

RESISTANCE OF TELE-SERVICE WORKERS: IMPLICATIONS FOR
QUALITATIVE POLICY RESEARCH

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates how resistance can be analyzed in qualitative policy research. My working definition here for *resistance* is: *the interruption of rituals and performances of power*. By qualitative policy research, I refer to methods of gathering stories from people for public policy development derived from ethnographic techniques in anthropology. Qualitative techniques generally prioritize the micro-analysis of particular situations in developing macro-policies. The problem here concerns a persistent focus in qualitative policy writing upon constraints and problems. This study engages issues of agency and human ingenuity through a resistance analysis.

This thesis research addresses resistance tactics employed by thirty-nine tele-service agents in Canada, interviewed in summer 1998 in Fredericton, Moncton, St. John, Toronto, and Winnipeg. The call centre industry is an excellent case study of the modern service sector as it exists at the intersection of economic and technological change in a highly gendered environment. Two thirds of call centre telephone agents are women. Key informant interviews have been analyzed with Non-numerical Unstructured Data Indexing Searching and Theorizing (QSR NUD*IST 4) qualitative data software using a typology developed from Political Scientist James C. Scott. This reading of Scott applies his descriptions of resistance in five areas of analysis: grumbling and complaining, quitting and missing work, bodily appearances, unions, and technology and sabotage. Diffuse ideas of power from postmodern social theory are used to further understand the significance of non-collective resistances in this sector.

Three significant findings are available from this study. First, narratives of telephone agents suggest that significant acts of resistance occur on a non-collective basis. Second, qualitative policy research creates opportunities to interrupt generalizations about service work; however, knowledge created by qualitative research remains embedded in the politics of the researchers and institutions where the research is produced. Qualitative policy research should be read accordingly. Third, if the call centre sector is profoundly shaped by worker resistance, it is worthwhile for professional economic development planners to consider these acts in policy development.

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Ideas on bodily appearances and the application of postmodern social theory in labour case studies were developed in a class with Geraldine Pratt in Geography at University of British Columbia. Early thoughts on the vital roles of quitting in shaping the call centre sector were written for Lourdes Beneria in City & Regional Planning at Cornell University.

CHAPTER 1 - INTRODUCTION

It is 7:58 at night as I type 'refusal' onto a computer keyboard. My black nylons scratch my knees midway through the shift at Angus Reid in downtown Winnipeg. This interviewing job entails completing survey research over the telephone. It is mostly agricultural surveys, where I carefully pronounce the names of chemical pesticides and herbicides. A lot of the farmers claim to be unavailable this evening. My father is a farmer who deceives Angus Reid. He explains it is not in his interest to report what he has planted, where, how much, or the influence of new pesticide advertising campaigns. Such valuable information is the essence of my job. Yesterday night, a local television news station surveyed respondents on choices for their new anchor, "When you visualize a television news anchor, do you think of a man or a woman?" I preferred respondents to answer "woman".

I am working the maximum five-hour shift tonight, and have planned a 20-minute break, which can be taken all at once, or in two installments. I split mine into two tonight, and am going to take the first ten-minute break at 8 o'clock, in two minutes. While the cigarette and lighter sit next to the keyboard, my mind wanders. I have made 80 calls this evening, listening mostly to answering machines. Of the households who answered the telephone, most were refusals, or women in farming households, who refused to answer on behalf of "the person in the household who makes most farming decisions". I had an attack of nerves at 6:30, strangely, where I felt unspeakably scared of talking with another person. That probably explains why my completes have been so low this evening. People can tell when you are anxious; you sound unnatural, and your voice is forced. Usually with a good survey I can complete five interviews per hour. Tonight I have made three completes in as many hours.

I glance at my sister. Andrena is leaning into her computer screen, intent on completing a survey. My sister is an excellent interviewer. On the weekend, we were selling coupon books for cruises to Americans, and Andrena was hung up on. Undeterred, she called back immediately and apologetically began, "I'm sorry, we must have been cut off. I'm calling on behalf of Angus Reid ..." I look at the clock, it is eight o'clock.

