County Council (IDeA, 2004: 11), with a smaller proportion of

156

FCOs recruited from private sector call centres where they had been working in locations such as banking or mobile telephone companies (field notes and interviews). If the FCO identified that the call had a child care component or a particular need such as mental ill health then the calls would be passed on to a social worker based in NCD who would deal with them in much the same way as a duty social worker would have previously, by offering advice or deciding whether to involve other professionals or colleagues from specialist teams. It was envisaged that emergencies would still be dealt with by the specialist teams or the EDT, if outside of office hours.

None of the qualified social work staff had been redeployed to NCD; all had chosen to work there. They were from a variety of child care and adult specialisms and had varying degrees of post-qualification experience ranging from two to more than thirty years. The assistant managers (PO4 grade) had been transferred from existing A&I teams, whereas no basic grade social worker from A&I teams had taken up this option when it had been offered to them.

Choosing a location for NCD

As we have seen, the task of researching and identifying a suitable location was delegated to the 'Resources' sub-group as a result of the initial report to the CMT in 2000. Four main sites were considered, along with detailed costs, and studies drawn up for consideration by EMT and CMT. The site options considered included new build extensions to existing County establishments, replacing buildings on existing sites and utilising existing space within County Hall. Another option presented for consideration was establishing a partnership with an organisation (referred to here as 'Millennium') that was a 'Voluntary not-for-profit

157

Community Organisation who have been established to promote [name of area] communities, to generate employment, social welfare and increase the business facilities within the area' (Director of Social Services, 2000: 4).

This organisation had already researched the option of establishing their own centre and had attracted [central government regeneration] funding to refurbish and equip 'Millennium House Community Resource Centre'. The organisation had 'included in the resource facilities ...a [proposal to develop] a "ready to operate" contact centre [and] established a business ('Call Centres Northshire') and are looking to begin to operate as a commercial call centre' (*ibid)*. This was seen as a way forward that could take three possible forms:

1) A partnership arrangement where the building would be used as a base and some of Millennium's resources would be used.

2) To 'completely "out-source" the service to Call Centres Northshire, for them to equip, staff and run the service on behalf of Social Services', which was 'considered under Best Value Option 3, the transfer or externalisation of the services to another provider.'

However 'as the organisation Call Centres Northshire was not fully operational this was not considered to be a viable proposal'. In addition a major obstacle to taking this option forward was

The consensus from members of the Project group that the front of house system should be staffed by people who know and understand social services, the legislation and policies underpinning its statutory obligations and have a working

knowledge of the Eligibility Criteria, as well as having the skills and experience in dealing with often difficult client groups.

(Director of Social Services, 2000: 5)

3) To take up the partnership option by leasing part of Millennium's building and using some of the facilities there (*ibid).*

The relative benefits of the four locations were considered in a report to the DIG and two of the options were dismissed as no longer being viable due either to 'restrictions being put on the use of the premises' [name of establishment], or 'lack of firm plans for the site and lengthy time scales for change of use' (D I G Resources Group, 2001: 1). Despite some reservations, particularly around the independence of the project, and 'fear [of] interference from [name of Millennium project manager]' (*ibid*) working with Millennium was still considered to be a potential solution.

One of the principal advantages that the use of Millennium House offered was the speed at which it could be made operational and this was seen as a big plus in comparison to all the other options. The concern that the project manager might be obstructive in some way encouraged the Resources Group to consider the leasing option further. This would consist of leasing only one floor of the building and allowing the possibility of:

Do[ing] own structural work, put in our own equipment, I.T./Telephone lines, furniture etc

Service run by our own staff and managed by SSD (but use other facilities of building)

159

<u>Benefits</u>

-Own management

-Building identified and free space

-Community partnership

-Could tap into [project manager's name] Call Centre if we wish

<u>Against</u>

-Timescale for conversion

-Not our own building

-Leasing issues, need to restore building if we move out, stripping out equipment etc.

<div align="right">(DIG Resources Group, 2001: 2)</div>

By March 2001 Millennium House had become the 'preferred option' and the Council had decided to use the upper floor of the building for the contact centre. This would offer:

- Space for up to 22 people (approx 1850 sq ft)

- Offices x2 (small), one to house server

- Managers Office (glassed walls)[15]

- Reception area

- Use of other facilities within Millennium House, (rest area, kitchen, toilets and car parking) (See Appendix Seven for floor plan)

---

[15] This panoptical feature was presumably seen as offering the manager the opportunity for physical (in addition to virtual) surveillance.

The DIG were asked to consider two options for taking this forward

- Rent Space

- [Project manager's name] suggests that **SSD buyout 20/21 year lease** (*emphasis in original)* from Millennium for the call centre area

(D I G Resources Group, 2001)

After some delay the decision was made to negotiate and pursue the leasing arrangement with Millennium and after protracted discussion it was given Cabinet approval (March 2002). The lease was negotiated on a three-year basis at the cost of £24,391.52 per annum (Director of Corporate and Legal Services and Director of Social Services, 2002: 2)

Equipping NCD

The technology requirements were considered in relation to existing call centre systems and the specification drawn up by a working party recruited from different areas within the Council. This included staff who had been involved in taking referrals and operating the County Council switchboard in order to ensure the technology met staff requirements. The working party also considered management information system requirements around call volumes, waiting times, call duration etc. to inform resource and shift planning (IDeA, 2004: 10).The telephony system employed was an 'Avaya Index' with a capacity of sixty lines and the ability to integrate with web-based systems, email and fax, which was at that time the standard call centre/business system that also offered 'automatic call direction' (ACD). NCD, however, took the decision not to offer any other option for callers (unlike private sector call

centres) except to leave a message on voicemail for the FCO who would return the call. Another departure from private sector practices was the lack of a prepared 'script' for FCOs to work to. The decision was made that, following their initial training,[16]they would be provided with only a 'crib sheet' providing information to assist them with their response, rather than a standardised answer.

In other respects, though, the equipment was exactly the same as in commercial call centres; one example being the indicator boards that displayed information on 'calls waiting', number of 'calls received' and 'average waiting time' and 'average call response time.' These large indicator boards, with bright red neon displays, were positioned at various points at NCD so that all of the staff were able to see them at all times. This was a feature that 'reminded' staff (both physically and psychologically) that they were subject to surveillance. They were a powerful presence and I found that they unconsciously became a focus for me in my field notes to indicate the degree of activity and throughout I recorded observations from them thus:

> 2-15-CR 162 Average Call Response time 00:14 (field notes 24th June)

> 6-30 pm Calls Received 315 (field notes 22nd June)

Thus, staff were constantly reminded how busy (or not) they were and, as such, the display boards were a deliberate part of the conception of work at NCD. In keeping with this, the indicators also served to reinforce the 'simplification of [the] job tasks' and the 'duty to [carry them out] unthinkingly' (Braverman, 1974:118); workers were prompted to do so by both audio and visual cues. In addition to the visual reminder, staff were subjected to an

---

[16] This was originally a six week intensive training package ,which included input from all the specialist teams, but only the original cohort received this (see Chapter 6).

audible 'beep' in their earpiece to indicate someone waiting and this audio-visual combination proved to be a powerful tool. This was confirmed by one member of staff who complained to me about their being used to 'rack up' the pressure on staff; something that they were designed to do (see Chapter 6 and Callaghan and Thompson, 2001).

It was recognised that once the contact centre was operational it would have 'an obvious impact' on the 'Specialist and Assessment and Information Teams' and the 'locality business teams' and it was anticipated that there would no longer be the need for a locality office telephonist (GL, 2001b: 9, and see Appendix Eight). Regular 'consultation with customers' and updating via 'keeping in touch with national developments to ensure continuous service improvements' were planned from the outset. It was also established that a 'Customer Contact System' (CCS) was needed to log and track all calls, faxes, and emails into NCD, as well as a Management Information System for data analysis (GL, 2001a: 6). The conception of work at NCD was, then, complete and incorporated sophisticated surveillance and control features.

Conclusion

Northshire County Council was able to present the need to develop a contact centre as a necessary development to improve the 'supply' side of social services for service users. It is quite clear, however, that it had little option (in common with other local authorities) but to pursue this course of action. This was as a result of central government pressure in the form of the Gershon 'efficiency savings', e-government and the e-accessibility imperatives. It was seen as *the* way to achieve those savings by employing the latest technology. It is evident that

163

Northshire were on-board with the government's modernisation agenda, as evidenced by the change of name of the central planning group, which by August 2002 met under the title of 'DIG/Modernisation Group' (minutes of DIG, August 2002). The chapter has also shown how instruments such as Best Value and the People's Panel consultation exercise were able to exert a powerful influence on Northshire County Council and how they featured prominently in discussions at senior management level (Director of Social Services, 2000; Director of Social Services and Director of Corporate and Legal Services, 2001), smoothing the way through the local authority planning process.

The chapter has provided thick description of both pre-and post-contact centre operation in order to help the reader understand the degree of change that the contact centre represented in relation to the delivery of social services within Northshire County Council. In doing so, it has described how Northshire County Council's Social Services Department was structured and has given some insight into the complexity of its operation prior to NCD, emphasising the role of central government in encouraging the development of such initiatives under the banner of modernisation.

The planning process has been described in some detail and shows clearly that it was in keeping with Braverman's thesis, with the conception of work being a management-driven activity, distinct from the execution of the work (Braverman, 1974: 114). It has also been shown that it was consistent with managerialism in terms of the faith shown in the transformational abilities of technology. As we have seen, Braverman predicted that technology would be increasingly used to simplify and degrade work that had once been the

preserve of skilled workers (Chapter 3). In adopting almost all of the features of a private sector call centre, including its ICT systems, the establishment of NCD appeared to have a similar impact. Responding to the referral of service users, which had been undertaken in localities by qualified staff, was now carried out in a remote location using automated systems and unqualified workers. This echoes Braverman's identification of the separation of conception and execution: in utilising call centre technology, staff had, to a large degree, 'los[t] control over their labour and the manner of its performance' (Braverman, 1974: 114-6, and, see Chapter 6).

This chapter has pulled the various strands of national and local policy together and shown how the government's modernisation agenda and its associated demands on local authorities impacted on Northshire's decision to establish a contact centre. It has focused on the first research question: the conception of work at NCD; how work was organised and structured. It has shown that the planning process was consistent with Braverman's thesis in this respect. The chapter has argued that the development of NCD can be viewed as exemplifying the conception of work process that Braverman described as typical of 'scientific management' and that it was commensurate with public sector managerialism and its emphasis on efficiency, effectiveness and (particularly) economy. In describing the genesis and evolution of the project it has sought to articulate and justify the choice of NCD as a research site to pursue the research questions. It has shown why it represented an opportunity to explore social work practice in an environment designed to accommodate the technocratic features of the commercial business sector. As we will see in the following chapter, this was reflected in, and reinforced by, various aspects of its training programme.

165

Chapter 6 will consider the 'execution' of work at NCD and the degree to which workers were subject to surveillance and managerial control. It will explore the degree to which staff were able, or willing, to resist control by management and how that was manifested, as well as considering the role of consent in this context. In describing the environment and work practices it will also reflect on how, and to what degree, employees are affected by working in this type of environment. In examining the day-to-day work at Northshire Care Direct it will describe the principal actors in detail and consider why social workers had chosen to work there. It will also look at the use of ICT in social work generally, and in contact centres in particular, and consider whether the use of ICT in this context amounts to a new form of social work.

CHAPTER 6

THE EXECUTION OF WORK AT NORTHSHIRE CARE DIRECT

Introduction

Chapter 5 concentrated on the conception of work at NCD and described the organisation and structure of work there. It showed that it was in keeping with Braverman's 'second principle' of the 'separation of conception from execution' in being entirely management-driven (Braverman, 1974: 113-4). This chapter addresses the execution of work at NCD and will focus on the two remaining research questions:-;

2   To what extent are employees at NCD subject to managerial control and surveillance? To what extent can they resist it?

3   What impact has working at NCD had on social workers from a personal and professional perspective?

Chapter 5 analysed the development of Northshire Care Direct (NCD) by Northshire County Council, seeing it as a response to New Labour's modernisation agenda and promotion of ICT (Chapter 2). The chapter justified the choice of NCD as the research site and set out how it offered the chance to carry out an in-depth case study of a setting that represented a radical departure from a conventional social work service. As we have seen, the most emblematic manifestation of the modernisation agenda has been 'electronic government' (e-government). This is intended to provide public access via computer and telephone to information about the services offered by both central and local government agencies, as well as offering the ability to engage with these services (Coleman and Harris, 2008: 3). Local authorities were left with little choice but to utilise call centre technology in order to meet the e-government requirement to make their services e-accessible and operational outside of normal office

167

hours (National Audit Office 2002), as well as to meet the government's efficiency savings targets within budgets that were already over-stretched. It has been argued that the development of contact centres in relation to social services was, therefore, an example of the government's eagerness to promote technological systems and approaches as an integral part of e-government.

Braverman argued that in keeping conception and execution separate, the execution of work under scientific management is reduced to:

[S]implified job tasks governed by simplified instructions...which it is thenceforth [the workers'] duty to follow...without comprehension of the underlying technical reasoning or data.

(Braverman, 1974: 118)

In analysing the execution of work at NCD, attention will be drawn to the principal actors and how and why they came to work at NCD. The chapter will use the workers' voices, where possible, to describe their motivation to work at NCD, to convey their experience of the execution of work there and to shed some light on how it affected them. It will consider firstly, to what extent ICT was being used to monitor and control social workers, and examine to what extent they were willing or able to resist this control or, indeed, whether they consented to it. These issues will be examined in the context of the overall management culture and style at NCD. The chapter will move on to examine the impact on social workers of working at NCD from a personal and professional perspective. In doing so it will seek to convey how, and why social work at NCD is different to social work in conventional settings. The chapter will argue that the social work labour process has been fundamentally changed in, and by, this context as a result of the incursion of technology. Finally, I will then consider

168

whether the data from NCD is evidence of social work having entered a new era that represents a departure from both conventional settings and 'traditional' face-to-face practice and initiates a new electronically-mediated form, which I characterise as 'e-social work'.

MANAGING SOCIAL WORK AT NCD

The management style at NCD was consistent with managerialism (see for example, Pollitt, 1993) in the following respects: first, the contact centre was managed as a 'quasi-business' and was underpinned by the notion of consumerism (Harris, 2003). The language employed by the management team emphasised this approach and numerous examples of their speaking in managerialist language were recorded in my field notes throughout the study period, including their routine reference to 'customers'. Secondly, the recruitment of a manager from an armed forces background, with no social work knowledge or experience of social care, is representative of a central tenet of managerialism; that management is a distinct organisational activity comprising generic knowledge and skills that enable a manager to manage any situation. Thirdly, managerialism seeks to 'empower' customers by reducing professional autonomy and discretion and the operation of NCD was consistent with this. Callers were able to access the service when it suited them, could engage in a degree of self-assessment and could elect whether to engage or not with FCOs or social workers. The fourth aspect of managerialism evident at NCD was the type of relationship that callers have with FCOs or social workers; it was short-term and 'contractual' in nature around a specific need rather than the ongoing professional-client affiliation of conventional social work practice. Finally, managerialism is underpinned by faith in the dynamic nature of technology, its increasing sophistication and its ability to control and continue to increase productivity in any labour process. NCD's reliance on ICT epitomised this, as did the manager's absolute faith in

169

it, despite often being confronted by evidence of its fallibility. Thus, evidence of managerialism at NCD is consistent with claims made by its proponents that it is a generic model applicable to any labour process, including social work. This generic managerialist model has evolved in accordance with the prevailing economic and political context over the last two decades and, as we have seen, has changed the social work labour process and the relationship between social workers and their managers (see Chapter 2).

Indicators of change in the relationship of social workers to their manager at NCD

The traditional interface of practice and management had been via the process of 'supervision'. Supervision has always been a fundamental part of social work management (Brown and Bourne, 1996) and traditionally had the function of monitoring the work that social workers did, as well as supporting them. It has been viewed as a way that managers could help their staff to cope with the stress associated with their casework, as well as highlighting areas for professional development. Kadushin and Harkness's (2002) model of supervision offers the generally accepted view of what social work supervision should be, suggesting it has three principal functions:

1. *Administrative* - including managerial oversight of policy, work and standards.

2. *Educational* - individual staff development; teaching new skills or passing on experience based knowledge.

3. *Supportive* - providing 'personal' time for workers, reflecting on work done/to be done. It also allows the supervisor to identify actual and potential sources of stress and how to manage it.

(Adapted from Kadushin and Harkness, 2002)

170

Chapter 2 described how managerialism in social services had changed the role of supervision from a supportive and worker-led process to a manager-led directive one, which was more concerned with performance management than support. The radically different approach that social work at NCD represented in its engagement with service users also manifested in changes to the supervisory relationship at NCD. As one social worker put it:

> I was saying to [the manager] …the reason why supervision has been such a cornerstone of social work is [that] it was about caseload management-so that your manager knew what the hell you were up to when you had umpteen cases. That is why there was such stress- I was saying to [the manager] the difference between [carrying and] not carrying a case-load, you know 80% of what we talked about in supervision- there's [now] nothing left to talk about.

> (SW 1)

This lack of common ground has arisen as a direct result of managerialism and the growing number of managers from non-traditional backgrounds such as the manager of NCD. However, the ephemeral relationship that social workers at NCD had with service users may not be amenable to traditional supervision, as it is evidently not conventional social work. Unlike conventional social workers, at NCD they did not carry a 'caseload' and contact with service users was on a 'one-off' basis. As one social worker explained in relation to supervision:

> I think in an area (i.e. fieldwork) team [the manager's] lack of experience of social work would be a huge handicap, but here ... it doesn't seem to matter,

because he is not experienced in the issues we are [actually] discussing but [it does not matter as] they are not social work issues.

(SW 3)

This underlines their acceptance that social work at NCD was indeed different to conventional social work. When asked about supervision the manager told me that he felt it was 'less important' than in field social work as 'there is normally someone available to talk to' (field note, 23-06-05). This highlights the fact that, as the examples above illustrate, the manager did not fully appreciate the role or extent of social work supervision. This was reinforced by his description of the supervision he undertook with the qualified social workers, where 'office problems, performance of staff and career paths etc.' were discussed (*ibid)*. In speaking to one of the assistant managers about supervision this impression was confirmed, when she said that 'the nature of the job is that at times they need social work rather than managerial advice [which is] on the spot and as it happens' She went on to say that as a result 'supervision is not particularly useful' (field note, 13-07-05). Furthermore, supervision with the manager had become an infrequent occurrence, evidence perhaps of a mutual acceptance of the lack of value now attributed to it. Although the managerial style at NCD in most respects conformed to textbook managerialism, there were additional facets as has already been indicated. The more pervasive use of ICT at NCD, and its potential for increased control and surveillance, may be seen as the prime reason for this.

ICT, control and surveillance at NCD

As we have seen, one of the issues that has attracted considerable interest in the call and centre literature is the potential for ICT to be used for surveillance and managerial control (Chapter 3) and ICT has undoubtedly changed the social work labour process in this respect (Chapters 2 and 3). This is a growing trend in 'mainstream' social work where ICT has

172

significantly increased the potential for managerial control (see, for example, Harlow and Webb, 2003, Garrett, 2005). However, it is the *context* (i.e. a call centre-type environment), combined with the extent to which managerial control and surveillance is exercised by ICT, that are key defining features of what I characterise as 'e-social work' and differentiate it from other developments (see below). E-social work in this sense can be seen as an extension of the rationalisation of social work practice that began with care management (Chapter 2). In this respect, e-social work is consistent with other developments that have seen greater systemic direction of professionals' actions via bespoke software (Chapter 3).

Braverman argues that the introduction of new technology and methods of working should be seen as part of management's attempts to consolidate their control of the workforce:

> [N]ew methods and new machinery are incorporated within a management effort to dissolve the labour process as a process conducted by the worker and reconstitute it as a process conducted by management.
>
> Braverman, 1974:170

The decision to replicate the design of a private sector call centre with the same equipment for NCD offered support for this view. Northshire's contact centre was designed to incorporate the same features as private sector call centres and industry-standard equipment was used there (Chapter 5). It was designed, therefore, to offer the same degree of control and surveillance over its workers. NCD conforms to what has been described as a 'techno-habitat' as it is entirely dependent on ICT systems (Garrett, 2005). In order to survive in this environment social workers have to find ways of coping and acquire particular skills amounting to a 'techno-habitus' (Coleman and Harris, 2008: 15). In tandem with the

173

development of what amounts to a new location-specific form of 'e- social work' practice, the use of ICT in this context can also be seen to further develop managerialism, offering a more controlling virtual form. As a result of acquiring a techno-habitus, the 'perfect control' that Fernie and Metcalf (1999) envisaged may have been realised in one respect.

Managerialism has, with the advent of more sophisticated technology, moved from the need for the physical presence of a manager actively changing individuals' work practices. The reliance on overt controls was characteristic of managerialism in the Thatcher years. However, in contemporary work settings, such as NCD, the use of ICT has rendered the need for physical control unnecessary and has seen a move toward covert systems-based control, where the active direction of a manager is no longer required. This also renders the personality or style of an individual manager, and his or her relationship with the team (once regarded as fundamental to 'good' social work management), largely redundant. This is in keeping with the ability of ICT to rationalise work and control the workforce and can be seen as evidence of a parallel move toward an e-variant of managerialism. The use of ICT in this way is not only evident in the context of contact centres; as we have seen, it has also been a feature of social work for some time (Harlow and Webb, 2003, Garrett, 2005, and see, Chapter 2) In some areas it has extended to work being allocated, and monitored, entirely by computer technology. In management terms this can be seen as another example of 'e-management', but in relation to practice, this is as (as yet) only an adjunct to field social work, rather than replacing it, as was the case at NCD

An indication of the control exerted by technology was demonstrated by the total dependence of staff on it at NCD; my daily recordings of problems with ICT in one form or another made this very clear (see below). The importance of ICT and its centrality to e-social work at NCD

174

was underlined in a discussion with one of the FCOs who, in complaining about the recent breakdowns ('if anything its worse than it was before!'), said the experience of these technical problems was exacerbated by the fact that 'now we are so reliant on [ICT] –in district offices we could at least do other things [if ICT caused problems there or broke down] here we can't! (field note, 13-07-05). This was reinforced in many conversations over the study period including one with an FCO who (having previously worked in a district office) who said 'it isn't professional having to tell people our system is down so I can't tell you who your social worker is!' When asked to compare it with her time at the district office she said that she remembers the 'odd half-day [when they had problems with computers], but as [name of another FCO] said you could do other things.' When asked how often the system goes down now she says 'every other day...so far today I have had no computer for 45 minutes!'(field note, 23-07-05). My field notes support this as they recorded some form of problem with ICT on every day I spent at NCD.