These personal memories of telephone service work in Winnipeg during the mid-1990s mark this thesis investigation of call centre work in Canada. I consider how workers employ resistance tactics while navigating labour markets. This thesis tells the stories of such cheeky and politically dangerous workers: tele-marketers who laugh at motivational slogans; fund-raisers who negotiate a cash settlement; and banking staff who grumble and complain within earshot of management.

I draw on an analysis of resistance developed by James C. Scott to illuminate narratives of telephone agents. By resistance, I mean instances where tele-service workers resist rules and regulations of their jobs. Call centres in Canada are an ideal case study for understanding resistance in the modern service sector workplace. They exist at the intersection of restructuring service work and new information technologies in a highly

gendered environment: two thirds of call centre workers are women. Call centres are defined as "business operations which use a group of agents or telephone service representatives to perform lead generation and sales (*outbound*) or provide customer service and support (*inbound*) over the telephone" (Caporusso 1997: 3). Telephone service is a huge industry in Canada, according to murky claims by consultants and economic development agencies, employing an under-researched number of workers, potentially in the hundreds of thousands.

My analysis leads to three main conclusions. First, that issues of non-collective resistance are significant in shaping the call centre sector. Second, that qualitative policy research can *both* be used to shatter stereotypes *and* to reproduce researcher interests. As a result, qualitative policy research should be read cautiously. Third, that resistance matters for economic development planners.

Issues Addressed

The thesis organization follows the points just summarized. The remainder of chapter one sets out the basic research questions. The fundamental issue addressed in this thesis is the following: How can resistance be analytically approached in qualitative policy research? Chapter two discusses methodology and the concepts of resistance used. Narratives of resistance will be identified through a content analysis of 39 recent interviews with tele-service workers conducted in 1998 in Fredericton, Moncton, St. John, Toronto, and Winnipeg. Chapter three examines the background of the call centre sector, particularly the gendered nature of this work. Chapter four forms the heart of this study and addresses the patterns in the stories workers shared about resistance. Chapter five concludes the analysis and proposes some implications for the field of planning. In a chapter by chapter breakdown, I address related basic questions as follows:

How can theories of resistance be integrated into qualitative policy research methods?

Chapter two outlines and assesses the methods and concepts utilized in this thesis. What was the research process of this thesis project? What sorts of power issues are at stake in undertaking qualitative research? What is the need for qualitative policy research? What are significant issues of resistance for policy purposes? Why is James C. Scott's approach to resistance used here? How have studies of service employment integrated analyses of resistance?

What is the Context and Background of this Call Centre Case Study?

Chapter three tells a story of material and cultural issues in the call centre sector. What is the size and scope of this sector in Canada? Who are the people who work at call centres? What is the 'culture' of call centre work? What have been the findings of

related research studies? What is the role of the professional economic development planner in this sector?

What trends are found in the stories 39 workers told about resistance tactics in call centres?

Chapter four is the analytic discussion of resistance in this interview data. I distinguish between collective and non-collective resistance through this analysis. What do workers say about the effects of grumbling and complaining at their jobs? How are the impacts of quitting and missed work described? How do bodily appearances shape the way this work is experienced? How do union structures influence workers and employers? How do new information technologies influence worker resistance tactics?

What conclusions can be drawn from this thesis for call centre work and qualitative policy research?

Chapter five explores implications of this study. How do worker resistances influence this sector? Why does qualitative policy research matter? How can economic development planners use these ideas?

CHAPTER 2 - QUALITATIVE METHODS AND RESISTANCE ANALYSIS

A current trend in policy formulation is increasing use of qualitative policy research, often with participatory methods. The main rationale behind this trend is that it provides policymakers with a more complete understanding of the issues at hand. While lauded as a step forward by many progressive policy writers, other writers exercise caution in the transformative potential for new qualitative methods. In exploring such debates, this chapter considers the question: How can theories of resistance be integrated into qualitative policy research?