Perhaps the clearest evidence of managerial control via technology was provided by the use of equipment developed for private sector call centres that was also employed at NCD (see Chapter 5). Alongside ACD and large neon boards that indicated the volume of 'calls waiting', the most blatant example of this was the use of the 'wrap-up' function, an automated system that ostensibly gave workers time to attend to their recording of referral details. This automatically took them 'out of the loop', giving them approximately 9 minutes to enter details on the system. However, when all operators were busy this function allowed the system to 'kick them off' wrap-up and direct a call to them to answer. This was done in order according to who had gone into wrap-up first.

In common with its private sector counterparts, surveillance was a routine feature of working life at NCD. We have seen that it was not coincidental that one of the features in the original plans was an office for the manager with 'glassed walls', offering a panoptical view of the workers (Chapter 5).This suggests that it was envisaged from the outset that NCD would conform to the stereotypical call centre model. Workers were effectively under surveillance from the time they 'logged on' to the system to the time they left. As we have seen, the system allowed every call to be recorded and for the manager to access and listen into calls remotely. In addition, every aspect relating to the timing of calls was recorded. This was taken a step further in employing a supplementary form of remote surveillance, as part of the quality assurance system, in the guise of 'mystery shoppers' (Chapter 5). It is significant that the manager himself was not even aware of their schedule. When I asked him about this he said that it was 'part of their quarterly survey' but that he was not privy to when and how the calls were to be made and he was not sure whether his manager knew (field note, 25-06-05).

It has been argued that this form of surveillance promotes a Foucauldian self-surveillance (e.g. Fernie and Metcalfe, 1998) and at NCD this did seem to be the case to some extent. There were frequent references to mystery shoppers in my field notes; workers often reflected on challenging calls (particularly about resources) wondering whether they were mystery shoppers. The following extract illustrates the mystery shopper process and the feedback given from them by the manager:

> *Overheard conversation between [name of social worker] and [name of] FCO*-they were discussing their experience of 'mystery callers'- (this is where someone from the department rings pretending to be a client to test responses as part of quality assurance system) FCO said that she had had feedback from [the manager] on one that she had received a couple of months ago. I asked her about this-she said that[at the time] she

had a feeling it wasn't a 'normal' call as they had made enquiries about a 'Houdini' car seat, saying they were ringing up on behalf of a friend and wouldn't give their name or details . She had apparently tried to deal with it, ringing the OT dept etc and making general enquiries to try to get an answer –her feedback [from the manager]had been that she had been very helpful and polite but that she should have re-directed it to the 'Directions' service (an information database).

(Field note, 29-06-05)

The following extract also shows (although spoken humorously) that workers were aware of the potential for this self-surveillance promoting conditioned responses

[name of FCO] wonders if she has had a 'mystery shopper' call -she says that you can't tell but only thought it might be [one] after she rings off: she thinks she might have got it wrong as she should have directed them to use the 'Directions' service- says though that it is difficult when time is limited to check everything, she says "we are supposed to 'resolve, redirect or refer"- I joke that I am impressed that she knows the [NCD] motto off by heart-she says "'well I have been here that long" and then says that she thinks she has "had a chip put in- so that she says it automatically".

(Field note, 12-10-05)

The use of First Contact Officers (rather than social workers) relying on electronic *pro forma* for all but the most complex work (Chapter 5) illustrates that in this context e-social work has moved from the use of 'self' (a staple of conventional social work) to the use of 'system'. It is also consistent with Braverman's (1974) depiction of the separation of conception and execution, in showing how as more tasks became fragmented and simplified they can be

177

carried out 'unthinkingly' by workers 'of smaller calibre and attainments' (Braverman, 1974: 118).

The electronic recording *pro forma* ostensibly reflected the requirements of forms routinely used in Northshire's Social Services Department for assessment and referral purposes, but as we saw in Chapter 5, they were also a significant part of managerial control. The use of on-screen direction ensured that callers were categorised, processed and responded to according to pre-programmed system requirements, thus obviating the need for professional judgement or discretion. One of the defining features of e-social work can be seen in the system dictating what role the worker plays, rather than professional judgement. We have seen how care management had increased proceduralisation in social work and, as a result, social workers' professional discretion had already been significantly reduced (Chapter 2). The increased use of ICT in social work generally, and in e-social work at NCD in particular, has taken this process further. Although it may be argued that screen-level controls and reduced discretion are typical of many contemporary social work settings, when coupled with the call centre environment and the apparatus employed there (such as ACD and 'calls waiting' boards) it represents the emergence of a greater degree of control. This virtual control helped ensure compliance with eligibility criteria and Northshire's procedures. In this sense the level of control extends beyond that which existed before, and with incrementally simplified tasks, offers further support for Braverman's thesis including consequential deskilling (see below). Braverman regarded deskilling as an inevitable consequence of scientific management and increased managerial control. As we will see, the social workers' narratives at NCD revealed that the issue of deskilling was a significant concern for them. The increasing atomisation or automation of tasks by ICT is, then, a feature of the e-social work environment, as is

178

increased control of the workforce by virtual means. As we have seen, however, systemic controls are not enough to exert complete control over workers, and subjective factors and tacit consent to those controls are at least as important (Burawoy, 1981, and see, Chapter 3). We have also seen that it is never possible to completely control workers who always retain a degree of agency and with it a capacity to resist managerial surveillance and control.

The role of consent to managerial surveillance and control at NCD

We have seen that Braverman has been criticised for underplaying the role of worker resistance and consent (Chapter 3), but nevertheless he warned against a deterministic view of technology that depicts a helpless workforce, subject to the 'despotism of the machine' (1974: 16-17). Braverman argues that it is how social relations and technology conjoin at any one time in the execution of work that is significant. In doing so, he rejects the notion that workers 'simply accept what designers, owners, and managers of the machines tell us about them' (*ibid*) and that they can only be evaluated in the context of workplace social relations. This was echoed in second-wave LPT which emphasised technology as being 'socially constructed' and that control was a design, not inherent, feature (Callaghan and Thompson, 2001: 20; Edwards, 1979). Despite the sophistication of control mechanisms, there is recognition of the need to gain some form of worker consent in order to exercise effective control over them (Burawoy, 1981, Thompson, 1989). This was evidently the case at NCD (see below), an archetypal 'techno-habitat' (Garret, 2005) with sophisticated surveillance and control apparatus in place.

We have seen the potential capability of high levels of overt and covert, surveillance of staff at NCD via technology, something which staff were aware of, and ostensibly comfortable with (Chapter 5). However, what was striking was the *lack* of surveillance by the manager; and there was no record of his having listened clandestinely to any of the workers calls in the time I was there. When I questioned him on this aspect he confirmed this was the case. Indeed, the only occasion recorded in my field notes where remote monitoring took place was at the request of one of the FCOs who had received a particularly abusive and unpleasant call. This may help to explain why tacit consent was given to this form of surveillance, in contrast to the private sector experience (see, for example, Townsend, 2005). At NCD it may have been viewed as a potentially protective, rather than intrusive, aspect of technology and this may help to explain tolerance of and consent to it. Alternatively, it could be viewed as a conscious choice by the manager in order to establish rapport with a workforce which manifestly displayed an attitude that contrasted sharply to his previous armed forces experience (see below). It may also have been an implicit acknowledgement that he did not have sufficient knowledge of social work, or social workers, at that time to use this tool effectively given that he would not have the insight into what constituted 'good' social work practice; perhaps contradicting of one of the central tenets of managerialism (Chapter 2). As we have seen, the sophistication of ICT has increased the potential for technical control, but control is a design feature not an inherent quality. Despite some fears to the contrary (for example, Fernie and Metcalfe, 1998) technology has, until now, proved to be sufficiently fallible to still require a degree of cooperation and consent from workers (see, for example, Mason et al., 2004, and below).

Consent typified working relations at NCD at the time of my study and that may have been the result of the perceived benefits of working there. The fact that, from the outset, working at NCD was perceived to be an attractive option can also be gauged by Northshire receiving in excess of a hundred applications for twelve posts (field notes, 23-07-05). A number of employees had previously worked in private sector call centres such as Orange and in telephone banking. In comparison to the working conditions experienced in the private sector, working at NCD was evidently more favourable and this may help to explain why consent was more likely than resistance. Similarly, social workers were also clear about the benefits around work-life balance and the inclusion of some negotiated features of social work such as supervision (whatever its shortcomings) also helped to appease them. This, along with the harnessing of workers' goodwill towards service users (a central feature of social work), may also help to explain why consent was largely the order of the day. It might also reflect the fact that there had, up until that point, been a relatively stable staffing complement comprising particular character types. Towards the end of the study period, which coincided with the arrival of new social workers, there was evidence to suggest that the consensus was starting to break down to some extent, and the beginnings of what appeared to be a more divisive culture between the FCOs and social workers (see below).

Resistance to managerial surveillance and control at NCD

NCD has been portrayed as an archetypal techno-habitat with inherent high levels of worker control and surveillance but one that was able to draw on a degree of worker cooperation and consent. Despite this, there were recorded examples of workers undermining these controls during my time at NCD. This is consistent with other researchers' findings in what has been described as a 'unique environment'. In rejecting the idea of panoptical control that Fernie

and Metcalfe (1998) saw as possible in this context, Taylor and Bain found 'manifold and vigorous forms of individual, quasi-collective and collective resistance' (2003: 1488-9). This chimed to some extent with my findings, but my evidence of resistance was primarily individual and to frame it as 'vigorous' would be overplaying it. It was also notable that acts of apparent resistance and subversion by social workers were not aimed at improving their own conditions, but that of their service users. In this respect, then, any examples given do not necessarily undermine the overriding feature of control at NCD, which although exercised primarily by ICT, was underpinned by tacit consent. Having said that, it may only have been a snapshot of nascent e-social work at NCD that reflected a temporary accommodation of the struggle to retain elements of conventional social work at NCD (for example, the decision to retain qualified social workers) and may not be typical of struggles taking place elsewhere. Braverman cautioned against complacency when observing apparently consensual management (or worker 'habituation'). This is viewed as a coping mechanism for workers who have seen the 'destruction' of their traditional ways of working. However, it is conditional on management not over-stepping the mark as:

> [B]eneath this apparent habituation, the hostility of workers to the degenerated forms of work forced upon them continues as a subterranean stream that makes its way to the surface when employment conditions permit'

> (Braverman, 1974:151)

Given the enormous change and professional challenge that the introduction of contact centres represented, the apparent lack of reaction from the social work profession, the public sector unions and the general public was difficult to understand. However, as has been noted elsewhere, the adoption of contact centres has largely gone unchallenged (Coleman and

Harris, 2008). The notable exception to this being the industrial action which took place in Liverpool in 2004 in response to the creation of LDL (Tifrin, 2004, and see Chapter 2).

Examples of resistance at NCD

As we have seen, in addition to providing evidence of consent to control, there were also examples of workers' resistance to it. This was evident more often in situations which appeared to impact on their social work values and practice. My research found that in these circumstances, social workers at NCD were willing and able to resist and subvert system controls (see below). Most of the examples I witnessed at NCD involved ways in which social workers manipulated the system, thus resisting the ICT system controls.

We have seen that covert control at NCD extended beyond the quality assurance mechanisms documented in Chapter 5 and was embedded in the electronic system that structures and organises all of the transactions at NCD. In order to proceed with any call, the FCO or social worker had to go through a number of screens that required various responses to electronic prompts. It was not possible to proceed without doing so and failure to navigate this led to a considerable degree of discomfort for the operator. I was made aware of just how uncomfortable this could be when I spoke to a social worker who was a relatively new arrival at NCD. She told me that for the first time since joining NCD she had been the only qualified worker on the evening shift and had experienced a problem when trying to action a child protection referral via the police, the relative who had reported it and the relevant area team. The system had prevented the social worker from entering the necessary data needed to send it to the relevant team manager and had then apparently lost her previous recording on the case. The system had generated a 'fire bell' warning that asked for data to be entered but,

frustratingly for the social worker, would not allow this to be re-entered. When I interviewed her she outlined the problem she had of wanting to ensure the child was safe, and making a credible response to the police over and above telling them it had been recorded on the system:

> The child had clearly been physically assaulted by both of the parents; both of the parents had admitted it and [names relative] was very distressed when she rang and I felt that something had to be done…so I [tried to] put the referral on last night just in case anything came of it, in case she rang the police again last night …so I wanted something more than a computer saying what I had done, and who I had contacted, and what their response was-and then I decided I was going to contact the [area] team manager this morning to ask [their] opinion - was it serious? [and did] it need to be sent to her team?

<div align="right">(SW5)</div>

As well as highlighting the frustration with ICT that was often in evidence at NCD this incident also shows how the social worker felt compelled to depart from the electronic protocol. In order to ensure the child was safe (in keeping with her social work training) she was forced to make contact with the team manager to ask for a second opinion. This shows the social worker responding in the traditional manner; ensuring that the child would be safeguarded whilst being able to manually track the referral process for the police or any other agency. The following extract from an interview with the same social worker illustrates that there were times however, when no way could be found to circumnavigate the system and ICT was indeed able to control the worker:-

When I went in [to the case] I couldn't find the recording that I had done last night - so I made a new referral, and then for whatever reason it wouldn't let me progress this new referral, and I thought it was because there was another one already there so I tried to go in via the other referral, and it wouldn't let me progress that either! When I got some help from admin [I was told] that the reason it wouldn't let me progress was because I [unknowingly] had already progressed it!

(SW5)

Another social worker recounted a similar example of having to subvert the system in order to reassure themselves that a child would be safe. The ICT system at NCD controlled whether, and when, the original faxes from the police detailing concerns were sent (via email) to the area team. The (relatively new) social worker had assumed all faxes from the police would automatically be sent to the area team (as had been the case prior to the contact centre). Having found out, and been extremely concerned, that the team had not received one such fax, she was informed that the system only allowed this when the referral was classified (i.e. entered on the system) as 'serious'. Although, at that point the social worker did not feel it was an urgent case, good practice dictated that the area team received all the relevant information. The social worker felt that the fax should be seen by the team manager so she had to subvert the system in order to achieve this:

I had to ring [team manager] and say I am screening it as 'serious' even though you[the team manager] said it was 'moderate' - you know the child isn't in danger - but I am recording it as serious just to make sure that the fax actually gets to you.

(SW4)

These examples also demonstrate the degree of cognitive dissonance experienced by social workers experiencing the transition to e-social work at NCD as they struggled to work within

185

the new paradigm. They were being made to practise in a new way which appeared to conflict with the principles they retained from their training. In order to do so, they were often forced to abandon the comfort zone of their traditional skill base and learn, and rely on, new skills. This was seen by some as reframing their professional identity (see below). It shows the potential stress that can arise as a result of an inability or unwillingness to either master, or succumb, to e-social work's electronic protocols. This further facilitates the development of a techno-habitus in order to regain some psychological comfort via the illusion of control.

One of the 'benefits' (see below) of working at NCD was the fact that cases were only dealt with on a 'one-off' basis , with no follow-up or long-term involvement. This was a clear departure for some from what they had done for many years. A clear example of this involved the most experienced social worker at NCD, who, in being unable to accommodate this, resorted to subverting the system by accessing records of cases and checking their progress to ensure they were adequately dealt with. This can be seen as signifying the struggle between conventional and e-social work. As we can see, it illustrates how for some e-social work could not be accommodated within their professional value base:

> Discussion about problems of recording (lack of it) by child care teams –with adult teams 'it was not a problem'. He gave several alarming anecdotes about poor recording practice by child care teams (and interrogated past records to illustrate). Later in conversation [name of SW]opens up about what he saw as problems with contact centre model-he gave a very worrying example of a child protection referral which had clearly disturbed him-where very serious allegations (with detailed

descriptions of observed injuries) had been passed on to Child Protection team but they "hadn't examined the child and accepted mum's explanation"-this really worried and upset him, and seems to have been a watershed for him, which prompted him to apply for another post in county hall completely unrelated to social work.

(Field note, 22-06-05)

Braverman noted that workers' opposition to Taylorism was not necessarily aimed at the 'trappings' of the system but at the 'effort to strip the workers of craft knowledge and autonomous control and confront them with a fully thought-out labour process' (1974: 136); I would argue that what I observed taking place at NCD could be viewed from a similar perspective and might be seen as resistance to deskilling. As we have seen the examples of resistance thus far relate to a lack of fit between conventional and contact centre social work practice, and represent a loss of professional discretion to ICT. The system had been programmed remotely without the involvement of social workers (Chapter 5) and represented a clear separation of the conception and execution of work. The use of automated systems precludes professional judgement and reduces the worker's role to carrying out simplified tasks; this separates skill and knowledge, and reduces the need for qualified or experienced staff. Braverman argued that this is an incremental process that ultimately reduces the worker to an 'animated tool of management' (1974: 136). The acts of resistance or subversion of the system might be seen as a microcosm of the ongoing struggle between conventional and e-social work at NCD. A similar situation, which exemplified this struggle, arose as part of the referral process.

In order for a referral to proceed at NCD, certain screen-based protocols had to be followed. These related to categorising a care need or simply a reminder to enter data relating to a

187

callers religion or ethnicity for example. However, when motivated to do so, staff were able

to resist this control and this was clearly demonstrated whilst I was observing a social worker

processing a referral on what they clearly felt to be a 'deserving' caller who needed help, but

did not fit into the categories on the system. The social worker was faced with the conundrum

of having to accommodate the service user's needs and the system's requirements. This arose

as a result of a specific code having to be entered in order for the referral to progress. The

social worker had assessed this caller as being a 'vulnerable adult' needing some form of

intervention, but (surprisingly) the system did not contain such a category. This was not an

isolated incident and staff told me that when it had occurred previously they had taken the

decision to initiate an *ad hoc* solution to ensure that the caller did in fact get a service, despite

the system's attempts to deny them any input from the department. The field note entry below

describes a discussion of this issue:

> Discussion with [one of the assistant managers] about data entry problems-regarding
>
> adults that don't fall into a specific specialism category but just need help of some
>
> kind-she says that if they are under 65 they have to be recorded as 'disabled' or if
>
> over 65 as 'older person'- interestingly she says that she thinks 'it may be that the
>
> government limit the categories that can be recorded.'

(Field note, 31-08-2005)

The assistant manager's suspicion that central government dictates the categories that can be

recorded was inaccurate (this was a local protocol) but perhaps indicates a degree of

acceptance of the prescriptive nature of e-government and e-social work; and a willingness to

resist this when it was seen as over-stepping the professional mark.

In addition to resistance being exhibited in relation to screen controls, there were other more subtle displays of resistance, such as the use of humour, which at NCD was more often used as a coping mechanism (see below). Humour has been used as a form of resistance in call centres where (according to the orthodox view) the environment is inherently 'oppressive. Here it has been found to take 'novel [and] call centre specific forms' and was used by trade union officials as a subversive influence (Taylor and Bain, 2003: 1487). At NCD this was not evident. Humour was more likely to be used as a way of passing subtle comment on the managerial style employed there (see below). However, I observed a more visible display of resistance in an outburst of anger directed at the system, and a subsequent refusal to process a request that had incorrectly arrived at NCD. This was exhibited by the most experienced (and highly valued) social worker at NCD:

> [Name of social worker] is having a heated exchange "it's nothing to do with bloody social services and I'm going to rip it [the letter] up!" (Which, he does). When I ask him to clarify he explains that a letter from a GP surgery had (erroneously) arrived for the second time which related to an employee of the local hospital which should have gone to their Occupational Health Department. The phone call was from a team clerk at the local social services office asking why it hadn't been entered on [name of the social services information data base] (the letter had originally gone there and they had forwarded it on to NCD). [Name of social worker] explains that "I've dealt with it once and I don't mind wasting my time once but not twice-after all at my age it's a significant part of the time I have got left!"
>
> (Field note, 12-10-05)

189

Another example of anger was directed at the general use of ICT in social work; however, anger being directed at ICT was an everyday occurrence at NCD (see below).

> *12:35 computers down -20 minutes* –leads to frustrated comment by [name of SW]-"I don't know why we put up with this-it happens every bloody day"-saying it was "an American idea and we should get rid of the bloody lot"!-When I ask him if he meant computers, or contact centres, he said "the whole bloody lot!" Frustration was clearly evident in the room as the calls mounted up.
>
> (Field note, 22-06-05)

We have seen (Chapter 3) that resistance can also take more subtle forms and be demonstrated by 'pretence, boredom [or] sympathetic dialogue' (Callaghan and Thompson, 2001: 31) and my field notes recorded various examples of this, showing how during quiet periods boredom was a factor. One example was recorded thus:

> Periods of quite frenetic telephone and keyboard activity interspersed with periods of relative inactivity (short-lived) with people doing different things to pass the time-some play computer based quizzes –e.g. name that band from the picture, or other interest based pages-*(I note that one quickly minimises the page when I walk past)* or read magazines while others speak to each other about leisure activity imminent and past.
>
> (Field note, 24-06-05)

We have seen that despite the systemic controls that workers were subject to at NCD, there remained the ability and willingness to resist and undermine them under particular

190

circumstances. We have seen that resistance took differing forms, and could in some cases circumvent ICT. This was not the norm, however; as a techno-habitat NCD was almost totally dependent on ICT and when systems malfunctioned or broke down this could cause considerable problems. The chapter will now move on to consider the final research question which asks how workers were affected by working at NCD.

WHAT IMPACT DID THE LABOUR PROCESS AT NCD HAVE ON THE WORKFORCE?

This section will cover a variety of issues pertaining to the professional and personal perspectives of NCD's workforce. It will consider how working at NCD affected professional identity and personal well-being, as well as relationships with fellow workers, service users and the local community. It will also consider the extent to which the social workers were deskilled by working in this way as a result of the transformation of their role. It will begin by looking at the training and preparation of workers for working in a contact centre.

Preparation for e-social work at NCD

Given the radical change that working at NCD represented for social workers, the training programme would clearly have played an important part in preparing them to work there. The degree to which they were affected by the change would depend in part on this preparation. The central role that ICT has in a contact centre was one of the key aspects of training and despite social workers having routinely used it as part of their work (see, Harlow and Webb, 2003, for example) the degree to which it was employed and how it was used at NCD was significantly different. The initial training was an intensive programme over a six-week period and involved all of the staff who would be working at NCD, regardless of position or

191

qualification. The training included inputs from all of the specialist teams and covered the following areas:-

- The telephony system

- The software systems

- The process and procedures for different types of calls

- Telephone and communications skills

- Social services departmental structure and key personnel

- Social services issues, e.g. charging policy and structures, response time requirements, child protection issues, etc

- Partner organisations

- Health and safety issues

- Training and development issues-individual TNAs (training needs analysis)

- Disability awareness

(IDeA, 2004: 11)

The original training programme clearly borrowed heavily from the private sector and had a marked technocratic focus, as evidenced by its emphasis on software and telephony systems. However it also acknowledged the need for 'traditional' social work expertise and knowledge by seeking input from all the specialist teams who were invited to contribute to the training programme (see list above). This aspect of the training was very popular and in interview it was favourably commented upon by both qualified and unqualified workers. The intensity of this training was also something that attracted comment with one FCO (who had previously worked for the department in another capacity) declaring that she 'couldn't fault the training' and felt it was 'essential', if rather overwhelming:

Anybody with no prior experience of social services … probably wouldn't have come back the next day [as] it was just so much to absorb in such a short time. It was six weeks...day in day out, and it was really hard work.

(FCO 4)

However, she stated that it had prepared her for the live launch by equipping her with knowledge of the different service user groups and said 'I wouldn't like to think I was coming in now without having [the six-week] training'. The intensive training was only offered to the original cohort, with those employed thereafter being taught by a form of mentorship that involved them sitting alongside an experienced operator, observing their practice and listening in to calls for a period of approximately three weeks, until they felt competent to operate on their own. Thus 'learning on the job' (which was the manager's preferred method, see below) did not offer in-depth training on service user groups or inter-agency procedures. This experience of this 'on the job' training was summed up by another FCO, who had joined the contact centre six months after the original recruitment:

No [they hadn't had the six week training] it was more or less thrown in the deep end, and given in-house training by whoever was here, basically we got [in] the first few days was … "here is a manual[17] to look at, read it", and you know a lot of it doesn't sink in really. It is once you start taking the calls, that is when you start learning really.

(FCO 3)

Even workers who had not experienced this training thought that it was necessary and felt that it would have prepared them more adequately for the demands of going live. One FCO,

---

[17] They are referring to the procedural manual which also included the 'crib sheets' of service user specific information which FCOs were meant to refer to when responding to calls.

who had only been there for five weeks, made this clear when he was asked for his views on the six-week training; 'It would have been better, what surprises me is that there isn't [any formal training]'. He goes on to explain why he felt that way as he had struggled with the various procedures and protocols that he had come up against and that at times he had been 'pulled up' about doing things differently:

> There are so many subtleties, so many variations that the alternative is to trip up each time you hit a new one, and you haven't done it right and be pulled up afterwards, which as long as there is someone checking work, it is fine…….but it doesn't make you feel great that you are constantly being told –'don't do it like that , do it like this' when you are doing one of those and you say 'yes but that is the first time I have seen one of those!'
>
> (FCO 5)

This view of the intensive training as being necessary or desirable was widely held but this view was not shared by the manager of NCD who had told me that he felt it was probably too intense and demanding and not practical enough. When asked to elaborate he explained that this had not been the only reason that had led him to say that with hindsight he would have done it differently:

> They did a week of contact centre work which was inappropriate…we did an awful lot of theory on the Childrens Act, Mental Health Act...which I felt could have been condensed…and we could spent more time on shadowing people and taking actual calls in the localities to give us a gist of the sort of things we were going to deal with and to start to build up a database of telephone numbers of people, contacts [and] what to do.

194

I was interested that he thought that the 'contact centre work' was inappropriate and asked him to clarify:

> No one could provide the sort of training that we needed so we went to a commercial company who provided generic contact centres for Orange, British Gas, O2, Lloyds bank type scenario where we had two days practising inputting data; that was a useful two days,..then we had three days of contact centre training-how to get the best out of a call, how to drag a story out of someone, but it was mainly based on the commercial selling rather than the sort of stuff we want.

It was interesting that from the outset NCD was viewed as being different to a private sector call centre. Initially at least, the intensive training did cover the traditional areas of social work practice. This might reflect the fact that both the training and the inclusion of qualified social workers, which as we have seen, was not originally planned, were viewed by senior management as necessary to dispel any fears and dampen down any disquiet about the contact centre concept. This was clearly evident at the outset, not least within the DIG, where one of the assistant managers (who had been recruited as a member of the group) was recognised as a powerful voice and persuasive advocate for her colleagues, as well as being able to help sell the concept to them. As part of this role, it was recognised that she would be able to mediate between the technophiles and senior managers about what was desirable and achievable. Her importance was recognised in assigning her to a roving 'ambassador' role, helping to persuade her more sceptical colleagues. She was certainly aware of the need to do this and underplayed her importance in summing up her contribution:

195

I always said I was the bit of rough on the team because I was the practitioner and they were the IT experts, and they had some fabulous ideas but I was there to say 'No, no, no, that won't work- nobody rings you up and says 'this is my problem, these are my needs.'

AM1

The six-week intensive training programme may therefore have been the direct result of the change of heart in relation to the qualified staff. It may have also signalled recognition of the need to have knowledge of issues hitherto associated with conventional social work. However there was no contemporaneous record of this being a conscious decision in the minutes or associated documentation (Chapter 5).

It has been shown that the underlying premise of e-social work was that ICT could be used to replicate, replace or direct tasks or transactions which had been seen as the sole preserve of qualified social workers. As Chapter 5 showed, NCD was a new and challenging direction for social services in Northshire but none of the staff had been redeployed there from the old 'Assessment and Information' (A&I) teams; all had chosen to work there. For the social workers, used to working with some degree of discretion and self-direction in community-based settings, it would have been expected that working in this environment would represent an enormous challenge. What motivated them to move to NCD, given that, as we have seen (Chapter 2), call centres are overwhelmingly regarded as uncomfortable and stressful environments? The remainder of this Chapter will examine the execution of work at NCD via the social workers' narratives, to offer some insight into why they chose to work in this environment. It will also consider their perception of how working at NCD affected them from a professional and personal perspective and offer some insight into the issue of deskilling.

Choosing to work at NCD: e-social work as convalescence

As we have seen, there is a considerable amount of research on call centres, albeit almost entirely in private sector settings (Chapter 3). The consensus view is that this type of environment is inherently stressful, oppressive and personally damaging for its employees (see, for example, Taylor and Bain, 1999; Batt and Moynihan, 2002; Bain et al., 2002; Holman, 2002). The very few studies that have focused on centres in the public sector have reached a broadly similar verdict, concluding that public sector forms are no different in the degree to which they damage employees' well-being, as a result of the stress levels that are seen as a fundamental part of the call centre environment (See, for example Fisher, 2004; Bain et al., 2005). As we have seen, only one study to date has looked at a social work contact centre (Chapter 3) and this investigation in an Australian context drew largely the same pessimistic conclusions as its UK counterparts (van den Broek, 2003). Against this background, it might be assumed that social workers would not willingly choose to work at NCD, particularly in light of the evident confusion with call centres (Chapter 5), but this was not the case.

Ironically, the principal reason for opting to work at NCD was the perception that stress levels would be lower there than in field social work and this perception was also shared by some of the FCOs, who had previously been employed in call centres in the private sector (Coleman, 2009). None of the social workers saw working in NCD as being remotely comparable in terms of stress to the type of social work that they had been engaged in previously and this was a shared view regardless of whether they had been employed in an adult or a child care setting. The social workers either saw their employment in the contact centre as a way of taking a break from the stress of field social work in order to re-evaluate their career path (*n=4*), to take them up to retirement (*n=2*) or as a way to earn

197

supplementary income in retirement (*n=1*) (Coleman, 2007: 6). The response from one of the social workers interviewed was typical:

> I just found [the] Children in Need [team] very stressful and I just felt like I needed time away and I just needed to… not to have a big case load and [be] writing reports and, arranging meetings and that sort of thing, and this seemed like a good place to do that- just to clear my head of everything, [and to ask] where am I going to go, and what am I going to do?

> (SW 4)

Another social worker who was preparing once more for retirement (having come out of retirement to work at NCD) summed it up when he said:

> The people who this job attracts have got different reasons for coming here, I am preparing for retirement again, [names social worker] wants to work part-time, other people I would suspect are care worn,[and] have come in for a rest.

> (SW 2)

This view of NCD as somewhere where 'care worn' social workers could come to recuperate was apparently widespread. All of the social workers I interviewed cited the slower pace and the fact that work was 'one-off' (rather than their carrying an on-going case-load) as an aspect of the job that helped them to regain some degree of work-life balance. The comment below by a social worker who had only recently started at NCD was typical in this respect:

> I think the pressures of my previous job were becoming overwhelming, [with] staff shortages [and] high case-loads and [I] want[ed] to have the balance back in my life-

198

my family is the most important thing. It [was] sad to be leaving because I left a very good team but I thought I would move on for a better quality of life.

(SW 4)

The perception of NCD being a less stressful place to work than traditional social work settings was explained even more succinctly by a very recent arrival at NCD who was very frank in saying he had been 'sat on his backside' and how he was aware that it could be seen as 'a nice job [or] even… as a cushy job'. This might suggest that the apparent reduction in stress compared with working in conventional social work teams would be universally seen as beneficial. However, as we will see, this was not always the case and a constant cause for concern was the effect e-social work was having on the social workers' professional skill base.

The lessening in work intensity, pace and stress, whilst initially welcome, was a shock to some who recognised that the intensity of field social work was something that they had actually thrived on. Furthermore, they were concerned that being cocooned in the reasonably comfortable environment of the contact centre isolated them from opportunities for professional development. The most vivid illustration of the differences that social workers were likely to encounter in relation to the pace of their working day was described by the social worker who was the most recent arrival at NCD from a conventional setting:

I have been sat on my backside for 8 weeks. I've come from what I would term 100 miles an hour working environments really, from the first minute you walk to the door to the minute you walk out of the door and beyond, constantly thinking on the go, adrenaline pumping, using your initiative, seeking resolutions as quickly as possible

199

or dealing with situations to the best of your ability hoping that things won't develop too much to a crisis point over a period of time, that being when you're asleep. I feel now that I've come in to a work environment where there just isn't that same level of intensity that you function at. I've gone from 100 mph to the zones of 30 mph, 40 and 50mph and occasionally 60mph but I don't think I'll reach 70.

(SW 3)

The image this social worker conjures up is that of a comfortable cruise in contrast with the overworked hectic drive that most social workers would recognise (see for example, Postle, 2002).The contact centre social workers' accounts suggest a very different working experience to that which has been previously documented in all other call centre environments. The contact centre was generally seen as a healthier location to practise than conventional settings. This view was clearly held by one of the assistant managers:

I've said this to [the manager], especially for people in child care teams who are often talking about burn-out, would this not be an ideal place for someone to come for a year–18 months to recharge their batteries, get away from caseloads and then go back into it?

AM 1

This positive view of working at NCD is, as we have seen, in stark contrast to the prevailing view of this type of environment. It should, however, be seen against the backdrop of the enormous changes in social work since the Children Act (1989) and the NHS and Community Care Act (1990) and the pressures that social workers have been subject to as a result (see for example, Harris 1998a; Lymbery, 2001; Postle, 2002; Harris, 2003; Garrett, 2005). In this respect, it could be regarded as much a comment on the current pressures within social work

200

(see Chapters 2 and 5), as the experience of working at NCD *per se*. The view of *all* call/contact centres as highly pressurised and damaging work environments (Chapter 3) however has been undermined. In this context, NCD was represented as quasi-therapeutic and even as a form of 'convalescence' for burnt-out social workers (Coleman, 2009).

The chapter will now move on to gauge the effect of working in a contact centre such as NCD on social workers' skills. It will consider whether there is any evidence to support the notion that e-social work deskills its practitioners or whether it can be viewed as providing them with new or different skills.

Flying blind or learning new skills?

Thompson observed that the issues of increased deskilling and managerial control 'have emerged as the two main areas of debate in labour process theory' (1989: 89). We have seen (Chapter 3) that Braverman argued that early resistance to Taylorism was not just based on the mechanical controls it introduced, but on the loss of craft knowledge and autonomy. I have argued that a parallel could be drawn at NCD where there was no overt resistance to virtual control unless and until it was seen as a threat to social work's values or the worker's professional judgement. In the examples given, social workers were shown to have exercised what they evidently regarded as their prerogative to utilise their social work skills in the interests of service users. The ability to retain specific skills against the backdrop of increased systemic control will now be examined.

Skill is rarely defined (even in Braverman's final chapter 'A Final Note on Skill') and this complicates any assessment of its perceived loss. Thompson helpfully suggests that

> [T]he general picture built up in the assessment of changes in the labour process is that skill is largely based on knowledge, the unity of conception and execution, and the exercise of control by the workforce.

<div align="right">(1989: 92)</div>

He argues that as a result skill tends to be measured more by historical context and comparison (*ibid)*; in other words, it is a more subjective exercise. Braverman regarded deskilling as an inevitable consequence of the separation of knowledge and skill and part of the overall 'degradation' of work (1974: 124-30). He was also prescient in recognising the role of technology in facilitating this process. He argued that the introduction of technology evidently affected the labour process, but that deskilling does not just result from this; it arises from a combination of technology, scientific management and the consequent reorganisation of work. In that sense NCD, with its combination of all three elements, was an ideal arena to test Braverman's hypothesis, albeit with a recognition of the difficulties in gauging the overall effect on social work skills.

Contact centres such as NCD have used ICT to further delimit the discretion of social workers, a process that began with the managerialist reforms introduced by the NHS and Community Care Act (1990), as epitomised by care management (Chapter 2). E-social work largely confines workers to the execution of automated tasks in response to on-screen prompts and direction. This situation embodies the developments that Braverman foresaw, albeit in a setting where generating 'surplus value' is clearly not an issue. The recorded conversations and interviews with social workers at NCD show that they were acutely aware of the potential of this form of work to cause a loss of the skills that have, until now, been associated with conventional social work.

202

All the social workers recognised that working at NCD represented a fundamental change in the nature of work with service users, and one that challenged their perception of what social work should be. The main concern that social workers raised was the possibility that they would lose some of their social work skills as a result of e-social work. In this respect the improvement in work-life balance to which almost all of them refer (see above) was seen as a 'trade-off'. One social worker summed the dilemma up thus:

> To be truthful I felt really de-skilled by doing this job ...coming from writing reports, going to court, going out [and] assessing people and I do miss the client contact. I didn't realise I would miss it as much ...but the benefits I've got in my own personal life outweigh all that.

> (SW4)

This is consistent with the apparently benign view of e-social work already encountered, but the fact that the loss of skills was seen as the *quid pro quo* for an improvement in work-life balance was unexpected and bears further investigation.

As we have seen e-social work no longer has at its heart local knowledge of the community, its resources or characters. The departure from this familiar terrain was mirrored by the need for the social workers at NCD to adopt a generic approach to social work that was reminiscent of the organisational arrangements that were in place prior to 1990. This meant their having to offer advice or make decisions on issues that were outside of the child care or adult fields they came from. For some, particularly the two social workers who had over thirty years experience, this was a comfortable return to social work arrangements to which

203

they had once been accustomed. However, for those trained after the implementation of the NHS and Community Care Act (1990) and Children Act (1989) reforms, this proved to be an uncomfortable transition. Prior to this they had only worked within defined 'specialisms', whereas now they were forced to re-engage with areas of knowledge they had not encountered since their qualifying education. Whilst social work education has, ostensibly, always been generic, it has, since the inception of the degree level qualification, usually encouraged some degree of specialisation. This has in any case been increasingly a necessity as a result of the 1990 NHS and Community Care Act reforms and subsequent managerialism that separated the 'purchasing' and 'providing' roles under care management (Chapter 2).

We saw (Chapter 5) how one of the principal responsibilities within the role of social worker at NCD was to take calls that were 'complex' in nature as a result of child care, mental health or learning disability issues and to respond to them, including referral to colleagues in specialist teams and/or offering advice to FCOs. This advisory role and the ability to take any call which FCOs regarded as outside their remit, had been operating effectively when I arrived at NCD. However, it quickly became apparent that this had more to do with the experience and characters of the social workers involved, one of whom was referred to as a 'star' by the manager, seen as 'the oracle' by the FCOs and deferred to by all. E-social work at NCD demanded working outside of the comfort zone of recent experience, relying on technology and acting as 'experts' in relation to advising FCOs. The ability to work flexibly in this way had apparently been taken-for-granted within the original work team and only became an issue when new social work staff were employed. New staff clearly did not feel comfortable in this role, and were reluctant to take calls or give advice on areas that were outside of their particular experience. This led to a gradual deterioration in the relationship between the FCOs and the more recent social worker arrivals and eventually led to the FCOs

meeting with the manager to air their grievances (field note 2-11-04). This showed the extent to which, for some, working at NCD represented more of a challenge and added to the pressure to learn new skills and coping mechanisms.

Acquiring a techno-habitus at NCD

The ability to work with people who may not be willing or able to express their needs has always been associated with traditional social work practice and has required social workers to exercise considerable skill and sensitivity in both verbal and non-verbal communication. Traditional social work training has, therefore, emphasised the need to work in partnership with service users and to acknowledge their insight and expertise concerning their own lives (see for example, Smale et al., 1993). Being able to develop and sustain on-going relationships with service users was seen as fundamental to this. In order to assess a service user's needs, conventional social workers are taught to employ highly developed communication and observation skills that rely on information from all of the senses. In contrast, e-social work reinforces the managerialist assumption that assessment is a rational process (*cf.* care management) that can be directed by ICT via on-screen protocols. Social workers in contact centres such as NCD are dependent on these systems and the use of only one sense, hearing, in order to gauge a service user's eligibility for services. We might speculate, therefore, that this form of social work, which does not involve face-to-face contact, would be anathema to most social workers. Being asked to adapt to what amounts to 'virtual' social work represents a challenge on a number of levels, including a revision of the social workers' sense of professional identity. Having to engage with e-social work evidently caused a degree of psychological discomfort and a reappraisal of professional identity, as one social worker explained:

When I first came into social work, my whole thinking and reasoning…was to work directly with people to try and help, support and advise, empathise etc., to actually be there on the coal-face and be somebody for them to rely on and to guide them through a difficult period and beyond. This is very different to what I am used to. There is no face-to-face contact. We cannot in my opinion genuinely understand the circumstances of the situation because we are not seeing it.

(SW 3)

This social worker had only been at NCD for a matter of weeks and was clearly in a process of adjustment that all of the social workers described to me as part of acquiring a techno-habitus. E-social workers are forced to accept that that technology guides their work with service users, rather than their professional judgement, and that they will have to learn to work with, and within, an electronic system. As we have seen the acquisition of a techno-habitus (Coleman and Harris, 2008: 15) is essential for their psychological well-being in this respect, as they find that their professional training and experience does not equip them to work in this way.

The most obvious difference for a social worker who is used to field social work is the absence of the usual visual and olfactory aids to assessment. One social worker (who had been at NCD since it opened) referred to a degree of re-skilling as a result of working there. He explained how his practice differed in the contact centre by comparing the experience to being blindfolded:

I think the best way that a social worker could understand it, is if we blindfolded [them]…. I know that I have developed different skills now in listening to people on the telephone and trying to interpret what they are saying….. you cannot see their body language, you can't experience the smells, and you can't see their eyes, which I

206

think...is the window of the soul,… it is almost like being blind because you have got to interpret what is being said, and I think a lot of our colleagues who are in the field when we pass the referrals to them forget that, they go out and they might see an entirely different scenario to what has been described to us, but we can only work with what people tell us.

(SW 2)

This social worker was clearly more comfortable than the one referred to above, having apparently adapted to e-social work and being able to outline the process of re-skilling required. The example shows how he had been forced to hone his listening skills in order to compensate for the missing sensory input. This extract also gives some insight into the relationship that NCD had with community-based teams and the degree of scepticism they still sometimes faced from social workers located in conventional settings (Chapter 5). The interface and relationship that NCD had with other professionals and field social workers is critical, as it helped to ensure that relevant information was shared; something which underpins high quality assessments.

Assessment has always been a key element of social work practice and, as we saw, its importance was underlined by the introduction of care management which described assessment as the 'cornerstone' of good community care (Department of Health, 1991, and see, Chapter 2). Despite the unambiguous 'motto' of NCD ('Resolve, Redirect or Refer') there appeared to be some initial confusion as to the role of NCD in relation to assessment, although one of the assistant managers was very clear that what NCD did was not, and never should be, part of an assessment *per se*. As she explained:

I think it's dangerous to make it part of the assessment…because I don't think you can actually do the assessment on the phone. We've been asked to do that and I'd have said to them clearly, no way. When they're brought out the FACS criteria we were asked to actually take all the details and say to somebody, no you don't meet the criteria, and to me that's doing an assessment over the phone and I said no way are we doing that.

AM 1

Equipped for e-social work? Acquiring e-skills at NCD

The stance taken on assessment above can be seen as a defence of the traditional professional role. However, we have already seen that what might be seen as e-social work in one form or another (whether that is the more developed form as at NCD or in conventional settings where ICT is playing a more central role) is actually beginning to displace this as an exclusively face-to-face activity. As a result ICT competence in this context can be of equal importance to traditional social work skills. This is now reflected in social work training where the importance of ICT skills is recognised and was, until recently, a requirement for student social workers to be able to evidence this competence in order to qualify (Department of Health, 2002). The increasing use of expert and web-based systems is likely to diminish e-social workers' professional discretion further, as will the relatively recent development of 'self-assessment systems' as part of the 'personalisation' agenda (Department of Health, 2005; Department of Health, 2007). Self-assessment has been promoted as promising 'an instant response, informing if you or the person you are completing the assessment for, are eligible for services' (Kent County Council On-Line, 2008). At the time of my study NCD was one of the sites piloting self-assessment which is now used everywhere to some extent.

One social worker was very clear that his job had undergone a transformation and that in his opinion contact centre social work had very little in common with traditional social work. When asked to sum up what he thought they were doing at NCD he said:

> I don't think it is social work. I think it is some sort of… horrible word… customer relations. I think it is taking information from people in as pleasant and professional way as you can and passing them on to the place where they are going to get help. What do they call it? - Redirection, referral or resolution- and I'm not sure that is social work. For me social work was always about some sort of relationship and on the 'phone your relationship lasts five minutes and is very superficial-as a social worker you used your relationship to effect change but I don't think they do that now. They just take your information and pass it on, [and] give them the advice they need.
>
> (SW1)

For the social workers employed at NCD, some of whom had worked in social work prior to care management and managerialism; it was evident that working in the contact centre required a major adjustment. A number of personal and interpersonal responses to different callers and their situations were observed and recorded in my field notes and often reflected social workers' frustration at working 'blindfolded'.

Coping with e-social work at NCD

All of the employees interviewed, whether social workers or FCOs, were able to identify experiences with callers who were challenging, upsetting or memorable for some reason. This

209

varied from callers being aggressive or hostile to having to deal with people suffering from terminal illness or their relatives. This aspect of the work most closely resembles conventional social work, although it is in the absence of face-to-face contact and managed solely by electronic means. However, there were categories of work in which the qualified social workers were routinely involved. This included areas traditionally viewed as their area of expertise like child protection or severe and enduring mental health problems. However, it is conceivable that even these specialist areas of practice may diminish as e-social work and dedicated ICT systems continue to develop. The way that workers dealt with these difficult situations varied but all employed some form of coping mechanism, the most frequent of which was the use of humour, which, as we have seen, was also used as a form of resistance.