My discussion of qualitative research is inspired by my participation in a Status of Women Canada policy report (Buchanan and Koch-Schulte 2000) and in World Bank policy writing on participatory poverty assessments (Narayan et al. 1999; Narayan et al. 2000). While some contend that qualitative research remains a minor and alternative approach to research, I disagree with this characterization. Rather, I suggest that it is an emerging new paradigm. I assert that this is a critical time for debates on qualitative research, as standards for such research are solidifying.¹

From my experiences using qualitative methods, I am skeptical about the emancipatory potential of such research for empowerment goals. This chapter is very much an exploration of these reservations. Advocates of qualitative methods may feel such techniques hold great accuracy in capturing nuances of data, are more democratic than established quantitative practices, and offer findings complementary to quantitative techniques. Yet, while qualitative methods offer potential benefits, serious drawbacks exist which are outlined in the context of this case study.

One reason for these reservations has been my own under-use of concepts of *resistance* in qualitative research work. My past analyses have heavily relied on describing the problems and constraints individuals face, particularly those people considered *marginal*. I chose this study in part to illuminate the resources and strategies people draw upon in everyday work situations, such as a telephone call centre. Also, I wanted to demonstrate how such an analysis, which I refer to as a resistance analysis, is important for policy work.

The second part of this chapter explains my conceptual framework of resistance. I assess my reasons for using a typology of resistance developed by James C. Scott, rather than an inductive style of analysis. I articulate my interest in non-collective resistance as I distinguish between collective and independent resistances. My focus on independent resistance stems from a close reading of interview narratives in the call centre case study; however, it is also influenced by my interest in diffuse ideas of power put forward by postmodern social theorists.

¹ The World Bank has standardized qualitative policy research through the adoption of the Participatory Poverty Assessment since 1992, which is now included in half of poverty assessments (Robb 1999) and forms a foundation for the World Development Report on Development and Poverty 2000/01, which is available in draft form at the time of this writing (World Bank 2000).

What is Qualitative Policy Research?

... The differences between the quantitative and qualitative traditions are only stylistic and are methodologically and substantively unimportant. (King et al. 1994: 4)

Qualitative research can mean many things to many people. Rather than providing a final word, this section sets out to situate this thesis within definitive debates. While some argue that qualitative research is nearly identical to quantitative and statistical methods, others claim that it is unique in its ability to uncover social complexity. Social capital approaches contribute towards the mainstreaming of qualitative policy research, and have been advocated by the World Bank in recent years to analyze social networks. Feminist development of qualitative methods has particularly stressed self-reflexive reporting in the research process. I contend that qualitative methods are firmly entrenched in the micro-politics of the participants, researchers and institutions in which they are produced.

Three notable political science professors at Harvard University unanimously state that qualitative and quantitative traditions should be similarly systematic and scientific (King et al. 1994: 5). An influential social capital study in Italy by their colleague Robert Putnam, is cited as evidence of such rigour (Putnam 1993). In the authors' provocative words, "we seek not dogma, but disciplined thought" (King et al. 1994: 7). In line with many academic and policy analysts, they argue that macro claims must be developed from the micro, such that, "good social science attempts to go beyond these particulars to more general knowledge" (King et al. 1994: 35). Their points of rigour and thoughtful analysis are important contributions.

Contrary to King et al., anthropologist Carol Stack argues that qualitative methods are unique and bring a new light to bear on policy issues. Stack argues for public policies built around the social practices and everyday lives of the people most affected (Stack 1997: 191). Her method is ethnographic, defined as "arguing from the particular to the construction of theory" (191), and rings true to the above definition put forward by King et al., that the macro must be developed from the micro. Stack uses two examples to argue for critical policy studies through poverty research: that of block grants in the rural south of the United States, and the other of fast food workers in Oakland, California. Unfortunately, Stack idealizes ethnographic policy research at times. For example, in one brief article she strongly argues, "ethnography uncovers the complex dynamics of social change and the unintended consequences of social policies" (207). This characterization is overly powerful.