Humour has always been used as a coping mechanism by employees at work, as a form of relief from pressure, routine or boredom, particularly in environments that are deemed to be 'oppressive' (Taylor and Bain, 2003). As we have seen, call centre settings do seem to generate a particular type of humour, which is often used to undermine managerial efforts (*ibid*). My field notes recorded that the use of humour was an everyday occurrence at NCD and, as we shall see, fulfilled a number of functions. The use of humour at NCD, as a coping mechanism, fell into four main categories:

- To relax callers;

- To vent or control stress and frustration;

- To deal with uncomfortable situations;

- To amuse colleagues as mutual relief from boredom or tension;

- To mitigate the often visible discomfort experienced by social workers trying to adjust to the novel demands of e-social work.

I observed many occasions when a frustrated, angry or distressed caller was deflected or calmed by the use of humour. The extracts below illustrate some of the situations in which humour was utilised.

[name of SW] holds court with humour telling about his usual trip to get a 'burger and a bottle of chardonnay' from the local shop [where] he had asked where the woman had been the previous day only to be told as she served him his burger (to much hilarity in the room) 'Eee I had terrible diarrhoea yesterday' SW says he 'declined the brown sauce'-cue riotous laughter again.

(Field notes 27-06-05)

As this example illustrates, the use of humour to deal with stress or frustration was often a very theatrical and exaggerated public act, designed to entertain colleagues as well as defuse a worker's own tension. This performance aspect was to some extent necessary in an environment where workers had to compete with a backdrop of conversations and telephones ringing. This shared theatre often featured pantomime-like performances from certain key players and I observed on more than one occasion how this had the effect of visibly reducing the tension within the room. Humour in its various forms was the most frequently observed reaction of workers at NCD and at times belied the lack of stress that most interviewees reported, as the extracts below demonstrate:

5pm-[female SW] asks [male SW] 'are you in tomorrow?' he jokes 'I am thinking of falling over tonight and twisting my arm' she chides him with 'you can nick off!' she

then asks [the other male SW who is present] who says 'I am thinking of falling over and breaking my arm!'

[Name of SW] starts singing in a languid and ironic style 'I'm so excited'-I joke sarcastically that he is singing it 'with feeling'-he says 'yes-my other favourite song is "show me the way to go home"!'

(5pm the same day) [the same SW] starts singing 'show me the way to go home' (modifying the lyrics though to 'I had a little spliff about an hour ago and it's gone right to my head').

Whilst humour was frequently used to reduce tension and stress there were also times where the reaction of the worker was very different. In some situations it was clearly evident that the worker involved had been distressed, upset or angered by a call. The observation from my field notes below was one such occasion where I witnessed the ability of a call to cause distress, despite the lack of face-to-face contact:

[FCO] dealing with a caller being obviously sensitive to them and demonstrating sympathy for them ('oh dear' etc), and being visibly upset herself. I said 'that sounded like a difficult call' she answered 'yes he had cancer'; I say that it must be difficult to deal with – FCO said what she found most difficult was when it was something close to her own experience giving the example of dealing with people who have had a

stroke as her 'gran' had recently had a stroke. When she takes these calls she says that her 'voice wobbles a bit' I say 'I wonder if it gets better the longer you are here'? She answers 'I don't think so.'

(Field note, 29-06-05)

The following extract from my field notes of the same day gives an indication of a potential source of frustration arising from misunderstanding (for example, of medical terminology) or frustration when dealing with other agencies. This extract also illustrates the fact that not all agencies were convinced of the merits of using the contact centre to 'refer, re-direct or resolve' enquires, particularly where they would have previously dealt with professionals from their own area:

FCO relates to me that she has just had a telephone call from a staff nurse on a hospital ward about a discharge-FCO had asked her to spell certain medical terms and had been treated 'very abruptly' by the staff nurse (SN) who said 'a district nurse would have known that !'[18] The FCO apologised but explained that she had to take the referral and needed to be sure that she had the right information-at this point she could hear the SN talking to her colleague saying "this is fucking ridiculous!"-SN still hadn't spelt out terms for her but at this point FCO decided not to pursue and wrote down what she thought it was and then used her medical dictionary to work out what it actually was. I asked her how this made her feel: she said that she worried in case she hadn't got accurate information and how it would impact on the service user if she got it wrong.

(Field note, 29-06-05)

---

[18] NB this was the result of a system change-previously the ward would have dealt with a district nurse or GP's surgery directly.

In another example of what was a difficult call from a very aggressive and confused man, the social worker dealt with it using a different approach that combined patience with appropriate assertiveness, whilst speaking to the man, and using humour for the benefit of colleagues following the call:

> [name of SW] new SW receives a call which is difficult as the caller is shouting and swearing and eventually puts the phone down on her. I discuss with her –she says that he was an elderly (79) man who appeared to be confused as he thought that someone had used his keys to enter his house without his permission. He had been verbally abusive about the wardens who oversee his house-telling her "don't tell those cunts" – it transpires that a note had been left on his mantelpiece which when SW asked him to read necessitated him getting his glasses. SW said that she had waited on the phone for at least '5 or 6 minutes' but he hadn't returned and as she had his number thought she would ring him back after a short time. When she did so he was very aggressive accusing her of putting the phone down on him. She clarifies that the note was left by the wardens who had in fact entered the house to repair a leak and had left him a note to this effect. She tries to clarify further and after he continued to shout and swear she asked him not to shout as she couldn't hear what he was saying-he told her to 'fuck off' and rang off. I spoke to her and asked her how it made her feel-she maintained that she wasn't upset by it as 'it goes over my head' and 'you need a thick skin in this job'. She then jokes to all though that 'if he rings back I'm putting it through to [name of most experienced SW]!'

<div align="right">(Field note, 20-07-05)</div>

214

Displacing craft? Using ICT to degrade labour at NCD

Braverman describes the change in the labour process as a result of technology and scientific management producing units that 'operate like a hand, watched, corrected and controlled by a distant brain' (1974: 125). At NCD the 'distant brain' was the ICT system that oversaw all of its functions. In keeping with Braverman's thesis on the degradation of labour, we have seen how ICT required untrained workers to deal with relatively complex situations that they would not previously have been engaged with. The First Contact Officers were the 'front-end' of NCD, and as such, had to deal with all initial calls. Even using unqualified staff to filter referrals represented a departure from traditional practices in Northshire, and the ability to utilise FCOs in this way can be seen as another facet of e-social work. It is illuminating that the original conception of NCD did not include any qualified social workers at all (Chapter 5).

Work undertaken by FCOs at NCD was evidence of the ability of ICT to replicate the input of qualified staff. It records the beginning of the displacement of 'traditional' social work skills or training in Northshire. As such it can be seen as exemplifying what Fabricant called the 'debasement of [the] craft' of social work (1985: 393, and see Chapter 3). Fabricant (like Braverman) recognised that the social work labour process was subject to the same pressures as other areas of work and that Braverman's thesis was applicable to non-industrial settings. He argued that social work had historically possessed the characteristics of skilled craft and that social workers could therefore be (loosely) compared to artisans in the pre-industrial era:

> The individual social worker was expected to absorb and synthesise the information necessary to understand the intra-psychic dynamics of an individual or the complex forces at work in the community [and] was responsible for struggling against the

limits of available knowledge to understand as much a possible about the entire human being and the whole community.

(Fabricant, 1985: 389)

Fabricant's work preceded the widespread incursion of ICT into social work and what he foresaw has evidently moved on apace. In that respect, it might be seen as evidence of the beginning of the epochal shift. The development and current use of electronic protocols and tools such as electronic *pro forma,* additional on-screen controls and assessment tools further rationalised once complex tasks that required the 'craft' of social work. This allowed FCOs to engage in work that would normally have been carried out by qualified social workers. The fact that all contact with service users is by electronic means reinforces this further by removing FCOs (and social workers) from the stresses and potential dangers of face-to-face contact. In addition, this offers insulation from the consequences of their actions, including mistakes made, in a way that face-to-face social work does not. The data from NCD records many examples where FCOs have dealt with complex and, at times, life-threatening situations. The FCOs, for example, were all able to describe their 'regulars', often callers who had enduring mental health problems and usually rang up at night. As a result of their particular problems, these callers had to be handled in a particularly sensitive manner. One FCO was able to describe two occasions where she had been directly involved in saving someone's life. The first incident also provides an example of traditional roles being reversed, with the FCO engaging with a potentially suicidal caller, while the social worker telephoned other agencies:

One guy who rings a lot and he said he didn't want to go on any more, saying he'd rather be dead-I kept him talking while a colleague [the social worker] rang EDT (Emergency Duty Team) who knew him well to see whether it was likely that he

216

would [commit suicide] and then I kept him talking while she rang the police to go
around.

<p align="right">(FCO 1)</p>

Another recorded incident clearly illustrates how e-social work allows arms-length direction of resources and is another example of the displacement of the qualified social work role. This example shows how an FCO managed a case that would have previously been classified as urgent and as requiring a qualified social work to intervene:

> I had another lad who took an overdose and I asked for help and [the assistant manager] rang the police-well an ambulance actually as he wouldn't [agree to] have the police, and I kept him talking-it went on for about forty minutes until the ambulance arrived, but it felt like forever-my hands were really shaking as I took that one.

<p align="right">(FCO 1)</p>

The examples show how e-social work by FCOs can supplement or replace qualified social workers. The increasing development and sophistication of ICT, and in particular, expert software, is likely to extend this further. This clearly has implications for the status and identity of the profession in the long-term and it remains to be seen if and how it will impact on social work training (see Chapter 7). The ability of unqualified individuals to utilise software to replicate professional advice or input is increasingly supplemented by expert software and web-based sources of knowledge and/or support (Chapter 2).

The central role of ICT in e-social work brought its own particular problems. As we have seen, the workers at NCD had to deal with a wide variety of issues that ranged from life-threatening or abusive situations to the frustration of fielding inappropriate referrals. Whilst

217

the issues they faced varied from day-to-day, one feature remained the principal (and most cited) source of frustration at NCD: ICT.

'In the loop': e-social work and ICT limitations

As we have seen, the defining feature of e-social work is that ICT is no longer merely a tool for workers to use, but is embedded in the labour process. E-social work is totally dependent on technology and ICT directs and controls the e-social work labour process. The social workers at NCD were acutely aware that this dependence was shaping their work and that the limitations of the technology, system errors or breakdown could have serious consequences. They also expressed fears of being deskilled, although no-one ever gave concrete examples to illustrate how this was manifested in practice. However, as we have seen, the notion of skill is largely comparative and subjective, and deskilling is inevitably an incremental process.

Chapter 5 outlined how the systems employed at NCD were a mix of standard call centre technology and systems that were bespoke to Northshire. Advocates of such technology argue that it promotes the 'three Es' of managerialism in being effective, economic and efficient and the prominence of ICT in this context is often used to portray the image of efficiency (Garrett, 2005: 530). However, this assumes that the technology is operating correctly and that e-social workers have the necessary technical expertise to use it effectively. As we have seen, at NCD the systems in use did not routinely deliver the promised efficiency. In numerous incidents recorded in my field notes and interviews, it was shown that ICT actually slowed down transactions or over-complicated what were essentially simple operations. This often had a palpable effect on workers at NCD and served to frustrate and anger them. This example was typical:

218

[Name of social worker] puts something in the shredder saying 'that's technology I *can* handle!' (his views on technology are well known).

(Field note, 27-07-05)

Another example demonstrates how ICT slowed down what would once have been a very simple and routine outcome:

What annoys me increasingly is what is supposed to be a huge help to do the job in this technological age [actually] appears to be a colossal hindrance. The job is [actually] very easy-what makes it difficult is that the computers keep breaking down. A classic example is [that] you get a lot of email enquiries on various subjects you would never had dreamed would come to a social work duty team, but they come in anyway and you are supposed to reply very easily by filling in the reply section on the form and pressing a button to send. I drafted a copious lengthy reply to a poor woman who basically wanted help to get more appropriate help. I did the reply but it wouldn't let me send it. It was a nightmare-I was getting all sorts of funny little messages telling me I had performed illegal things [and] a five minute job ending up taking forty five minutes!

(SW1)

In this case (another example of resistance), the social worker eventually had to obtain the woman's personal email address, re-draft the message and email it conventionally to circumnavigate the e-form. There were many other examples of the technology failing to deliver; in the eight month study period there were entries almost every day recording technical problems and breakdowns. This appears to be typical, as other studies have noted (see for example, Mason et al., 2002; Fisher 2004). The inherent lack of reliability of the technology used in this type of setting, when combined with the possibility of workers being

219

able to subvert or sabotage systems, limits the ability of management to control the workforce and 'their realisation of a Taylorist decomposition of call handling tasks' (Fisher, 2004: 157 and see Chapter 5). The evidence from NCD showed that the equipment was incredibly prone to breakdown and as in Mason et al.'s (2002) study, 'considerable collective energy was expended in actually making the technology work, rather than in circumnavigating its supposed negative effects' (Mason, 2004: 144)[19]. This certainly undermines the view of ICT as inherently efficient, economic and effective and (thus far) capable of exercising the 'perfect technical control' that some fear (Fernie and Metcalf, 1999).

Despite the fallibility of the ICT systems at NCD, we have seen how the use of ICT has changed the organisation and delivery of work. One of the most significant aspects of this has been the fragmentation of work and simplification of work tasks through ICT, which saw unqualified FCOs undertaking work that would previously have been outside of their remit.

E-social work as signifying on-going change

In describing social work practice at NCD as 'e-social work' I have argued that it is something distinctive but as yet not fully formed. As has been argued elsewhere (Coleman and Harris, 2008), the use of contact centres in social work represents one of the most fundamental changes ever introduced. Technological developments have always defied prediction, particularly in the last three decades where the pace of change has been relentless. This 'serves as an elementary demonstration of the fact that the relations between technology and society are beyond the reach of simple-minded "determinism"' (Braverman, 1974: 19). As both Marx and Braverman (1974: 17-19) argued, there is no clear demarcation point when

---

[19] Mason is referring here to using ICT for surveillance and managerial control

epochs change; there is always a degree of overlap where 'traditional' labour processes continue, and 'the same productive forces that are characteristic of the *close of one epoch* of social relations are also characteristic of the *opening of the succeeding epoch'* (Braverman, 1974: 19, emphases in original). I would argue that we are witnessing one such point where 'conventional' social work is moving toward the complete version of what I have called 'e-social work', where more functions will be controlled and decisions made by ICT at the expense of professional judgement. Given the climate of economic austerity and attacks on the public sector by the current government, this evolution is likely to gather pace. I am arguing therefore, that this is the prevailing direction with two distinct continuities:

- Elements of conventional social work including retention of the social work title;

- Further adoption of the 'techno-habitat' and e-social work practice, as epitomised by NCD and the continued growth in use of ICT in social work generally (See for example, Harlow and Webb, 2003, Garrett, 2005).

My research at NCD is only a single case study, and I am mindful of the dangers of generalising from it. However, this does not preclude similar developments taking place elsewhere; hence the need for more research in this area. In keeping with any paradigm shift, it also does not exclude the possibility that there are areas of different practice or pockets of resistance to it (Braverman, 1974:14-20). My argument is that the trend (as shown by evidence across social work of the use of ICT) is consistently moving toward e-social work. The fact that some form of contact centre is now the norm in virtually all local authorities, ten years after their introduction in Liverpool, is further evidence of this trend. The loss of professional discretion is not in itself a distinguishing feature as this is evident elsewhere

221

(including fully automated case allocation). However, as I have shown, the contact centre environment adds another dimension and moves e-social work along the evolutionary path.

Conclusion

This chapter has considered the data relating to two of the research questions:

2   To what extent are employees at NCD subject to managerial control and surveillance? To what extent can they resist it?

3   What impact has working at NCD had on social workers from a personal and professional perspective?

In doing so, it has considered a range of issues relating to the personal and professional experience of workers at NCD, including the management regime. It has argued that the most significant development has been the emergence of 'e-social work'. This is seen as a further, and specific, development of the use of ICT in social work that others (see for example, Harlow and Webb, 2003, Postle, 2004, Garrett, 2005) have highlighted. Contact centres represented New Labour's search for 'modern' ways of managing service delivery and e-social work, and its e-management, have been characterised as by-products of this policy. We have seen that e-social work at NCD had a number of key features:

- It was practised in a 'techno-habitat' where ICT skills take precedence over other skills and workers are constrained to develop a 'techno-habitus' (Coleman and Harris, 2008);

- It was mediated, directed and controlled by ICT;

- It was subject to a number of overt and covert surveillance and control mechanisms;

222

- It was rationalised, highly procedural and more amenable to measurement or quantification than conventional social work;

- There was no face-to-face contact with service users, and all interaction was electronically mediated;

- It did not require qualified staff to carry out most of the work. ICT was used to replicate or replace tasks or transactions which hitherto had been the sole preserve of qualified social workers.

E-social work is consistent with managerialism and the latter's affinity with technological solutions that have progressively affected social work practice and the relationship that social workers have with service users. E-social work is distinct from traditional social work in that it further rationalises the assessment process initiated by care management, no longer having a face-to-face long-term relationship as its foundation. It can be seen as the most recent manifestation of the changes that have occurred as a result of the managerialism that delivered the 'social work business' (Harris, 2003). The progressive disengagement from face-to-face work has been an on-going incremental process since the implementation of the Children Act (1989) and the NHS and Community Care Act (1990). It has been argued (albeit in a Canadian context) that 'the social worker who engages with her (*sic)* client in a supportive, nurturing encounter appears, at least officially, to be dying' (Davies and Leonard, 2004: x). In addition, professional competence now appears to equate 'to "mastering" scientific knowledge and new technical skills, [and] the latest and most glamorous forms of expertise' (*ibid).* E-social work and the embedding of contact centres in social care practice is the epitome of this trend, as is the need for social workers to be conversant with and competent in the use of ICT. The fact this had also been incorporated into social work

training can be seen as evidence of the previous government's commitment to the increasing incorporation of ICT in the public sector and the further development of e-social work.

The research questions asked to what extent employees at NCD were subject to managerial control and surveillance and how the experience of working there had impacted on them. The findings of the study shed light on both issues. The workers at NCD were subject to what I characterised as 'e-management.' This was an extension of forms of control that have been used in social work for some time now, in keeping with the growing use of ICT in contemporary social work (Harlow and Webb, 2003). As with e-social work, I am not arguing that it represents a completely different form, merely another step on the techno-evolutionary scale. What was significant about the management of staff at NCD was not just the degree to which the 'distant brain' controlled their actions, but the location in which it occurred. This provided a different managerial dimension.

Call or contact centres have been recognised as 'unique' environments (Taylor and Bain, 2003), and allow for a more subtle and pervasive form of surveillance and control. Working in this isolated environment would inevitably have a greater impact on social workers than most other occupational groups; prior to working at NCD social workers travelled widely and were exposed to different colleagues, service users, opinions and circumstances on a daily basis. Even within the confines of a local office they would be subject to debate and banter, some of which challenged or undermined managerial decisions. At NCD, or similar establishments, their spheres of influence were limited and this might be seen to facilitate more effective surveillance and control. As we have seen, staff at NCD were effectively under surveillance via the system from the moment they 'logged-on' at the beginning of their shift to the time they switched off their computer. Their calls and response times were

224

monitored and at any time could be automatically diverted to calls even when they were on 'wrap-up'. This was supplemented by the ability of the manager to 'listen-in' to any call at any time. In this respect NCD conforms to the orthodox view of call centres.

What distinguishes the public sector contact centre from private sector call centres is the apparent impact it has on its employees, which as we have seen, is altogether more benign than the experience of workers in the private sector. Nevertheless, it did impact on their personal and professional lives. The workers at NCD described their work as being less stressful than field social work and most had chosen to work there as a way of restoring their work-life balance. This benefit was off-set however, by the perception of being deskilled, as Braverman (1974) had argued they would be, by the fragmentation and degradation of their work. However, this aspect was only a perception that could not be substantiated; contact centre social work is a relatively new development and the degree to which they might be demonstrably deskilled is another area of research that needs to be undertaken in the future (Chapter 7). The perception of deskilling had been underlined by the use of technology to replicate what were once seen as aspects of their 'craft'. In addition the need to undertake their work at NCD 'unthinkingly and without comprehension of the underlying technical reasoning or data' (Braverman, 1974: 118), resulted in relative boredom and workers expressing the fact that they were missing the (more stressful) 'buzz' of conventional social work. It is conceivable (and indeed likely, given the threats to local authority funding), that the relatively easy work pace enjoyed at NCD was a temporary phenomenon. Indeed, one worker who had previously worked in a banking call centre indicated that this may have already begun as one of my observations recorded: 'When I first came I thought working at NCD was easy, but now that has changed' (field note 16-11-05).This was not an opinion that

225

was widely expressed however; we have seen that the predominant view was that working at NCD represented a slowing down from '100mph to 30 mph'.

Despite apparent overall accommodation, albeit tempered by boredom and concerns about the loss of social work skills, there were still signs of potential and actual resistance. As we have seen, the way in which social workers resisted managerial surveillance and control took particular forms. At NCD it was not a reaction to oppression by 'the system' as such; it was a reassertion of social work values and the primacy of service users, rather than managerial needs. This showed that at this juncture the distant brain of e-social work was unable to fully control the hand of the worker and belies the apparent habituation of the workforce.

The concluding chapter will be in two main sections. Section one will revisit the defining characteristics of e-social work, how it has emerged and the factors that have shaped current work practices. It will take an overview of the research findings using the three principal themes of the thesis and Braverman's (1974) labour process perspective. It will then briefly review the contents of the thesis chapters and the implications for e-social work before moving on to section two. Part two will evaluate the thesis as a whole and its contribution. It will examine the overall strengths and shortcomings of the case study design, methodology employed and research findings. It will point up directions for future research and consider the implications of the research for practice. In conclusion, it will consider what the thesis has contributed to knowledge, how it might have implications for policy and the significance of the empirical data.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSIONS AND CONTRIBUTION OF THE THESIS

Introduction

The thesis has explored the use of ICT in social work but in a setting that is relatively new: the contact centre. It has used the findings of an in-depth study of Northshire Care Direct (NCD) to examine the effects of this form of work on social work and its practitioners. Braverman's (1974) labour process perspective has been used to analyse the labour process at NCD and to interpret recent developments. Three principal themes arising from Braverman's work have been used to inform the research questions and structure the thesis. The thesis has described how the conjunction of a call centre environment and systemic managerial control and surveillance by ICT has seen the emergence of a new variant of social work practice that I have designated 'e-social work'.