Ethnographic methods themselves do not drive conclusions; rather, it is the selection of narratives compiled by the researcher. In the hands of a researcher with a different agenda, conclusions would look very different from the critical policy studies of Stack. In this sense, I concur with King et al. who find that qualitative and quantitative traditions

are only a difference of style. This being the case, researcher and institutional politics are critical in directing qualitative research findings.

Can qualitative research express ideas beyond the institutional context in which it is produced, or does ethnographic research reproduce institutional interests? Ben Fine is skeptical of the emancipatory ideals of qualitative policy approaches. He studies the accelerating use of social capital analyses within the World Bank. Social capital is a loosely defined concept encompassing ethnographic and qualitative policy approaches focused on analyzing social networks. Fine suggests that social capital analysis is a looming successor to the Washington Consensus of economic restructuring, such as structural adjustment policies. He argues, "these new [social capital, or qualitative] initiatives together hold out the prospect of an even stronger stranglehold over the development debate than was held by the Washington consensus." (Fine 1999: 2). Fine outlines several problems with characterizing social capital analysis as an emancipatory tool. First, the concept is murky and open to definition by competing political interests (5). Secondly, the social capital origins themselves are politically conservative. Fine points out that the origins of this concept rest with James Coleman, a sociologist at the University of Chicago, who established social capital co-relations between family types and deviant criminal behaviour (5).

This thesis has been further informed by literatures in feminist research methodology. Feminist researchers have been advocates of participatory and qualitative methods for some time, while acknowledging that there is no one set of feminist methods or techniques. I concur with Liz Stanley and Sue Wise, who contend that all knowledge is the result of its conditions of production (Stanley and Wise 1990: 39). They argue this in an edited book that focuses on translating feminist epistemology into concrete feminist research practices (Wise 1990). Similarly, Shulamit Reinharz has provided an overview of the practice of Western feminist research methods, and argues that semi-structured interviewing has become the principal means by which feminists gather data (Reinharz 1992: 18). She notes an "emerging norm" of self-reflexive reporting of the interview process. This concept of *reflexivity* often takes the form of autobiographical researcher bylines within texts.

Qualitative research models move us in a grounded direction for policy formulation, but are often reform-based approaches to social change. By *grounded* here, I refer to policy processes which consult with those significantly impacted by resulting decisions, arguably a more democratic approach to policy development. In my claim that qualitative research is often reform-based, I believe that room for political maneuvering on the part of the researcher is potentially expansive, but in practice, it is underused. Reasons for this may be related to institutional constraints in state, academic and other organizations. Arguably, cultural stereotypes also influence researchers in selections of narratives which support the status quo.

Democracy and Voice

Is participatory policy research more democratic because it gives participants a greater voice? This is a popular idea among qualitative researchers, but opinion varies among participants in this study. Some participants indicated agreement with democratic principles in participatory policy research. Camilia compared this project to her own work conducting telephone surveys. She considered participation in this research to be an empowerment strategy, *"Just because I like to give my opinion, you know, especially when it comes to politics and stuff. ... To me, if you want something changed or if you want things to go a certain direction, you've got to stand up and say something about it or do something about it. ... after I talked to you and got more information and understood it more, it was like, 'Okay, yeah, that makes sense.'"* She had discussed these issues with colleagues before coming to the interview. Claudine expressed similar agreement with democratic policy development, *"It is important to do this work so that people walk away with a greater understanding of what is happening out there in the community - and how this approach is very democratic in terms of giving voice to people in terms of developing an analysis of what is really happening out there from various points of view. I think that matters. I look forward to getting the study."* Lisa identified the importance of telling people's stories in order to influence specific policy directions, *"That is one thing I like about face-to-face stuff is that you also learn a lot of things of other people's points of view and other people's stories and what other people have gone through. ... I think if enough of these types of surveys are done that the government will finally realize and corporations will finally realize that telephone work is not the way to go."* Arguably, participants who chose to participate in this study were more likely to believe in democratic contributions resulting from their participation in policy research.