The degree of managerial control and surveillance at NCD was extended by the use of private sector technology in what has been described as a 'unique environment' (Taylor and Bain, 2003). It was in this respect consistent with managerialism and also allowed for a distinct separation of the conception and execution of work (Braverman, 1974). As a result of these features, like social work practice, managerialism can also be seen to have developed further in this context. Once again, it is the combination of factors that render it different to other forms of technical and managerial control that exist in mainstream social work, not least of

which is the techno-habitat (Garrett, 2005). Therefore, in order to distinguish it, I have characterised it as 'e-managerialism'. Although these developments were observed as the result of data from a single case study, and notwithstanding the difficulties associated with generalisation (Chapter 4), the now widespread use of contact centres in the UK using similar technology makes it more likely that they will be reproduced elsewhere. I have argued that these are pivotal developments that will have significant implications for future practice.

We have seen how e-social work at NCD embodied Braverman's (1974) separation of the conception and execution of work and how this was, as Braverman argued, facilitated by the use of technology (1974: 169-183, and Chapters 3, 5 and 6). The central argument of Braverman's thesis was that the degradation of work, and deskilling of the workforce, was the inevitable consequence and result of reductionist work practices and the incremental 'destruction of craftsmanship' (Braverman, 1974: 133-6). Braverman saw technology as playing a key role in this development but, despite some seeing him as being 'surprisingly deterministic' concerning technology (Thompson, 1989: 106), he rejected technological determinism (Braverman, 1974: 19). He recognised however, that the incorporation of technology inevitably leads to a decline in skill, as:

> The more science is incorporated into the labour process, the less the worker understands of the process; the more sophisticated an intellectual product the machine becomes, the less control and comprehension of the machine the worker has. In other words, the more the worker needs to know in order to remain a human being at work, the less does he or she know.

(Braverman, 1974: 425)

This was in evidence at NCD where workers struggled to master electronic protocols (Chapter 6), and e-social work was reinforced by the worker not understanding the technology, but merely following it s direction.

Three themes have been used from Braverman's thesis, and underline the significance of separating the conception and execution of work (Chapter 3). These themes underpinned the research questions:

1   How was work organised and structured at NCD? (The conception of work);

2   To what extent were employees at NCD subject to managerial control and surveillance, and to what extent could they resist it? (The execution of work);

3   What impact did the labour process at NCD have on social workers from a personal and professional perspective? (The execution of work). Central to this research question is the consideration of Braverman's argument on the consequent deskilling of the workforce and the effects on social workers of the degradation of work in relation to their overall well-being and satisfaction.

This chapter is in two parts. Part one will revisit the defining characteristics of what will be referred to as 'e-social work'. It will revisit its origins and the factors that have shaped current work practices. It will review the research findings and reconsiders the principal themes and then will briefly review the contents of all the chapters, before moving on to part two. Part two will evaluate the thesis as a whole. It will examine the strengths and limitations of the case study design, methodology employed and research findings. It will consider the implications of the research findings for practice and point to directions for future research.

In conclusion it will consider what the thesis has contributed overall to knowledge, its policy implications and the significance of the empirical data. In doing so it will ask whether the data is open to different interpretation and whether the concept of e-social work stands scrutiny as a model for future service delivery.

<div align="center">**PART ONE**</div>

<div align="center">**E-SOCIAL WORK IN CONTEXT**</div>

Defining e-social work

I have argued (Chapter 6) that e-social work has a number of defining characteristics and have indicated the connection of these to the three central themes of the thesis:

- It is practised in a techno-habitat where ICT skills predominate (theme 1);

- It is rationalised and, therefore, highly proceduralised, predictable and quantifiable (theme 1)[20];

- It is mediated, directed and controlled by ICT (theme 2);

- It is amenable, and subject to, surveillance and virtual control (theme 2);

- Transactions previously seen as the sole preserve of qualified social workers are now replicated, reproduced or replaced by ICT (theme 3);

- The use of ICT facilitates e-social work practice by workers without conventional social work training (theme 3);

---

[20] This is comparable to Ritzer's (1974) characterisation of the concept of 'McDonaldization' which he saw as the ultimate expression of rationalisation

- The relationship with service users is exclusively mediated by electronic means (theme 3).

The thesis has analysed how and why this form of social work has emerged, attributing it to the pronounced changes in working practices that have arisen as a result of the introduction of social services contact centres. I have argued that these changes were directly attributable to New Labour's modernisation agenda and its reliance on ICT to provide solutions to what had been perceived as inherent problems in the public sector (Chapter 2). E-social work has been portrayed as another facet of the managerialism that has promoted a business ethos in all areas of the public sector, including social work (Harris, 2003). As others have observed, this has led to a marked reduction in face-to-face work and a parallel rise in the use of ICT in day-to-day social work practice (Postle, 2002; Harlow and Webb, 2003; Davies and Leonard, 2004; Garrett, 2005). This trend was been reinforced and validated by, the requirement until recently, of qualifying social workers to evidence technological capability alongside traditional social work competence. I have argued that e-social work is, therefore, consistent with managerialism and its affinity with technological solutions; and in the context of the contact centre, will progressively affect and change the relationship social workers have with service users. I have also argued that there is a concomitant development in managerialism (Chapter 6, and see below). A parallel development will be an incremental deskilling of social workers in keeping with Braverman's thesis and the need to acquire a 'techno-habitus' (Coleman and Harris, 2008) with a new set of 'e-skills'.

I have argued that whilst e-social work is distinct as a form of practice, it is not yet fully formed (Chapter 6). Technological developments and progress have often defied prediction, and, as we have seen, Braverman cautioned against 'simple-minded determinism' in this

respect (1974: 19). However, e-social work can be seen to represent another rationalising step along the path toward greater technological control of processes (and indeed professions). I have argued that it signifies the beginning of the end of one epoch and, at least, the beginnings of a new one. That 'conventional' social work practice continues, to varying degrees, in a number of settings does not preclude this paradigm shift, or take account of what is happening elsewhere. It adds support to the notion that there is always a degree of overlap between epochs where 'traditional' labour processes continue for a time (Braverman, 1974: 19).

The thesis contends that contact centres, such as NCD, represent one conjunction of technological and human control that are moving us further toward a fully-formed e-social work. Ultimately, this will see more functions controlled and decisions made by ICT, at the expense of professional judgement. As we have seen recognition of the incursion of ICT into social work is nothing new and has been well documented (Postle, 2002; Harlow and Webb, 2003; Davies and Leonard, 2004; Garrett, 2005). This is also the case with the reduction of professional discretion, and the increasing direction or allocation of work by ICT (Harlow and Webb, 2003; Garrett, 2005; and see Chapter 6). However, what distinguishes e-social work is the call centre environment and its particular attributes: this marriage is the key aspect that sets it apart from other developments (Chapters 3, 5 and 6). The current economic climate and the need to identify on-going 'efficiency savings' (Chapter 2), combined with the demonstrable and substantial savings made by Northshire as a result of introducing NCD (Chapter 5) gives further support to my argument that the prevailing direction is toward e-social work. The thesis has, then, identified the emergence of e-social work as a development

that has shaped practice in Northshire and one that is likely to influence national working practices in the future.

Groundwork

Chapter 1 described the context, initial aims and focus of the thesis, and the rationale for embarking on an in-depth case study of what was then a nascent organisational form. At the inauguration of the research (2004), the use of contact centres to access social services was a novel concept in Britain and one that had not been subject to research here previously. The lack of empirical data on public sector contact centres and any understanding of how social workers might operate in this setting formed the initial rationale for the study. Braverman's thesis acted as a guide for the literature review and helped to identify the key themes which informed the research questions.

An examination of the literature was undertaken in order to make sense of the basic features of call centre environments (Chapter 3) and gain some understanding of how and why they had come to be utilised in the public sector and how contact centres might differ. This initial enquiry aimed to establish the rationale for the use of contact centres and how it might interface with conventional social work practice. At this point, it was not clear whether contact centres differed from private sector call centres, which had become ubiquitous in the preceding decade. The preliminary enquiry aimed to shed light on this form of work and the motivation for employing it in social services. The opening trawl of academic literature and policy documents began to reveal the significance of a number of developments and, in particular, the direction of New Labour policy. This alerted me to the need firstly, to re-

examine contemporary social work practice and how it might be affected by the modernisation agenda. It also highlighted the necessity of reviewing the literature on private sector call centres to uncover any common organisational features, which would help to identify the potential impact on NCD's workforce. In the course of reviewing government policy, I became acutely aware of the direct influence of the modernisation policy stream and the significance of certain aspects of it. It became clear that the 'e-government' initiative was the driving force behind the active promotion of ICT in the public sector. The use of contact centres, a radical departure from orthodox social work, was a direct result of this and this epiphany resulted in a more critical review of the literature thereafter. In this respect the initial literature review can be regarded as the groundwork leading to the eventual reconceptualisation of social work in this setting as 'e-social work'.

Once it became clear that a new conceptual framework was emerging, the focus of the research began to sharpen. It became evident that there were two clear elements underpinning the emergence of e-social work: the ideological (i.e. the political and policy context) and the material (i.e. structural responses to supply-side demands for efficiency savings (Chapters 2 and 5)). The ideological and material demands of the modernisation and managerialist discourses challenged local authorities in a number of ways. They had been forced to adopt business practices and incorporate a quasi-market philosophy which elevates the private sector to the status of mentor to local authorities, seeking to continually increase efficiency and lower costs. This illuminated the decision-making process of Northshire County Council and clearly illustrated why the decision was taken to establish NCD, as the data revealed (Chapter 5).

One of the aims of the research was to examine the extent to which this had affected social work practice in Northshire. It soon became apparent that there was a marked lack of research into this area. There was very little around public sector contact centres and nothing relating to social work in a British context that could be used to help with this. The literature review and evidence supporting the instrumental role of e-government in promoting the use of ICT to deliver social services alerted me to the possibility that I was observing something new. Although at this stage I had not fully conceptualised Northshire's response as 'e-social work,' there were evidently three distinct strands of Northshire's reaction to policy drivers that led to it (see figure 7.1). These were: national policy drivers (as epitomised by e-government) which promoted ICT and technological solutions; the local authority's strategic response to these initiatives via local policy and procedures; and the social services response, e-social work. Figure 7.1 shows how the interaction of these elements led to the introduction of contact centres in local authorities like Northshire and why the decision was taken to introduce NCD.

Figure 7.1 Northshire's Response to National Policy Drivers

NATIONAL POLICY DRIVERS (E-GOVERNMENT AND ECONOMIC IMPERATIVES)

LOCAL AUTHORITY STRATEGIC AND RESOURCE PLANNING

LOCAL POLICY AND STRUCTURAL RESPONSE: CONTACT CENTRES

LOCAL AUTHORITY SOCIAL SERVICES RESPONSE (E-SOCIAL WORK)SERVICE USER
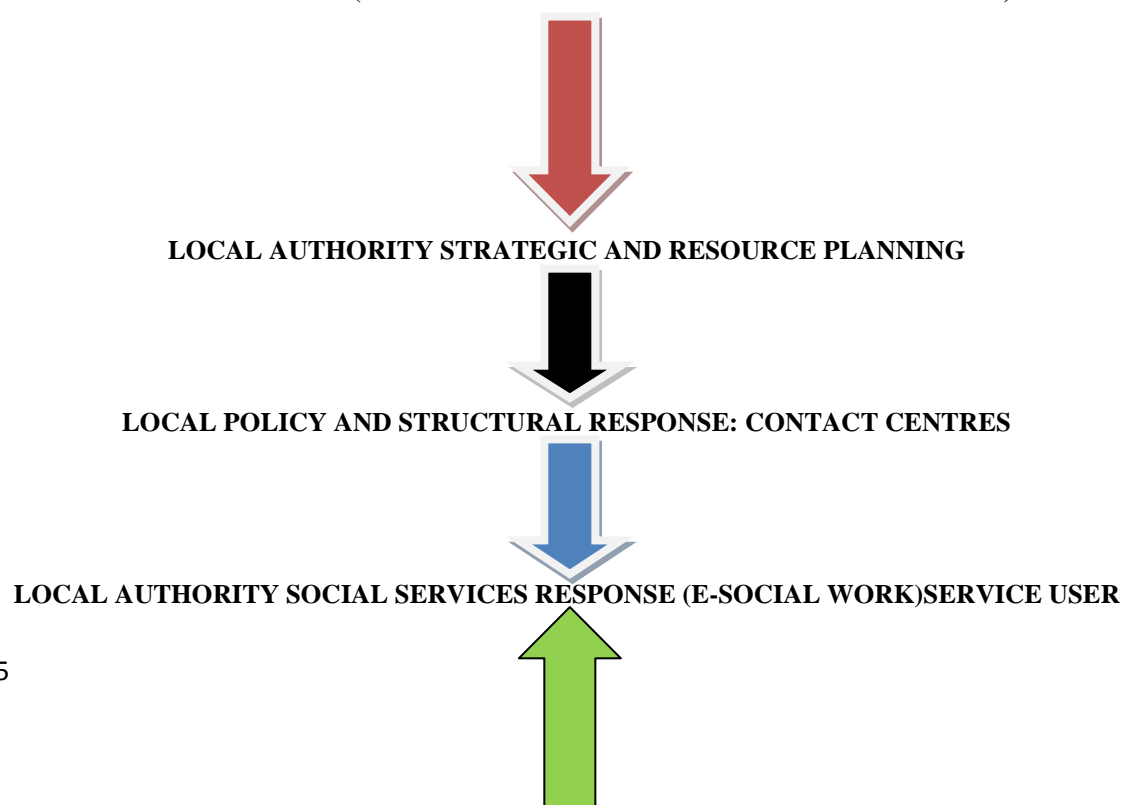
The lack of research and empirical data relating to public sector settings meant there were no pointers as to how the introduction of contact centres might affect social work practice locally (or, nationally). There was an extremely limited amount of research into public sector contact centres in the UK (see, for example, Fisher, 2004; Glucksmann, 2004) and, as I have noted, (Chapter 3, and see below) the conclusions that have been drawn (at least by those that do not support the dominant view of call centres) have been consistently criticised by the prominent academics in the field (for example, Bain et al., 2005). This led to a thorough and critical reading of the significant body of literature relating to private sector call centres in order to ascertain the degree of fit to the public sector situation.

The call centre literature reveals a consistent and almost universally negative view of this environment and the impact it has on the people who work there (Chapter 3). The research from the public sector, albeit limited, hinted at the possibility that, being in the public sector, contact centres might represent a challenge to the prevailing view. This allowed me to test out the adequacy of the existing theoretical models and analytical frameworks in relation to NCD. The review of the call centre literature had the potential to confirm the utility of existing perspectives and models or point to the need for a new one.

The remainder of part one will review the research data and issues arising from the thesis under the principal themes.

REVIEW OF THE RESEARCH FINDINGS AND SUMMARY OF THE THESIS

The thesis has argued that contact centre social work represents a distinct form of work: e-social work. Chapter 3 showed how, as a result of predominantly private sector research, a number of assumptions are routinely made about this work setting: first, that the rationale for using call centres is to increase efficiency by standardising working practices and responses to customers (see, for example, Taylor and Bain; 1999; van den Broek, 2003; and Chapter 3); secondly, that any debate about the working environment should focus primarily on managerial surveillance and how that might be resisted (see for example, Fernie and Metcalf, 1999; Glucksmann, 2004); and the overwhelming conclusion is that this work environment is stressful, oppressive and damaging for employees (Taylor and Bain, 1999; Holman, 2002). However, whilst these assumptions underpin the available research, there is considerably more debate around the models that can be used to understand this organisational form. We saw that while some authors suggest there are a number of 'variations' of what is essentially an electronic 'assembly line' (Batt and Moynihan, 2002), others seek to address the apparent contradictions of the 'dual logics' of customer satisfaction and service efficiency (Korczynski, 2002). More recently, theoretical frameworks have attempted to distinguish different levels of operator discretion and interaction between caller and operator within the process. This suggested that not all call centres conform to the restricted industrial view and that at the 'quality end' of the continuum there is the potential for a more 'professional' model, enjoying higher levels of discretion and more meaningful interaction (Glucksmann, 2004). However, we saw that this notion of a professional paradigm was robustly rejected by some as 'mistaken' and they sought to restore the dominant view of the 'production line' model (Bain et al., 2005, and see Chapter 3).

237

It was clear from the outset that the relative novelty of contact centre social work and the lack of academic research emphasised the importance of choosing appropriate research methodology. Chapter 4 gives a detailed account of my research journey from the initial research questions, through the practicalities of site access to data collection and analysis. A decision was made to use a case study approach precisely because it was able to capture and illuminate the experiential aspects of new phenomena and offered the degree of flexibility that would best suit a data-rich, multi-faceted situation like NCD (Stake, 2000). We have seen that at the time of the initial study, and at the time of writing this thesis, there was/is no comparable research into British contact centres. The initial data suggested at an early stage that I was observing a new phenomenon and that a new conceptual framework was needed in order to make sense of it. Braverman's (1974) work was helpful in this regard, and assisted in the formulation of the research questions and in making sense of some of the initial data. This insight served to alert my research activity thereafter to the possibility of uncovering further evidence of this new phenomenon and my research was structured around the three main themes identified.

The research methods employed at NCD reflected the eclecticism of the case study approach and were described in some detail in Chapter 4. In order to embark on the research it was necessary to navigate a number of structural and procedural obstacles to gain access to the study site. In doing so, I was acutely aware of the issue of privileged access. As an ex-employee of Northshire, I recognised that my role as researcher would be different and this alerted me to the potential ethical dilemmas inherent in the situation. My 'expert knowledge' and insight proved to be an asset, and my prior knowledge and experience helped me to make sense of the data (Yin, 2003). An example of this was my ability to gain access to key

informants (and, subsequently, critical documentation) and highly placed individuals, which helped me to understand the extent to which political imperatives had impacted on Northshire County Council's decision to establish NCD. My personal experience and prior knowledge was also an important factor when analysing the data. The insight I had into local government systems and social work processes helped me to distil, and make sense of, the data gathered from semi-structured interviews, spontaneous discussion and contemporaneous field notes. This helped reveal what were emerging as the central themes of the social workers' narratives and which were seen to chime with the key themes. They were: the personal and professional experience of e-social work, the issue of ICT and screen-level controls, deskilling and the issue of work-life balance. Although caution should be observed in relation to generalising from a single case study, it was clear that the data were revealing something significant which could have profound implications for social work. This offers support for Donmoyer's view that single case studies can serve to inform the wider picture and that they have more utility in this respect than is generally acknowledged (2000: 46).

Chapter 5 provided a narrative of the conception of work in the development of NCD and highlighted its introduction as a direct result of local authorities having to meet e-government targets on accessibility, whilst simultaneously delivering 'efficiency savings'. As we have seen, this was consistent with New Labour's modernisation discourse, which saw the public sector learning from the example of the private sector, where call centres as cost-saving enterprises had become omnipresent (Cabinet Office, 2000, and see Chapter 2). Chapter 5 described the local political context and resource issues in Northshire when establishing NCD. It also described the physical and practical obstacles that had to be faced in relation to choosing a site for it.

239

The scale of the task facing Northshire County Council was illustrated in describing the infrastructure that NCD had to replace. This showed that on average the council was dealing with approximately 29,000 referrals per annum when the decision was made to adopt a contact centre approach. The planning process was described in detail, including the lengthy consultation process with partner agencies, before moving on to discuss the operational issues. Chapter 5 showed how this aspect demanded a great deal of tenacity on the part of the planning team as it represented a radical departure from the accepted practice at the time. This presented structural and professional challenges and the chapter describes the laborious process of finding a suitable location for NCD that would address economic, political and professional concerns. The process of staff recruitment and training was also described in some detail, alongside a discussion of the implications of managerialism in the public sector, initially raised in Chapter 2.

The evidence from my study offers support for the notion that social services contact centres might indeed be different to their private sector counterparts. The data from NCD clearly illustrated this and the empirical data offers some support for the 'professional model' paradigm in this context (Glucksmann, 2004). Particular aspects of this model identified were the relative levels of discretion that NCD staff enjoyed in the way that calls were handled and the degree to which they were able to interact with callers. In contrast to private sector call centres, the calls were not time-limited, nor were they 'scripted', being only guided by 'crib sheets', provided by the different specialist service teams. The type and degree of interaction they had with callers also distinguished them from their private sector counterparts and in this respect positioned them within the professional model as Glucksmann (2004) had hypothesised could be the case in the public sector. Glucksmann had argued that as profit was

not a concern in the public sector, there would be more time for interaction with customers. All workers, whether qualified or unqualified, demonstrated a range of individual responses and qualities including patience, empathy and sensitivity in relation to service users. These responses were clearly atypical of the usual representation of the call centre experience as recounted in the literature (see for example, Thompson, 2005). Having argued that e-social work represents a departure from conventional practice that has arisen as a result of the combination of managerialism and New Labour policy, a similar observation has been made in respect of how e-social work was managed at NCD.

E-MANAGEMENT: SURVEILLANCE AND CONTROL AT NCD

In giving an account of the execution of work at NCD, the thesis has outlined what I have argued is a parallel change in managerialism in this context, producing what might be seen as the concomitant development to e-social work. This further extends the control of managers, offering new features in an environment uniquely suited to surveillance and virtual direction (Taylor and Bain, 2003). As a result of the fragmentation of tasks, screen controls and direction by ICT, 'e-management' in this context has effectively 'dissolve[d] the labour process as a process conducted by the worker and reconstitute[d] it as a process conducted by management' (Braverman, 1974: 170). Managing social work has, as a consequence, moved from a person-led, overt and interactive process to one that is ICT-based, covert and mostly virtual. However, as with e-social work this is an on-going evolution rather than a clear break with the past. The evidence provided by the thesis demonstrates that in keeping with Braverman's observations on epochal shifts (Chapter 6), and despite the overlap of conventional management practices elsewhere, 'e-management' at NCD can also be seen to underline the direction of change.

241

We have seen that contact centres and e-social work are consistent with managerialism in their affinity with ICT. The growing reliance on ICT is a feature of managerialism which has been used to modernise management and promote consumerism, in line with the commercial sector (Coleman, 2009). Contact centres such as NCD can also be seen as part of the ongoing rationalisation of social services, which is also consistent with managerialism and in keeping with New Labour's modernisation agenda (Chapter 2, and see Coleman and Harris, 2008). ICT has been associated with increased managerial control in social work for some time now (see for example, Postle, 2002; Harlow, 2003) and the thesis has shown how e-social work and its use of virtual, system-based controls has rendered the need for the physical presence of a manager unnecessary. It could be argued that it brings Fernie and Metcalf's (1999) nightmare vision of the possibility of 'perfect control' via technology one step nearer in this context. However, in supporting the notion that e-management is not (as yet) fully formed, I have offered evidence to show how currently this control is open to worker resistance and sabotage (Chapter 6). The data showed that social workers still retain the ability (and motivation) to subvert the system in response to particular issues or concerns. This was demonstrated by their overriding the screen-level controls to secure services for someone excluded by the e-eligibility criteria, who they nevertheless perceived to be in need of a service (Chapter 6).