Other participants were more skeptical of policy implications from qualitative methods. Helen explains her skepticism of democratic ideals in policy research, and points to the inequitable distribution of researcher funds: She explains how this replicates the approach of market research firms:

I've been thinking about what you guys are doing [qualitative policy research] and ... I just do not know. I just don't trust middle class people's help. I feel like they really do not listen; that they decide what they think people need or want or should have. ... I worked in market research before, and I noticed when you are talking to people and you need to pay for their opinions, and you need to pay housewives, you pay them less than if you need to talk to doctors. It is just a reflection to me on what people's time is worth ... my reward in this, I guess, is to get my story told or help other people.

Practical challenges in the publication process also impede democratic goals related to empowerment. It was difficult to guarantee participants access to this research, as dates for publication were unclear. While telephone numbers and addresses were sought, it is doubtful that these will be accurate in one year's time for many of the highly mobile workers interviewed. Publication dates are unknown; I could only estimate by indicating

result availability in "*next spring*". Many participants expressed interest in seeing research results, which could be answered realistically by, "*It would be easier for us if you could just call and order a copy.*"

Increasing democratization of research *is* underway: according to Anthony Giddens, "a world of intensified reflexivity is a world of *clever people*" (Giddens 1994: 7). Giddens claims that social reflexivity is a key influence in the democratization of knowledge, where, "information produced by specialists can no longer be wholly confined to specific groups, but becomes routinely interpreted and acted on by lay individuals in the course of their everyday actions" (Giddens 1994: 7). This routine that Giddens makes reference to is premature in the context of this research, as illustrated by the difficulties participants will have in accessing the policy study written on this sector. Perhaps on a macro scale (Giddens does not use case study approaches), greater democratization of research *is* linked to qualitative methods. However, there is limited potential for *social reflexivity* with this study as the interview participants and their peers have limited access to the policy report and this study.

A discourse theory of democracy is useful in understanding decision-making in the tele-service situation. Jürgen Habermas argues that the everyday choices of policymakers and citizens drive democracy, such that "... the democratic process is dependent on the virtues of citizens devoted to the public weal" (Habermas 1996: 24). Habermas views public institutions as key sites for democracy, particularly in their communicative functions: "Discourse theory has the success of deliberative politics dependent not on a collectively acting citizenry but on the institutionalization of the corresponding procedures and conditions of communication" (Habermas 1996: 27).

Despite constraints, formal and informal institutions are the best systems we have for making decisions. By institutions, I refer to state, educational and related social institutions. Habermas seeks continual improvements to how citizens communicate through public institutions. It is with this intent that I favour developing qualitative tools which promote participation and democratic deliberations in public policy developments.

Introduction to Resistance

Resistance is a contested term that reflects multiple meanings.

My working definition here for *resistance* is: *the interruption of rituals and performances of power.*

By this, I consider resistance to be closely related to existing power structures and inherently change-oriented. I distinguish between collective and non-collective forms of resistance, and focus on the significance of non-collective resistance for policy research. Debates between political economy and postmodern perspectives shadow this analysis. By political economy, I refer to an intellectual tradition that focuses on economic actions

as central to power relations, and generally theorizes resistance as related to collective action. By contrast, more recent postmodern thought prioritizes cultural and discursive norms in understanding power, and considers independent acts of resistance significant. By discursive power, I mean that the way we talk about the world shapes its reality. In line with numerous other writers, I struggle to find a voice that articulates the complexity of a synthesis between these two strong intellectual traditions.

I begin by evaluating the ideas of two prominent resistance theorists who focus on collective acts: James C. Scott and Aihwa Ong. Similar to this study, Scott and Ong coalesce political economy and postmodern literatures. Scott's roots are firmly in the Subaltern Studies political economy analyses from South-East Asia, which have used Marxism in post-colonial settings. Ong expresses greater postmodern tendencies imbued with feminist anthropology. James C. Scott explains the multiple resistance tactics of Malaysian peasants via the notion of "hidden transcripts" and Aihwa Ong brings these ideas to spirit possessions on the assembly line in Malaysia.