We have also seen how unreliable ICT can be in this context and how its current fallibility suggests that the ability of 'e-managers' to 'perfectly' control e-social workers might be some way off (Mason et al, 2002: 144, and see Chapter 6). However, we have also seen how rapidly ICT has developed in this area and the possibility is that this will eventually extend to more effective-managerial tools and controls. Thus, it is less likely that the option of

242

subverting ICT systems and circumventing systemic controls will remain open to e-social workers indefinitely.

HOW THE LABOUR PROCESS AT NCD IMPACTED ON E-SOCIAL WORKERS

We have seen that whilst no longer a requirement a degree of digital literacy is, nevertheless, an expectation of newly qualified social workers, but what about those who qualified before ICT was on the curriculum? At NCD this was clearly an issue for some (and not, as might be imagined, only older workers) who struggled to make sense of the technology. A lack of computer skills caused a great deal of distress for some social workers at NCD as they found themselves unable to navigate around screen-based obstacles (Chapter 6). Despite the evident reliance of e-social work on ICT, workers were not given additional training in computer skills. The training they had received in this area related only to the software and information database with which they routinely interfaced. Training in this was rudimentary and part of their induction to Northshire County Council. The initial tranche of training that NCD staff received prior to its opening did cover system-specific features such as the use of the headsets and Automatic Call Distribution but the intensive training programme was dropped after the initial cohort was inducted (Chapter 5) and thereafter training was 'on-the-job' with an assumption made of ICT competence. This echoes the Australian experience of social workers at 'Centrelink' (see Chapter 3), where 72% reported having no formal training in relation to the mainframe information database, with the implication that 'the majority of Centrelink social workers [were] either self-taught or learnt ...from colleagues' (Humphries and Camilleri, 2002: 255). The dynamic of e-social work is underpinned by technical ability and the recounting of experience by workers at NCD reinforced this time and again.

Chapter 6 details the execution of work at NCD and uses the voices of social workers and FCOs to convey the experience of working there. The data support Garrett's (2005) notion of a 'techno-habitat' where all functions are mediated by ICT systems and competence in ICT is the primary requirement for workers. It shows that, despite apparent similarities, this contact centre is distinct from call centres in a number of ways and many of the conclusions that have been drawn from call centre research cannot be supported in this context. The evidence from NCD supports the notion that social work in contact centres cannot be compared with traditional social work practice either. This supports my contention that it is a particular form which has arisen from the conjunction of two elements: a call centre environment and systemic managerial control and surveillance of social workers by ICT. In the techno-habitat of NCD this combination therefore represented a new and distinct form: e-social work.

We have seen that e-social work necessitates the acquisition of new skills, the adoption of new working practices and immersion in a new culture leading to a new 'techno-habitus' (Coleman and Harris, 2008: 15). The data from NCD clearly shows how workers had to adapt to e-social work and how acquiring a techno-habitus impacted differently on employees who were trained social workers and FCOs who were not. A form of social work practice that is conducted via electronic media, rather than face-to-face contact with service users, is one that would once have been anathema to social workers. It was evidently challenging for the social workers at NCD, who saw it as undermining their sense of professional identity. This perception was illustrated by a comment made by one of them that what they were engaged in was *not* social work *per se* but amounted to 'public relations' work (Chapter 6). It was evident that e-social work demanded a different mindset and new competences from its practitioners and gave far less prominence to what had always been regarded as the 'core'

244

skills of traditional social work. The primary competence in e-social work is (and, indeed, has to be) in ICT and the need is to master computer, rather than people, skills. This emphasised technical, over professional, competence. E-social work takes the use of ICT beyond what it was previously and it is now fundamental to the labour process in the contact centre (Chapter 6).Thus, at NCD technology controlled the 'technicians' and face-to-face relationships with service users were replaced with virtual transactions. This echoes another concern- that e-social work has undermined social work's sense of place and presence in communities (Coleman and Harris, 2008: 590). In this respect, e-social work can be seen to represent connection to the virtual communities of 'network society' (Castells, 1996) but a disconnection from actual society and the communities which social workers have traditionally served. This, once again, underlines the separation of the conception and execution of work and the significance that Braverman assigned to its effects. This disconnection exacerbated the key concern voiced by the social workers at NCD: the fear of losing 'traditional' social work skills as a result of the fragmentation of tasks and degradation of their 'craft' within the labour process at NCD.

The social workers at NCD made clear they regarded the development of e-social work and contact centres as a long-term threat to their skill base and, in keeping with Braverman's analysis, regarded deskilling as an inevitable consequence of losing face-to-face contact with users of social work services. We saw in Chapter 3 that this fear was also voiced in van den Broek's (2003) study of Australian child care social workers in a contact centre. However, as we have seen, skill is a notoriously difficult thing to define, let alone measure, in this context and is a subjective assessment which relies on historical context and comparison (Thompson, 1989, and see Chapter 6). Given the relatively short period since the introduction of contact

centres and, until my study, the lack of research in this specific context, my research is only able to offer limited data with which to evaluate this claim. Although the fear of losing skills could be viewed as an inevitable reaction to any profound change in working conditions, it is clear, nevertheless, that e-social work at NCD involved only a very limited use of skills that were once seen as fundamental. As ICT becomes more sophisticated it is likely to offer more web-based opportunities for virtual contact that may make even the most basic skill of 'listening' largely redundant. However, the need to 'e-skill' is now accepted as being a necessity as evidenced in social work training programmes.

E-social work and ICT

The growth of contact centres combined with the continued development of sophisticated software makes it more likely that e-social work will eventually become the new orthodoxy. Thus, the fears expressed around losing conventional skills may well become a reality. However, a critique of this technologically deterministic approach is offered by some who believe that social work needs to embrace technology rather than reject it out of hand (Rafferty and Steyaert 2007). By engaging with the development process as 'partners' and adopting a 'social constructivist' approach, they argue that ICT and software design can incorporate positive features rather than merely reflect the managerialist rationale (Rafferty and Steyaert 2007: 174).

We have seen that the future development of e-social work is likely to be in tandem with the advance of 'expert' software, which, as we have seen, is being increasingly deployed in areas that were once seen as being exclusive to professionals (Chapter 3). Another area that will

certainly play an integral role will be the further development of web-based tools, including the option of video-calls using 'Skype' or similar technology. This is consistent with consumerism in increasing the degree of control and interactivity that service users will have when engaging with social and other services. This may extend to e-social workers making more use of on-line resources, including referring service users to 'on-line communities of support and collective learning' (Castells, 2000: 21). At NCD the use of MMS text-messaging to reach younger service users is one example of using current and 'fashionable' communications technology in this way. The potential for increased use of such facilities may be seen as further evidence of the direction of travel that e-social work is likely to take, which will heighten its distinction from earlier conventional forms: as the research has underlined.

The data from NCD support the argument that e-social work at NCD had specific features that distinguished it from conventional social work. The defining features of the e-social work labour process were described in detail in Chapter 6 and are summarised here. It has been shown to be an electronically-mediated, rationalised and highly controlled form of work. The clearest manifestation of its difference from conventional social work is the total reliance on ICT and this provided evidence of how professionals' discretion has been further reduced as a result. Another feature is the potential for, and the degree to which, e-social workers are subject to surveillance and virtual control. At NCD, e-social work practice was directed via electronic *pro forma* and on-screen controls, with no face-to-face contact with service users at any time. The social workers' narratives offered a revealing insight into how the experience of e-social work differed from conventional practice. It was compared to a social worker in a conventional fieldwork setting being 'blindfolded,' as in e-social work the usual visual and olfactory cues are missing. As we have seen, the perception of the social

247

workers at NCD was that this disconnection from service users was the main cause of deskilling (Chapter 6). The consensus among the social workers at NCD was that deskilling was indeed inevitable and arose from habituation of workers to the e-social work labour process, as Braverman had predicted.

The e-social work labour process as a form of convalescence

We have seen that surprisingly, given the negative view of call centres (as NCD was originally regarded), all of the workers at NCD made a conscious decision to work there (Chapter 5). Also initially shocking was the fact that social workers regarded this option as respite from field social work, which they saw as inherently more stressful. Every social worker interviewed saw working at NCD as a way of restoring their work/life balance and as a way of 'slowing down' from the '100mph working' of traditional field social work (Chapter 6). However, paradoxically, one of the social workers who had opted to work at NCD on this basis told me that he had since regretted the decision, as he missed the stimulation and was actively looking to get back to field social work. In this respect he was not alone and all the social workers (who were not nearing retirement) told me they were looking to move back to a conventional setting.

Apart from the social worker referred to above, the reasons for this were linked to the fear of deskilling rather than a lack of pace or stimulation. This was seen as a reason for moving on and offered evidence to support the notion of a limited 'shelf-life', a documented feature of private sector call centres (Callaghan and Thompson, 2001: 33, and see Chapter 3) being a factor at NCD also (Chapter 6). The view that the labour process at NCD was not as stressful

248

as traditional social work was shared by one of the assistant managers who suggested that e-social work could even be viewed as 'time-out' from conventional social work in order to avoid 'burn-out'(Chapter 6). This depiction of work in a contact centre as a form of 'convalescence' contrasts sharply with the image of private sector call centres which, as we have seen, are universally portrayed as inherently oppressive, stressful and damaging for employees' health and well-being (for example, Holman (2002). This adds further evidence and support to the thesis that the e-social work labour process was distinct from that of other settings.

In summary, the thesis has described the case study, its origins and findings. It has used three key themes that were derived from Braverman's (1974) labour process perspective. This approach has been used to analyse what is a relatively recent development in the first study of its kind. In doing so it has argued that we are witnessing the beginning of the reconceptualisation and reconstruction of social work as 'e-social work' in the twenty first century. This has been attributed to the current predominance of ICT in social work and its use by management, conjoining with the new development of contact centres as 'techno-habitats' where surveillance and control are routine (Garrett, 2005) and its practitioners are isolated from their service users. It has also described the key features of e-social work's concomitant managerial form characterised as 'e-managerialism', as a result of the increased surveillance and control made possible by that conjunction of technology and environment. This has produced a different and more benign labour process that contrasts with both conventional social work and private sector call centres. The final part of this chapter will reflect on the overall design and utility of the thesis and its contribution to knowledge.

249

PART TWO

STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS OF THE THESIS

I have argued that the use of the case study approach was one of the strengths of the study (Chapter 4) and the rich and detailed data it yielded is a testimony to this. As an eclectic and flexible approach, it allowed me to respond to events as they occurred and offered the best chance of 'capturing the moment' in such a way that others might be able to share it. The thesis has, where possible, used the voices of the principal actors to convey some sense of their personal and professional experience of these phenomena. One of the original aims of the research was to gain some insight into how contact centres could function in a social work context. It has been acknowledged that the case study can only offer a detailed picture of one site and the degree to which it can shed light on others is, as we have seen, debatable. However, some believe that the case study approach is particularly suited to providing information that can inform similar situations (Yin, 2003, and see Chapter 4). However, generalising from a single case study clearly has its limitations although its utility is in the ability to take a study beyond statistical data by addressing the 'how' and 'why' questions.

The lack of focus on the caller's perspective might be regarded as a deficit of the study. My original aim was to integrate service users' viewpoints as this has been largely neglected by researchers (although I hope to address this in future research, see below). It is a surprising omission given the callers' centrality in call/contact centre transactions. Having initially considered this, and interviewed four service users, I decided that it would not be feasible for a number of reasons. First; the study was subject to pragmatic considerations; in order to fully represent the caller's perspective considerably more time would have had to be allocated to

the research. This would not have been agreed by my employer at that time. Secondly, in order to capture faithfully the caller's experience it would have had to be the central focus of the study and I was already convinced of the need to focus on the potential effects on social work. Thirdly, there was an ethical consideration, as social services engage with the most vulnerable members of society. One of social work's core values is that of service user 'empowerment', in other words attempting to move from the paternalistic professional view to allowing the service user a degree of control over their own lives and the social work process. This acknowledges that they are the 'experts' in relation to their own lives (Smale et al., 1993). This has been a notoriously difficult concept to operationalise, given the clear imbalance of power in any statutory relationship. It has been shown how managerialism in the public sector, despite its anti-professional stance and purported empowerment of consumers, has actually served to exacerbate this imbalance of power (Chapter 2). In order to progress this, the power issue would have had to have been addressed and the service user would have had to have been fully involved at every stage of the research, rather than being used in some subordinate or tokenistic role. However, whilst acknowledging this absence as a potential weakness, making the conscious decision early on to exclude this aspect sharpened the focus of the study and, as a result, the potential utility of the research findings was increased.

The contribution of the thesis to theory and knowledge

The thesis has contributed to theory and knowledge in a number of ways:

- First, it has used Braverman's labour process perspective in a specific social work setting to provide data and analysis of an area of work that until now had not been studied in a British context;

- Secondly, it has given an account of the features signifying a new conceptual framework (e-social work) and the e-social work labour process, capturing social work practice in the techno-habitat of the contact centre;

- Thirdly, it has described a concomitant managerial form, an electronically enhanced variant of managerialism that facilitates increased management control and surveillance using call centre technology;

- Finally, it has shed new light on an organisational form (call/contact centres) that has been the subject of extensive (and mainly one-dimensional) research; offering support for an alternative model and more benign perspective.

The thesis may also be seen as further evidence of the relevance of Braverman's work in contemporary settings. It follows others (notably Fabricant, 1985; Harris, 1998a and Carey, 2009) in applying Braverman's work in a social work context, albeit a very specific one. Carey's (2009) recent work revived interest in this area, following Harris's (1998a) lead in applying Braverman's thesis to contemporary social work practice (Chapter 3). I have argued that Carey's reading of Braverman had increased resonance for my thesis in also recognising how ICT had been used to progressively deskill social workers by separating the 'conception and execution of disparate welfare labour processes' (Carey, 2009:524, and Chapter 3), as well as heightening surveillance, control and progressively deskilling social workers. My research adds to that tradition, which continues to recognise the relevance of Braverman's thesis in the present era. That it can accommodate and help to explain unforeseen

developments such as social work contact centres is further testimony to its strength as an analytical tool.

The e-social work labour process and its management have been shown to be distinct from conventional social work practice in a number of ways, not least in its location in and direction by ICT. This extends the scope of managerialism in social work that others have identified, in using ICT to increase managerial control and surveillance, whilst progressively reducing professional discretion (for example, Postle, 2002; Harlow, 2003; Garrett, 2005; Carey, 2009). E-social work has been identified as an evolutionary change brought about by a combination of factors that assumed greater significance as a result of the location within a techno-habitat (Garrett, 2005). The key features of e-social work at NCD were: the reliance on, and predominance of, ICT in surveillance and controlling practice; the subsequent reduction of professional discretion and the need for professional judgement, as a result of software design; and the lack of face-to-face contact with service users. However, the crucial factor identified in effecting change in the social work labour process at NCD was the location; this reinforced and enhanced the impact of each feature. This was critical in producing the conditions necessary for what has been characterised as e-social work and e-management at NCD.

The e-social work concept helps shed light on current social work developments in response to policy imperatives like e-government, as well as in considering the impact of technological change. The thesis has argued that e-social work at NCD is a snapshot of one conjunction of technology and social work and recognition has been given to its inability to reflect what

253

might be happening elsewhere. However, unlike Garrett's (2005) work, which considered the influence of ICT in 'mainstream' social work, my study of NCD adds another dimension in being conducted in a unique environment designed to facilitate managerial surveillance and control and reflect private sector practices. This development has been shown as representing the prevailing direction of travel for social work in an era progressively dominated by ICT and the need to cut costs. In doing so, it has also served to highlight the potential implications for social work and its service users.

E-social work provides a different lens through which to re-examine social work practice. As we have seen (Chapters 5 and 6), the idea of virtual interaction with service users was anathema to a profession that had, until the incursion of managerialism into the public sector, always relied on establishing a face-to-face 'therapeutic' and on-going relationship (Chapter 3). The establishment of contact centres offers a renewed challenge to a profession that some argue has been slow to embrace technology in the way that others have (Rafferty and Steyaert, 2007). It could be argued that the lack of research in this area until now has to some extent insulated the profession from facing this challenge. The data from the study of NCD confirm that systems currently in use reflect managerial rather than practice priorities (Chapter 6).

The data from NCD support Garrett's (2005) notion of the 'techno-habitat' and the need for social workers to acquire a 'techno-habitus' (Coleman and Harris, 2008). Furthermore, the labour process at NCD, in clearly separating conception and execution, inevitably impacts on social work skills (Braverman, 1974; Carey, 2009). However, it was also evident that NCD

254

differed from the orthodox stereotype of the commercial call centre in how the labour process there affected staff. NCD offered an alternative view of an organisational form that had been considered damaging for employees and offered some support for the much-maligned notion of a professional paradigm with greater emphasis on the quality of interaction with callers (Glucksmann, 2004). Further research in this area is clearly indicated in order to further test the viability of this model in other locations.

Implications of the thesis for policy

The thesis findings have significant implications for policy but their potential contribution is dependent on the prevailing ideological perspective. There are two principal conclusions that can be drawn from the data that may have implications for policy. One view would be that social work contact centres represent a way of addressing the concerns of sceptical professionals and service users in relation to managerialism. The view of the contact centre as an apparently benign organisational from could be used to accommodate an acceptance of the need to have such arrangements in place as part of 'modern' service delivery. This perspective recognises the need to continue to make efficiency savings by utilising technological innovation in order to improve services for people and to give them greater control, whilst avoiding the worst excesses of private sector call centres. The contact centre could then be promoted as a modern service delivery system that *does* potentially empower callers whilst allowing a (albeit limited and possibly short-lived) degree of professional discretion for e-social workers.

From a managerialist perspective there might be an alternative reading of the data; it could be seen as confirmation of the need to instil increased commercial rigour in the public sector and to introduce more stringent controls. This view would be informed by the recognition of the differences between private sector call centres and the way contact centres operate. The fact that the calls are not subject to time constraints and are unscripted does not sit easily with the aims of managerialism to rationalise work and thus increase efficiency and consistency. As we have seen, New Labour followed the lead of the Thatcher government in promoting the idea of the private sector acting as a mentor to the public sector, which is seen as more efficient, effective, and economical (Chapter 2, and see Coleman and Harris, 2008). Using the private sector as a mentor has seen social services become more uniform, predictable and increasingly subject to control by technology. This is consistent with what some have seen as part of the 'McDonaldization' of social services (Bilson and Ross, 1999; Harris, 2003; Dustin, 2008).

The data from NCD demonstrated that e-social workers did retain a degree of control in being able to subvert systems and, from a managerialist viewpoint, this would be seen as another potential source of inefficiency, as well as undermining consumer control. This might serve as a cue for the implementation of measures to ensure the replication of private sector call centre practices by introducing stricter control mechanisms. This would also be dependent on the ideological stance of the government in power and their approach to welfare services. The recent change of government appears to have signalled a return to a more residual role for social services, which may yet see more moves to utilise or mimic the private sector. Any move toward further rationalisation and increased technical control in this way would serve to reinforce concerns expressed in relation to virtual control (Fernie and Metcalf, 1999) and

256

the deskilling of social workers in this context (Harlow, 2003; van den Broek, 2003; Carey, 2009; Coleman, 2009). In this sense contact centres might be regarded as a virtual battleground where the on-going contest between managerialism and professionalism is being fought.

This struggle was exemplified in the scandal of the 'Baby Peter' case. The failings of a local authority to safeguard a child's life raised concerns about the ability of social workers to exercise professional judgement. This case engendered a debate around the degree to which social workers are directed by processes and procedures that preclude their ability to make autonomous decisions. As we have seen, this concern has been raised before with the argument that, as a result of managerialism, social workers are becoming over-reliant on procedures and technology (Chapter 2). This feature, when combined with the attendant reduction of professionals' autonomy, was cited as a factor in poor decision-making in the 'Baby Peter' scandal and similar high profile cases. As a result of this case, reported in November 2008, one of the recommendations made was for workers involved in such cases not to rely on technology such as fax or email but to always follow up any contact by telephone (Haringey Local Safeguarding Children Board, 2008: 13). As always happens in these circumstances (as for example, in the Victoria Climbié case), social work practice is thereafter put under the media spotlight and subjected to intense scrutiny. However, the initial findings of the inquiry did highlight the dangers of rigid proceduralism, over-reliance on technology and consequent poor information sharing between professionals (BBC, 2008). The thesis might serve to reinforce these concerns, highlighting as it does the degree to which social work is already directed and constrained by ICT and screen-level direction and the degree to which this might increase as a result of e-social work. The data from NCD

underlines and reinforces these concerns in using unqualified workers as a first point of contact, enforcing reliance on technology and hindering the process of sharing information in such cases (Chapter 6). It could, therefore, add weight to calls for policy initiatives that reintroduce a greater degree of professional discretion or autonomy.

Implications for social work

In setting out the political context for the 'modernisation' of social services, the thesis gives an account of how public sector services had been seen to be wasteful, ineffective and in need of change by the Conservative government prior to 1997 (Chapter 1). Local authorities and, particularly, social services were seen to epitomise this (Chapter 2). Furthermore they were seen as anachronistic and resistant to change and managerialism was seen as a way of 'bringing welfare professionals firmly under political and managerial control [and] to enhance consumer power' (Foster and Wilding, 2000: 146). This perception had been used by both Conservative and New Labour governments to subject professionals to managerialism and by New Labour to justify their modernisation agenda. The image of social workers desperately clinging on to what had been caricatured as 'old fashioned' methods and values had been difficult to shift. This criticism had also been levelled at social work education, which had also been criticised for not preparing students for the varied demands of contemporary practice (Jordan and Jordan, 2000: 126-131). The stage was set, therefore, for 'modernisation.'

The perception of social workers not being willing or able to embrace change had been particularly prevalent in relation to new technology, such as ICT (Rafferty and Steyaert,

258

2007). As I have noted, the thesis might be seen as reinforcing the need to revisit and reappraise what constitutes 'social work' in the twenty-first century in providing further evidence of the significant change that has been introduced to the social work labour process by ICT. The overwhelming evidence supports the use of ICT as already being central to practice and the likelihood of it assuming greater prominence (see, for example, Postle, 2002; Webb, 2003; Harlow, 2003; Garrett, 2005; Rafferty and Steyaert, 2007; Carey, 2009; Coleman, 2009). Social work training has already had to respond to this with the requirement introduced in 2002 for social work students to evidence ICT competence 'to the level of the European computer driving licence (ECDL) or its equivalent' (GSCC, 2002: 16). Although this requirement is no longer in place, (having been dropped in 2009), it is significant that social work's governing body emphasised that:

> It remains essential that social work students develop IT literacy during their training and that social work practitioners and managers are able to ethically use the IT applications, tools and systems they will encounter in practice and have the understanding and awareness to take up opportunities to improve the service user experience of practice as the technology develops.

> GSCC (2004)

Thus, ICT's continuing prominence on social work training programmes can be seen to signal the first step toward a digitally literate social workforce that will be equipped for e-social work.

The thesis has argued that it is likely that e-social work will continue to evolve and become the new orthodoxy in the current era of 'hyper-regulation and surveillance' (Carey, 2009: 506-7). This evolution is likely to mirror developments in ICT and, in an age of austerity, be championed as another way of achieving elusive 'efficiency savings'. As the use of ICT to replicate or replace face-to-face social work increases, which seems inevitable, a new set of 'digital practice skills' will be needed, as others have observed. (Rafferty and Steyaert 2007: 17). However, the need to up-skill e-social workers digitally will continue to have major implications for social work education and training. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the current need to ensure students' competence in ICT has already caused some institutions difficulty. The need for even higher levels of specific 'e-skills is likely to cause further problems. The concept of e-social work outlined in the thesis might add to the debate on the currency of social work education and training by encouraging dialogue between policy makers and social work's regulatory body.

Should, as seems likely, e-social work become established, another, and perhaps more uncomfortable, outcome is likely to be the conclusion that the ability of ICT to replicate professional decision-making reduces the need for conventionally trained social workers. This would be consistent with Braverman's argument that technology, combined with managerialism's aim of reducing costs, will facilitate the fragmentation of tasks and drive down the need for skilled work.

We saw that electronic mediation might be seen as offering a degree of protection from the consequences of working face-to-face with challenging service users or dealing with serious

problems (Chapter 6). This could be promoted as an advantage of e-social work and a reason for its increased adoption. The data from NCD illustrated how unqualified workers like FCOs might be seen as representing the vanguard of change in social work. This is evidenced by the fact that, as a result of ICT, they were able to handle problems and issues that in the recent past would only have been dealt with by qualified social workers (Chapter 6). What is more they were evidently able to handle these issues well and contribute toward positive outcomes for callers. This is consistent with my argument that e-social work can be seen as signifying significant change in the social work labour process; representing the beginning of the end of one epoch and the emergence of another in this context (see Chapter 6).

Contribution to research methods

My study used conventional research tools within the case study approach and I found these to be more than adequate to gather and analyse the data for my thesis (Chapter 4). My use of these tools, such as semi-structured interviews and contemporaneous field notes, did not deviate from the norm or highlight any particular problems in using these methods. In this regard my thesis merely supports and confirms the utility of qualitative methods and cannot claim any particular contribution to the development of methodology.

The significance of the empirical data

To date, my thesis provides the first, and only, empirical data on UK social services contact centres and represents only the third such study in the world. In this respect, it is a pioneering investigation of a contemporary phenomenon. As a result, the thesis can be seen to have made a significant contribution to existing knowledge and one which will hopefully stimulate

debate. At the outset of the study I was aware of the lack of comparable research (Chapters 1 and 3) and this was one of the initial motivating factors for undertaking the study. The lack of research was surprising given the fact that, despite the contact centre being a novel concept, its use was fairly widespread when my research began in 2004, and this model is now used in some form by every local authority in the UK. Furthermore, there is evidence to suggest that dedicated social work/care management centres are the norm, rather than corporate call centres. This offers further support to the central tenet of the thesis that e-social work is now a feature of contemporary work (Keating, 2011).

The data the thesis provides is the first of its kind on a development that represents one of the most significant changes ever to impact on the social work labour process. As has been noted elsewhere, this has been incrementally introduced without recourse to a government Green Paper or legislation, whereas previous fundamental change would be heralded by the publication of the likes of the Seebohm, Barclay or Griffiths Reports (Coleman and Harris, 2008: 595). Further research would be needed in order to explain and understand why this occurred in the way it did, but it appears to confirm New Labour's faith in the modernisation mantra, which equated to anything that utilised ICT being seen as 'modern' and ergo as 'good' and resulted in the near veneration of the 'e' prefix. This utopian vision of continuous progress through ICT is a simplistic notion that has echoes of the dogmatic approach used by the Conservative government in its initial overhaul of the public sector in the early 1990s, which, as we saw, characterised all things private as 'good' and all things public as 'bad' (Chapter 2).

262

It has been argued that the empirical data from NCD offers support for the emergence of a new conceptual framework that can be used to illuminate current practice and is indicative of the direction and pace of change. However, the thesis has also sought to clarify that e-social work is an evolving form and to differentiate it from other uses of ICT in contemporary social work, where a reduction of professional discretion has also been a feature. The data locates e-social work practice as being specific to contact centres and in that sense, stands apart from mainstream developments, whilst being influenced by them (Chapter 6, and, see above). I have acknowledged that the findings could be used to inform different political agendas but have value in any case in helping to signpost the possible future direction of social work.

DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

I have already identified areas that could guide the direction of future research; one of these being a focus on how policy in this area has been developed. The fact that such a fundamental change to social work practice was implemented without consultation begs several questions, not least of which are how and why this was introduced in the way it was. A starting point for this could conceivably be how e-government has apparently been used as the 'Trojan horse' to smuggle in material that, had it been subject to the normal scrutiny, would almost certainly have attracted more criticism and controversy than it has to date. The fact that it has not might also indicate a degree of habituation to the effects of managerialism. Another clear and notable research omission is the service user perspective.

Given the fact that the service user as 'consumer' has been used to promote the contact centre, the poverty of research into the caller's experience is particularly surprising, although

263

there is a notable exception from the private sector perspective, which recognises that callers are not uniform and predictable but rather 'many-faceted, complex and sophisticated social actors' (Bolton and Houlihan, 2005: 685). The rationale for the introduction of contact centres did not acknowledge the complexity of the users (callers) to social services and their reasons for making contact. Indeed it was justified by their similarity to any other 'customer'.

The introduction of contact centres was defended in consumerist terms (Chapter 2) and aimed to reproduce the everyday experience of private sector call centres without ever questioning how callers position themselves. The unique relationship that social workers have hitherto had with the users of their services offers some support for those who believe that social work may never be able to be conceived fully as a rationalised labour process (Coleman and Harris, 2008). This is a significant weakness of the contact centre model as callers to NCD were clearly different to those who made contact with private sector call centres in one obvious respect: people who engage with social services do not usually choose to do so (Chapter 6). The notion of 'choice' is palpably a false one for these callers who invariably make contact because they have problems that they are unable to address and are usually in some form of crisis or are in a statutory relationship with the local authority (Coleman and Harris, 2008). This is clearly an area that would benefit from research, and one that I hope to pursue in the future. I have already highlighted the potential ethical problems that may arise with research of this kind and the practical difficulties that may ensue. However, such research is essential in order to understand how using contact centres position callers; whether contact centre use does represent a conscious 'choice' on their behalf and whether it meets their needs.

An additional flaw in the contact centre rationale is the fact that it does not acknowledge the crucial difference from a private sector call centre, which seeks to increase the number of calls made in order to maximise profit. Contact centres like NCD exist effectively to reduce 'demand' for, and to ration social services in order to achieve efficiency savings. Evidence is also needed on the quality of experience for social services callers and how this compares with face-to-face social work contact. Similarly, the concept of 'need' in this context is also one that is amenable to further research given the active promotion of 'self-assessment' as part of the 'personalisation' agenda using ICT (Department of Health, 2005). This might also be seen as a further threat to professional judgement and another example of the on-going rationalisation of social work.

A key issue for further research has been highlighted by the thesis around the perception of deskilling amongst social workers as a result of the use of ICT generally (Carey, 2009) and in contact centres specifically (Coleman, 2009). There was no hard evidence in the data of actual deskilling, which to some extent was seen as a (temporary) *quid pro quo* for a reduction in stress and an improvement of work-life balance. Braverman argued that deskilling was inevitable as a result of the fragmentation of tasks and the use of technology. However, as we have seen (Chapter 6), the issue of skill defies simple definition in any case and more research is needed to interrogate the issue and provide data on the existence and extent of skill loss.

Social work contact centres are now an established organisational form, and my research has only provided data from a single example. In providing data to challenge the pervasive

perception of the labour process in call and contact centres, the thesis has offered some support for the 'professional' paradigm mooted by Glucksmann (2004). Additional research is indicated to ascertain whether this might apply to other centre configurations and locations. Variations of the contact centre model are in use with obvious differences to NCD, such as the use of scripts or 'two-screen' prompting systems. More empirical data is needed in relation to the different models employed before any final conclusions can be drawn as to the effect on the social work labour process.

My research findings have echoed concerns from other social work studies and reinforced the significance of Braverman's (1974) arguments in relation to the separation of the conception and execution of work. They have also added support to other commentator's conclusions that the use of ICT, particularly in and e-social work context, may result in the deskilling of its practitioners (van den Broek, 2003, Carey, 2009). As we have seen, this is a complex issue and requires longitudinal study to establish the veracity of this claim. Further research is also indicated to monitor and evaluate the evolution of e-social work and its impact on social work training, seeking to establish whether e-skills could come to predominate over what have been regarded as the core 'traditional' skills.

The thesis has considered a fundamental question as a result of its analysis of the use of contact centres to access social services. In unpacking New Labour's modernisation agenda and its active promotion of ICT in the public sector it has thrown up the possibility that conventional social work may eventually be displaced by e-social work. The thesis only offers limited data that indicates this is the direction of travel and I have argued that this

266

emphasises the urgency of the need for more research, including a service user perspective.

The emergence of e-social work has mirrored the continued development of expert software that can complement, replicate or even replace professional judgement. The New Labour government demonstrated an absolute faith in ICT and its 'transformational' abilities (Cabinet Office, 2005) and this was epitomised by the e-government initiative. This, and the need to cut costs, offer support for my thesis on the central role that ICT continues to play. The predominance of ICT in social work in the last two decades has undoubtedly transformed the social work labour process and, as others have argued, has introduced changes of at least equal significance to the managerialist reforms that the Thatcher government introduced (Carey, 2009). It has also been argued elsewhere that introduction of social work contact centres represents fundamental change in social work and the significance of it has, thus far, been barely acknowledged (Coleman and Harris, 2008). These developments can be seen as signifiers of a new electronic era and an indication that e-social work could displace conventional social work.

Up until now the social work academy and profession appear to have failed to grasp fully the potential of this development. Some have offered a beguiling case for refuting technological determinism, suggesting that technology should be viewed as a potential asset rather than fearing its domination. It has been argued that 'changing the dialogue' to a 'constructivist' one of working with software designers will help to reflect social work practices in ICT rather than managerial imperatives (Rafferty and Steyaert 2007: 171-4). Although this is an attractive argument it does not acknowledge the extent to which the battle might already be lost. My thesis argues that we have moved away from ICT being a tool that we can integrate and manipulate. It is now embedded in the labour process and e-social work represents

267

further development of technology that directs and controls social workers and their interaction with service users. In its current form, e-social work reflects managerialist priorities. It remains to be seen whether the social work profession can engage with, and positively influence, the future development of expert software that seems destined to play a greater role in mediating contact with the public. If it can do so, it may be possible to reclaim some of the professional ground lost to managerialism and modernisation and once again see practice and service user issues predominate.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Ackroyd, K., Gordon-Dseagu, V., Fairhurst, P (2006) *Well-Being and Call Centres*, Brighton: Institute for Employment Studies, University of Sussex.

Asgarkhani, M. (2005) 'Digital Government and its Effectiveness in Public Management Reform: a Local Government Perspective', *Public Management Review,* vol. 7, no. 3, 465-487.

Audit Commission (1983) *Performance Review in Local Government: A Handbook for Auditors and Local Authorities*, London: HMSO.

Bain, P., Taylor, P. (2000) 'Entrapped by the "Electronic Panopticon"'? Worker Resistance in the Call Centre' *New Technology, Work and Employment,* vol.15, no.1, 2-18.

Bain, P., Taylor, P., and Dutton, E. (2005) 'The Thin Front Line: Call Handling in Police Control Rooms', paper given at the *23rd International Labour Process Conference,* University of Strathclyde.

269

Bain, P., Watson, A., Mulvey, G., Taylor, P. and Gall, G. (2002) 'Taylorism, Targets and the Pursuit of Quantity and Quality by Call Centre Management', *New Technology, Work and Employment*, vol. 17, no. 3, 170-185.

Batt, R. and Moynihan, L. (2002) 'The Viability of Alternative Call Centre Production Models', *Human Resource Management Journal,* vol. 12, issue 4, 14-34.

Bazeley, P. (2007) *Qualitative Data Analysis with NVivo:* London, Sage.

BBC (2008) 'Baby P report: the key findings'. BBC News Channel available on-line @ http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/7758897.stm, accessed 6th February 2009.

Bilson, A. and Ross, S. (1999) *Social Work Management and Practice,* (2nd edition), London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Bloomfield, B. and Hayes, N. (2004) 'Modernisation and the Joining-Up of Local Government Services in the UK: Boundaries, Knowledge & Technology,' paper given at conference on *Information, Knowledge and Management: Reassessing the Role of ICTs in Public and Private Organizations,* 3-5 March, Bologna: Superior School of Public Administration.

Boggan, S. (2001) 'Farewell to "Dark Satanic" Image of UK's Call Centres', *The Independent,* London: 11th December 2001, Independent.co.uk, available on-line @ http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/farewell-to-dark-satanic-image-of-uks-call-centres-619787.html**,** accessed 23rd April 2009.

Bolton, S. and Houlihan, M. (2005) 'The Mis-) Representation of Customer Service', *Work Employment and Society,* vol. 19, no. 4, 685-703.

Bourdieu, P. (1991) *Language and Symbolic Power,* Cambridge: Polity.

Braverman, H. (1974) *Labour and Monopoly Capital*, New York: Monthly Review Press.

British Telecom (2003) *Global Services: Case Study Partnership Transforms Liverpool's Performance*, available on-line @ www.btglobalservices.com/business/ap/en/docs/case_studies/bt_liverpoolcitycouncil_casestudy_en.pdf, accessed 23rd April 2009.

British Telecom (2008a) '*Liverpool Direct to expand support to social care call service',* available on-line @ www.btplc.com/News/Articles/ShowArticle.cfm?ArticleID=f6933659-f850-40e4-8817-b78c321921c5, BT Press Releases, DC08-386,November 4th 2008, accessed 23rd April 2009.

British Telecom (2008b) *Papur 2 tystiolaeth ysgrifenedig a gyflwynwyd ar gyfer yr Ymchwiliad i Bartneriaethau Cyhoeddus Preifat gan BT (saesneg yn unig) : BT Written Evidence to the National Assembly for Wales Finance Committee Inquiry into Public-Private Partnerships*, available @ http://www.assemblywales.org/cy/bus-

home/bus-committees/bus-committees-third1/bus-committees-third-fin-home/bus-committees-third-fin-agendas.htm?act=dis&id=72280&ds=3/2008, accessed 23rd April 2009.

Brown, A. and Bourne, I. (1996) *The Social Work Supervisor,* Buckingham: Open University Press.

Burghardt, S., Fabricant, M. (1992) *The Welfare State Crisis and the Transformation of Social Service Work*, New York: M.E, Sharpe.

Cabinet Office (1998) *Our Information Age: The Government's Vision*, London: Cabinet Office.

Cabinet Office (1999) *Modernising Government* (Cm 4310), London: Cabinet Office.

Cabinet Office (2000a) *E-government: A Strategic Framework for Public Services in the Information Age*, London: The Stationery Office.

Cabinet Office (2000b) *Delivery of Public Services, 24 Hours a Day, Seven Days a Week (24x7): People's Panel Wave 4* available on line @ http://archive.cabinet office.gov.uk/service first/2000/panel/wave4/reportquant.pdf, London: Cabinet Office, accessed 2nd January 2008.

Cabinet Office (2000c) *The People's Panel: The First Year Evaluation*, available on-line @ http://archive.cabinet office.gov.uk/service first/2000/panel/eval/index.htm, London: Cabinet Office, accessed 2nd January 2008.

Cabinet Office (2005) *Transformational Government: Enabled by Technology*, London: HMSO.

Cabinet Office (2008) *About the People's Panel*, available on-line @ http://archive.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/servicefirst/2000/panel/summary.htm, London: Cabinet Office, accessed 2nd January 2008.

Callaghan, G. and Thompson, P. (2001) 'Edwards Revisited: Technical Control and Call Centres', *Economic and Industrial Democracy,* vol. 22, no. 1, 13-27.

Carey, M (2007) 'White-Collar Proletariat? Braverman, the Deskilling/Upskilling of Social Work and the Paradoxical Life of the Agency Care Manager.' *Journal of Social Work*, vol. 7, no. 1, 93-114.

Carey, M (2009) "It's a Bit Like Being a Robot or Working in a Factory": Does Braverman Help Explain the Experiences of State Social Work in Britain Since 1971?' *Organization,* vol. 16, no. 4, 505-527.

Castells, M. (1996) *The Rise of the Network Society*, London: Blackwell Publishers.

273

Castells, M. (2000) 'Materials for an Explanatory Theory of the Network Society', *British Journal of Sociology*, vol. 51, no. 1, 5-24

Clarke, J. Gewirtz, S. and McLaughlin, E. (eds) (2000a) *New Managerialism, New Welfare?,* London: Sage

Clarke, J. Gewirtz, S. and McLaughlin, E. (2000b) 'Reinventing the Welfare State. in J. Clarke, S. Gewirtz, and E. McLaughlin. (eds.) *New Managerialism, New Welfare?* London: Sage.

Clarke, J. and Newman, J. (1997) *The Managerial State,* London: Sage.

Coleman, N. (2006) 'Resolve, Re-Direct or Refer: A Case Study of a Social Services Contact Centre,' Paper given at the *24th International Labour Process Conference*: University of London, 10-12th April 2006.

Coleman, N. (2007) 'Slowing Down or Seizing Up? Social Work Practice in a Call Centre Environment*' International Journal of Technology, Knowledge and Society*, vol. 3, no. 5, 1-10

Coleman, N. and Harris, J. (2008) 'Calling Social Work', *British Journal of Social Work,* vol. 38, no. 3, 580-599.

Coleman, N. (2009) 'This is the Modern World! Working in a Social Services Contact Centre' in J. Harris, and V. White, (eds) *Modernising Social Work: Critical Considerations,* Bristol: Policy Press.

Collin-Jacques, C. (2004) 'Professionals at work: a study of autonomy and skill utilization in nurse call centres in England and Canada', in S. Deery, and N. Kinnie, (eds) *Call Centres and Human Resource Management,* Basingstoke: Palgrave.

Collin-Jacques, C. and Smith C. (2005) 'Nursing on the Line: Experiences from England and Quebec (Canada)', *Human Relations,* vol 58, no.1, 15-32.

Davies, L. and Leonard, P. (2004) *Social Work in a Corporate Era: Practices of Power and Resistance*, Aldershot: Ashgate.

Deery, S., Iverson, R. and Walsh, J. (2002) 'Work Relationships in Telephone Call Centres: Understanding Emotional Exhaustion and Employee Withdrawal' *Journal of Management Studies*, vol.39, no.4, 47-496.

Deery, S., Iverson, R. and Walsh, J. (2004) 'The Effect of Customer Service Encounters on Job Satisfaction and Emotional Exhaustion', in Deery, S. and Kinnie, N. (eds.) *Call Centres and Human Resource Management,* Basingstoke: Palgrave.

Deery, S. and Kinnie, N. (2002) 'Call Centres and Beyond: a Thematic Evaluation',
Human Resource Management Journal, vol. 12, no. 4, 3-14.

275

Department of the Environment, Transport and Regions (1999) *Local Government Act 1999. Part1: Best Value,* Circular 10/99, London: DoETR.

Department of Health (1990) *Community Care in the Next Decade and Beyond*, London: Department of Health.

Department of Health (1998a) *Modernising Social Services Promoting Independence, Improving Protection, Raising Standards*, London: Department of Health.

Department of Health (1998b) *Partnership in Action, New Opportunities for Joint Working Between Health and Social Services: A Discussion Document*, London: Department of Health.

Department of Health (2000) *The NHS Plan*, London: Department of Health.

Department of Health (2002) *Requirements for Social Work Training*, London: Department of Health.

Department of Health (2005) *Independence, Choice and Well-Being*, London, Department of Health.

276

Department of Health (2007) *Putting People First: A Shared Vision and Commitment to the Transformation of Adult Social Care*. London: Department of Health, available on-line @ http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/publicationsandstatistics/PublicationsPolicyAndGuidance/DH_081 1118, accessed 17th August 2009.

D I G Resources Group (2001) *Location Options Report: D.I.G. 14.2.01.* 'Northshire' County Council.

Director of Corporate and Legal Services & Director of Social Services (2002) *Cabinet Briefing, Proposed Lease of Office Accommodation: Northshire Connect Centralised Contact Centre,* 'Northshire' County Council.

Director of Social Services (2000) *Corporate Management Team 21st November 2000, 'Northshire Connect' Centralised Contact Centre. Report of The Director of Social Services*, 'Northshire' County Council.

Director of Social Services and Director of Corporate and Legal Services (2001) *Corporate Management Team. Northshire Connect Centralised Contact Centre*, 'Northshire' County Council.

Donmoyer, R. (2000) 'Generalizability and the Single Case Study', in R. Gomm, M. Hammersley, and P. Foster, (eds) *Case Study Method,* London: Sage.

277

Dustin, D. (2008) *The McDonaldization of Social Work*, Aldershot: Ashgate.

Employers Organisation and Improvement and Development Agency (2001) *Call and Contact Centres in Local Government: Getting it Right*, London: Employers' Organisation and Improvement and Development Agency.

Evans, T (2009) 'Managing to be Professional? Team Managers and Practitioners in Modernised Social Work, in J. Harris, and V. White, (eds) *Modernising Social Work: Critical Considerations,* Bristol: Policy Press.

Fabricant, M. (1985) 'The Industrialization of Social Work Practice', *Social Work*, vol.30, no.5, 389-395.

Ferguson, H. (2008) 'Liquid Social Work: Welfare Interventions as Mobile Practices', *British Journal of Social Work,* vol. 38, no. 3, 561-579.

Fernie, S. and Metcalf, D. (1998) *Not Hanging on the Telephone: Payment Systems in the New Sweatshops,* London: London School of Economics, Centre for Economic Performance.

Fisher, M. (2004) 'The Crisis of Civil Service Trade Unionism: A Case Study of Call Centre Development in a Civil Service Agency' *Work, Employment and Society,* vol. 18, no.1, 157-177.

Foster, P. and Wilding, P. (2000) 'Whither Welfare Professionalism?' *Social Policy and Administration,* vol. 34, no. 2, 143-59.

Frenkel, S., Tam, M., Korczynski, M. and Shire, K. (1998) 'Beyond Bureaucracy? Work Organization in Call Centres', *International Journal of Human Resource Management,* vol 9, no. 6, 957 – 979.

Garrett, P.M. (2005) 'Social Work's "Electronic Turn": Notes on the Deployment of Information and Communication Technologies in Social Work with Children and Families', *Critical Social Policy,* vol. 25, no. 4, 529-553.

Garson, B. (1988) *The Electronic Sweatshop: How Computers are Transforming the Office of the Future into the Factory of the Past,* New York: Simon and Schuster.

Geertz, C. (1973) 'Thick Description: Toward an Interpretative Theory of Culture', in C. Geertz, (ed.) *The Interpretation of Cultures,* New York: Basic Books.

Gershon, P. (2004) Releasing Resources to the Front Line: Independent Review of Public Sector Efficiency, London: HM Treasury.

Glucksmann, M.A. (2004) 'Call configurations: varieties of call centre and divisions of labour', *Work Employment Society,* vol. 18, no. 4, 795-811.

Greatbatch, D., Hanlon, G., Goode, J., O' Caithain, A., Strangleman, T. and Luff, D. (2005) 'Telephone triage, expert systems and clinical expertise', *Sociology of Health and Illness,* vol. 27, no. 6, 802-830.

Griffiths, R. (1988) *Community Care: An Agenda for Action*, London: Department of Health.

GL (2001a) *Northshire Connect: Proposed Model For Service Report to DIG,* 'Northshire' County Council.

GL (2001b) Report for Executive Management Team. 10.5.2001. *Northshire Connect Centralised Contact Centre,* 'Northshire' County Council.

Gomm, R., Hammersley, M. and Foster, P. (eds) (2000) *Case Study Method,* London: Sage.

GSCC (2002) *Accreditation of Universities to Grant Degrees in Social Work*, London: GSCC.

GSCC (2009) *Letter to HEIs Explaining the Changes to the ECDL Requirement*: Rugby, 7th August 2009

Hammersley, M. and Gomm, R. (2000) 'Introduction', in R. Gomm, M. Hammersley and P. Foster. (eds) *Case Study Method,* London: Sage.

Harlow, E. (2003) 'Information and Communication Technologies in the Welfare Services: Wired Wonderland or Hypertext Hell?' in E. Harlow and S. Webb. (eds) *Information and Communication Technologies in the Welfare Services,* London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Harlow, E. and Webb, S. (eds) (2003) *Information and Communication Technologies in th*e *Welfare Services*, London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Harris, J. (1998a) *Managing State Social Work,* Aldershot: Ashgate.

Harris, J. (1998b) 'Scientific Management, Bureau-professionalism, New Managerialism: The Labour Process of State Social work', *British Journal of Social Work,* vol. 28, no. 6, 839-862.

Harris, J. (2003) *The Social Work Business,* London: Routledge.

Hartley, J. (2004) 'Case Study Research' in C. Cassell, and G. Symon, (eds) *Essential Guide to Qualitative Methods in Organisational Research,* London: Sage.

Health and Safety Executive (2006), LAC 94/2: *Advice Regarding Call Centre Working Practices',* HSE, available on-line @ http://www.hse.gov.uk/lau/lacs/94-2.pdf, accessed 23/4/09.

281

Holman, D. (2002) 'Employee Wellbeing in Call Centres'*, Human Resource Management Journal,* vol.12, no.4, 35-50

Holman, D., Fernie, S. (2000) 'Can I Help You? Call Centres and Job Satisfaction' *CentrePiece,* London: London School of Economics

Houlihan, M. (2002) 'Tensions and Variations in Call Centre Management Strategies', *Human Resource Management Journal,* vol. 12, no. 4, 67-85.

Hudson, J (2003) 'E-galitarianism? The Information Society and New Labour's Repositioning of Welfare' *Critical Social Policy,* vol.23, no. 2, 268-290.

Humphries, P. and Camilleri, P. (2002) 'Social Work and Technology: Challenges for Social Workers in Practice: A Case Study', *Australian Social Work,* vol. 55, no. 4, 251-259.

Improvement and Development Agency and Employers Organisation (2004) *Draft Final Report-Evaluation of [Northshire County] Contact Centre,* London: Employers' Organisation and Improvement and Development Agency.

Jamous, H. and Pelloille, B. (1970) 'Professions and Professionalization: Professions or Self-Perpetuating Systems? Changes in the French University-Hospital System', in J.A. Jackson, (ed.) *Sociological Studies 3,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Jones, R. (2002) *CRM in the Public Sector: A Hewson Group Report on the Issues and Implementation Challenges Facing the Public Sector in Pursuit of the Government's Service Transformation Strategies*, The Hewson Group in association with the Public Sector Information Group. Available on-line @ http://www.hewson.co.uk/paper-view.asp?paperid=10, accessed 26th March 2009.

Jordan, B. and Jordan, C. (2000) *Social Work and the Third Way: Tough Love as Social Policy*, London: Sage.

Kadushin, A., Harkness, D. (2002) *Supervision in Social Work* (4th edition), New York: Columbia University Press.

Keating, M. (2011) *Transforming Services, Transforming Workforce: 'Chicken or Egg?' Key Findings and Recommendations on Emerging Roles for Social Workers and Others in Redesigned Social Care Access and Care Management Services,* Leeds: Skills For Care

Kent County Council on-Line (2008) *Self Assessment,* available on-line @ http://www.kent.gov.uk/SocialCare/adults-and-older-people/self-assessment/, accessed 26th March 2009.

King, N. (2004) 'Using Interviews in Qualitative Research', in Cassell, C. and Symon, G. (eds) *Essential Guide to Qualitative Methods in Organisational Research*, London: Sage.

Kinnie, N., Hutchinson, S. and Purcell, J. (2000) 'Fun and Surveillance: the Paradox of High Commitment Management in Call Centres', *International Journal of Human Resource Management,* vol. 11, no. 5, 967-985.

Korczynski, M. (2002) *Human Resource Management in Service Work,* London: Palgrave.

Korczynski, M., Shire, K., Frenkel, S. and Tam, M. (2000) 'Service Work in Consumer Capitalism: Customers, Control and Contradictions', *Work Employment Society,* vol. 14, no. 4, 669-687.

Langan, M. (2000) 'Social Services: Managing the Third Way', in J. Clarke, S. Gewirtz, and E.M. McLaughlin (eds) *New Managerialism, New Welfare?* London: Sage.

LCSB Haringey (2008) *Serious Case Review: Baby Peter,* Haringey: Local Safeguarding Children Board, November, 2008, available on-line @ http://www.haringeylscb.org/index/scr.htm, accessed 22nd July 2009.

Lymbery, M. (2001) 'Social Work at the Crossroads', *British Journal of Social Work,* vol. 31, no. 3, 369-384.

Management Issues (2004) '*Call Centre Employment Set to Rise*', available on-line @ www.management-issues.com/2004/8/24/research/call-centre-employment-set-to-rise.asp, accessed 8th May 2006.

Mason, D., Button, G. and Lankshear, G. (2002) 'Getting Real About Surveillance and Privacy at Work', in S. Woolgar (ed.) *Virtual Society? Technology, Cyperbole, Reality,* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Miles, M. B. and Huberman, A. M. (1994) *Qualitative Data Analysis: An Expanded Source Book,* London: Routledge.

Milner, E. and Joyce, P. (2005) *Lessons in Leadership: Meeting the Challenges of Public Sector Management,* London: Routledge.

Moss, G. and O'Loughlin, B. (2005) 'New Labour's Information Age Policy Programme: an Ideology Analysis', *Journal of Political Ideologies* vol. 10, no. 2, 165-183.

Mulholland, K. (2002) 'Gender, Emotional Labour and Team Working in a Call Centre', *Personnel Review,* vol. 31, no. 3, 283-303.

National Audit Office (2002) *Better Public Services Through E-Government*, London: The Stationery Office.

285

Newman, J. (2000) 'Beyond the New Public Management? Modernizing Public Services', in
J. Clarke, S. Gewirtz and E.M. McLaughlin (eds) *New Managerialism, New Welfare?*
London: Sage

'Northshire' County Council (2007) '*Northshire County Council': Overview of the Council,*
available on-line, (accessed 11th October 2007), 'Northshire County Council'.

'Northshire' Social Services (2001) *Centralised Contact Centre Business/Service Plan*
August 2001. Draft 2 For Comment and Development, 'Northshire County Council.'

O'Connor, J. (1973) *The Fiscal Crisis of the State*, New York: St. Martin's Press.

Offe, C. (1985) *Disorganized Capitalism*, Cambridge: Polity Press.

O M (2002) Report for ACMT: Hospital Discharge /Intermediate Care Teams. Report of OM,
'Northshire' County Council.

Performance Innovation Unit (2000) *E.gov: Electronic Government Services for the 21st*
Century, London: Performance Innovation Unit/Cabinet Office.

Pleace, N., Burrows, R., Loader, B., Muncer, S. and Nettleton, S. (2003) 'From Self-service Welfare to Virtual Self Help', in E. Harlow, and S. Webb, (eds) *Information and Communication Technologies in th*e *Welfare Services*, London, Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Pollitt, C. (1993) *Managerialism and the Public Services,* Oxford: Blackwell.

Pollitt, C. (2003) *The Essential Public Manager,* Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Postle, K. (2002) 'Working Between the Idea and the Reality': Ambiguities and Tensions in Care Managers Work', *British Journal of Social Work,* vol. 32, no. 3, 335-351.

Rafferty, J. and Steyaert, J. (2007) 'Social Work in a Digital Society,' in K. Postle and M. Lymbery (eds) *Social Work: A Companion to Learning,* London: Sage.

Rapley, T. (2011), 'Some Pragmatics of Qualitative Data Analysis', in D.Silverman (ed.) *Qualitative Research*, London: Sage

Regan, S. (2003) 'Technology and Systems of Referral-taking in Social Services: From Narrative to Code,' in E. Harlow and S. Webb (eds) *Information and Communication Technologies in the Welfare Services*, London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Richards, L. (2005), *Handling Qualitative Data: A Practical Guide*, London: Sage.

Ritzer, G. (2000) *The McDonaldization of Society* (New Century Edition), Thousand Oaks: Pine Forge Press.

Richter, J., Cornford, J. and McLoughlin, I. (2005) 'The E-Citizen as Talk, as Text and as Technology: CRM and E-Government' *Electronic Journal of E-Government*, vol. 3, no.1, www.ejeg.com.

Rossman, G. B. and Rallis, S. F. (1998) *Learning in the Field: An Introduction to Qualitative Research,* Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Sapey, B. (1997) 'Social Work Tomorrow: Towards a Critical Understanding of Technology in Social Work', *British Journal of Social Work,* vol. 27, no. 6, 803-14.

Sarantakos, S. (2005) *Social Research,* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Schofield, J. W. (2000) 'Increasing the Generalisability of Qualitative Research', in G. Gomm, M. Hammersley and P. Foster (eds) *Case Study Method*, London: Sage.

Sederbland, P. and Anderson, M. (2006) 'Who Has Got the Control in Telephone Advisory Nursing?' Paper given at the *24th International Labour Process Conference*: University of London, 7th April 2006.

Selwyn, N. (2002) '"E-stablishing" an Inclusive Society? Technology, Social Exclusion and UK Government Policy Making,' *Journal of Social Policy,* vol. 31, no. 1, 1-20.

Sewell, G. (1998) 'The Discipline of Teams: The Control of Team-based Industrial work through Electronic and Peer Surveillance' *Administrative Science Quarterly,* vol.43, no.2, 397-428.

Shifrin, T. (2004) 'Striking Differences', *Guardian on-line,* 24-11-04, available on-line @ http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2004/nov/24/industrialaction.guardiansocietysupplement, accessed on 18/3/11

Silcock, R. (2001) 'What is E-government?' *Parliamentary Affairs,* vol. 54, no. 1, 88-101.

Silverman, D. (2010) *Doing Qualitative Research: A Practical Handbook*, London: Sage.

Silverman, D (2011) *Qualitative Research* (3rd edition), London: Sage.

Smale, G., Tuson, G., Biehal, N. and Marsh, P. (eds) (1993) *Empowerment, and Assessment: Care Management and the Skilled Worker*, London: National Institute of Social Work/HMSO.

Smith, C. (2009) *The Short Overview of the Labour Process Perspective and History of the International Labour Process Conference,* School of Management, Royal Holloway, University of London.

Social Care Information Policy Unit (2003) *Defining the Social Care Record*, Department of Health, available @ http://dh.gov.uk/en/PublicationsandstatisticsPublicationsPolicyAndGuidance/DH_4069421, accessed 11/3/09.

Social Services Inspectorate (1991) *Care Management and Assessment: Manager's Guide*. London: Department of Health.

Social Services Inspectorate (1999) *Open All Hours? Inspection of Local Authority Social Services Emergency Out-of-Hours Arrangements*, London: Department of Health.

Spencer, D.A. (2000) 'Braverman and the Contribution of Labour Process Analysis to the Critique of Capitalist Production - Twenty-Five Years On', *Work, Employment and Society* vol.14, no. 2, 223-243

Stake, R. E. (1995) *The Art of Case Study Research,* London: Sage.

Stake, R. E. (2000) 'The Case Study Method in Social Inquiry', in R. Gomm, M. Hammersley, and P. Foster, P. (eds) *Case Study Method,* London: Sage.

Steyaert, J. and Gould, N. (1999) 'Social Services, Social Work, and Information Management: Some European Perspectives', *European Journal of Social Work,* Vol. 2, no. 2, 165-175.

Suomi, R. and Tähkäpää J. (2003) 'Establishing a Contact Centre for Public Health Care,' Paper given at the *36th Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences:* Hawaii.

Taylor, P. and Bain, P. (1999) 'An Assembly Line in the Head: Work and Employee Relations in the Call Centre', *Industrial Relations Journal,* vol. 30, no. 2, 101-117.

Taylor, P. and Bain, P. (2003) 'Subterranean Worksick Blues: Humour as Subversion in Two Call Centres,' *Organization Studies,* vol. 24, no. 9, 1478-1509.

Taylor, P. and Bain, P (2006) '"A Very Different (Non)-Economic Space"? Emergency Call Centre Workers-A Reply to Glucksmann' paper given at the *24th International Labour Process Conference*: University of London, 10—12th April 2006.

Taylor, P., Hyman, J., Mulvay, G., Bain, P. (2002) 'Work Organisation, Control and the Experience of Work in Call Centres', *Work, Employment and Society,* vol. 16, no. 1, 133-150.

Taylor, P., Baldry, C., Bain, P. and Ellis, V. (2003) 'A Unique Working Environment: Health, Sickness and Absence Management in UK Call Centres', *Work, Employment and Society,* vol. 17, no. 3, 435-458.

Tedlock, B. (2008) 'The Observation of Participation and the Emergence of Public Ethnography' in N. K. Denzin and Y.S. Lincoln (eds) *Strategies of Qualitative Inquiry*, Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Thompson, P. (1989) *The Nature of Work: An Introduction to Debates on the Labour Process* (2nd edition), Basingstoke: Macmillan

Thompson, P. (2003) 'Fantasy Island: a Labour Process Critique of the "Age of Surveillance"' *Surveillance and Society*, vol. 1, no. 2, 138-151

Thompson, P. and van den Broek, D (2010) 'Managerial Control and Workplace Regimes: An Introduction' *Work, Employment and Society*, vol. 24, no. 3, 1-12.

Townsend, K. (2005) 'Electronic Surveillance and Cohesive Teams: Room for Resistance in an Australian Call Centre' *New Technology, Work and Employment*, vol. 20, no. 1, 47-59.

University of Warwick Graduate School (2007) Guide *to Examinations of Higher Degrees by Research*, Coventry: University of Warwick.

van den Broek, D. (2003) 'Selling Human Services: Public Sector Rationalisation and the Call Centre Labour Process', *Australian Bulletin of Labour ,* vol. 29, no. 3, 236-252.

Waddington, D. (2004) 'Participant Observation' in C. Cassell, C. and G.Symon, G. (eds) *Essential Guide to Qualitative Methods in Organisational Research,* London: Sage.

Webb, S. (2003) 'Technologies of Care', in E. Harlow and S. Webb, S. (eds) *Information and Communication Technologies in the Welfare Services*, London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

White, V. (2009) 'Quiet Challenges? Professional Practice in Modernised Social Work', in J. Harris and V. White (eds) *Modernising Social Work: Critical Considerations*, Bristol: Policy Press.

Woolas, P (2005) *Efficiency in Local Government 2005:The Second Wave*-Speech, Minister for Local Government, 5th September 2005, Imarsat Conference, London: available on-line @http://www.communities.gov.uk/corporate/efficiency-governmemt, accessed 23rd April 2009.

Yin, R. (2003) *Case Study Research*, Thousand Oaks: Sage.

THE UNIVERSITY OF
WARWICK

Research Study: Contact Centres and Social Care

You are being invited to take part in a research study. You will be asked whether you agree to this. Before you decide whether to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve, so I would be grateful if you would read the following information.

My name is Nigel Coleman. I am a Senior Lecturer in social work at   and I am currently undertaking research for a PhD at the University of Warwick. My research will focus on contact centres in social care and how they impact on the initial assessment of need and the process of social work. It will look at this from the perspectives of service users and staff.

I will be based in the contact centre in [name of location} for a full week commencing 20th June 2005 and each Wednesday thereafter for approximately six months. During that time I will be observing all aspects of the centre's operation and looking at procedural and other documents. I will also be interviewing staff about their work. This will usually take the form of informal conversations as the opportunities arise but will also involve some more structured interviews. These will be conducted in private and will be subject to individuals' consent. These interviews will be recorded, either in note form or on tape, again subject to individuals' consent. I will also be interviewing service users about their experiences of the contact centre.

I would like to tape-record some of the interviews as well as taking notes, as this will provide an accurate record of what has been said. The tapes will be erased after they have been transcribed. The tape transcripts will be anonymous and kept in a locked drawer. They will only be used for research and any information used will be in a form that continues to ensure the anonymity of all participants. Confidentiality will be strictly observed and apart from myself only my supervisor, Professor John Harris, will have access to this data. All data will be destroyed on completion of the research.

Thanks for taking the time to read this, if you want to contact me about anything relating to the research you can do so either by telephone or email (see below).

If you are willing to participate in the research, I would be grateful if you would complete the attached slip.

294

Nigel Coleman

School of Health and Social Studies

The University of Warwick

Coventry CV4 7AL

UK

Tel: 0191 3754261

Email:
nigel.coleman@newdur.ac.uk

<u>Appendix Two</u>

<div align="right"><u>Reference</u>

Letter:

Number:</div>

Name:_____

Contact telephone number/e-mail:_____

I have received and read a copy of the research information sheet and I am aware of the purpose of the research. I understand that any information I contribute will be anonymous and be assigned a number and/or a letter not my name, and will be treated in strict confidence. I am also aware that I can withdraw from any interview or discussion at any time, if I choose to do so.

Notes will be taken during interviews or they may be tape-recorded, subject to your agreement.

- *I agree to participate in the research, to be interviewed if required and for the information to be used in the research study.*

signature_____

- *I agree to interviews being tape recorded if required and for anonymous quotations to be used in the final research report and/or other publications.*

signature_____

295

Appendix Three: Initial Questions for Semi-Structured Interviews

1) How long have you worked at NCD?

2) What were you doing before you worked at NCD?

3) What was your first impression of NCD?

4) What sort of training have you received to prepare you for working at NCD?

5) How have you found the experience of working at NCD?

6) Have you had experience of challenging calls?

7) If so, can you give me examples?

8) How did you feel after these calls?

9) (For SWs only) How long have you been qualified? What type of team were you working in before here?

10) (For SWs only) How do you feel about dealing with adult/childcare calls (if background only in one area).

11) (For SWs only) Does the technology in use here help or hinder you? In what way?

12) (For SWs only) Do you regard what you do here at NCD as 'social work'?

13) (For SWs only) How do you feel about being managed by someone who is not from a social work background?

14) (For SWs only) How long do you see yourself working here? Why?

Appendix Four

Staffing Structure and Costs of Duty System in Northshire County Prior to Northshire care Direct (2000)

Day Staff

Clerk/Receptionist x 5	£ 71,280
Care Manager X5	£140,756
Care Manager Assistant x5	£88,800
Manager x5	£144,560
Input of Locality Business Team Pro Rata	£38,500
Locality Managers (Pro Rata PO10)	£35,797

Evening 5-8pm

Saturday 9-1pm

Care Managers x 1.5 Pro Rata	£22,186
Manager x0.5 Pro Rata	£15,500
TOTAL	£557,388

Appendix Five

Original (2000) Proposed Staffing Structure and Costs for Northshire Care Direct

First Contact Officers x 13.5   £270,486

Clerk/Typist x 1   £14,257

Senior Practitioner (Qualified Social Worker)   £29,912

Contact Centre Manager   £32,432

TOTAL   £347,087

Appendix 6

Northshire Care Direct: Staffing Complement (as at October 2007)

Corporate Contact Centre Manager (not SW qualified) based at County Hall but retaining managerial responsibility for NCD)   x1

Assistant Manager (SW qualified) based in centre with day to day management responsibilities)   x1

Shift working Social Workers (SW grade)   x1

Shift working Social Workers ('Staff Supervisor' grade 6)   x2

Day working Social Worker   x1

Part-time Social Worker   x1

Shift working 'Customer Service Officers'[21]   x8

Day working CSOs   x4

Part-time CSOs   x3

Occupational Therapist   x1

Team Clerks   x2

---

[21] **Note the name changed from First Contact Officer in 2006**

Appendix Seven NCD Floor Plan

3 x FCOs

4 x FCOs

Fire Exit

Escape Stairwell

Locker Room

Door.

Comms Room

Door

3 x FCOs

2 x Steps

3 x PO2s

3 x PO2s

Access Stairwell

* Left to other offices

Exit

Door

1 x Managers Office

300

2 x Admin Staff

Northshire County Council Management Structure 2005

```
                              ┌──────────────────┐
                              │    HEAD OF       │
                              │    ADULT         │
                              │  COMMISSIONING   │
                              └──────────────────┘
```

COUNTYWIDE COMMISSIONING MANAGER (SUPPORTING PEOPLE)	COUNTYWIDE COMMISSIONING MANAGER (LEARNING DISABILITIES)	COMMISSIONING MANAGER (MENTAL HEALTH & SUBS MISUSE) *	DIVISIONAL COMMISS MANAGER	DIVISIONAL COMMISS MANAGER	DIVISIONAL COMMISS MANAGER

Integrated Team Managers x 5

DEVELOPMENT COMMISSIONING MANAGER

Comm Services Manager x 3 PIT Teams

Comm Services Manager x 2 PIT Teams

Comm Services Manager x 2 PIT/ICT Teams

Review Team Manager

Service Dev Officers x 6

Social Care Lead (MH)

Contact Centre Manager

Adult Protection Dev. Officer

Integrated Team Managers * x 13

Comm Services Manager Sensory Support Team

Direct Payments Team Manager

Adult Protection Practice Officer

Partnership Manager Substance Misuse *

Carers Dev. Officer

*Shared responsibility
  with General Manager CDDPS NHS TRUST

---

i