I am most interested in ideas of non-collective resistance which stem from readings in postmodern social theory on interruptions in traditions of power. Theorists Michel Foucault and Judith Butler provide an idea of resistance which focuses on the politics and actions of the individual in resisting repetitive systems of domination. Their analytic approaches have been used in several workplace studies. I use such service work studies to counter allegations that the ambiguity in postmodern social theory can lead to policy paralysis. I disagree with this critique of postmodern theory, and illustrate several ways in which Foucault and Butler are applied in understanding service work.

Knowledge is the result of its conditions of production. As such I consider my discussions of methodological and conceptual ideas to be interconnected in this chapter. I begin with some discussion of qualitative research issues in the context of this study and policy research. Here, I detail the process of research and methods employed. Later in this chapter, I focus on conceptual issues in developing an analysis of resistance with this data set.

Research Process

The interview transcripts in this study emerged from a policy study done for Status of Women Canada. The objective of this Federal government study was the production of a contextual and thorough narrative of the gendered experiences of tele-workers with the aim of developing policy narratives to reflect issues of workers in this sector. Principal investigator Ruth Buchanan and I interviewed 53 call centre workers who had worked in the industry in the past year, including both current and former workers. The interviews were semi-structured conversations with workers on a confidential basis about their entry into tele-service work, experiences of this industry, work conditions and personal aspirations. We designed a template, or rough guide, of questions, which we expected, would last about one hour. Interviews ultimately varied between 30 and 90 minutes.

Most Toronto and Winnipeg interviews were conducted in public coffee shops and restaurants, and occasionally in private homes. New Brunswick interviews were done independently by Ruth Buchanan. Most interviews were tape recorded and transcribed by Janet Lennox in Victoria, British Columbia. Our approach to interviewing evolved with the study, so those subsequent interviews would incorporate issues that had emerged earlier.

Descriptions of Research Participants

The following list of pseudonyms details the 39 people who participated in interviews used for the purpose of this thesis. People are clustered according to social networks through which they were interviewed. Thirty-four people were interviewed independently, and two group interviews were undertaken with a total of five participants. Group interviews included one in Winnipeg with Jacqueline and Sandra; and another in Toronto with Brian, Jasmine and Brenda. Research participants are people who have worked in a call centre in the past year. When provided in the interview, I include age and the type of call centre where the person has most recently been employed. I also include identity issues that I find relevant, such as: gender, educational background, future career plans, and personal interests. Regarding gender, the ratio of men interviewed is higher than those who work at call centres statistically (Buchanan and Koch-Schulte 2000). Regarding racial categories, such information is excluded from these descriptions of research participants, as participants were not asked to self-identify.²

Total participants:	39	Female:	26	Male:	13
Winnipeg:	13	Toronto:	21	New Brunswick:	6

Winnipeg

Bonnie, insurance tele-service worker at a large firm and a 31-year-old new mother recently returning from her maternity leave, married.

Candice, a 21-year-old tele-marketer with a retail work history.

Jacqueline, 20-year-old former survey research interviewer, now working in a bookstore part-time, looking for another tele-work job for extra income.

Sandra, partner of Jacqueline, a customer service representative at a multinational long distance company, planning to start own business.

² For discussion of race and ethnicity in the context of this research, please see the discussion of multicultural and multilingual communication in Chapter 5, *Skills, What Skills?*, in Buchanan and Koch-Schulte, 2000. According to visual estimations, call centre workers in Winnipeg, Fredericton, Moncton and St. John were 'white' with one exception. Toronto interview participants appear more racially diverse: eleven participants were 'white', and ten were 'of colour'.

Christopher, 22-year-old waiter, former tele-marketer and survey interviewer at four firms in Winnipeg and Toronto, cousin of Jacqueline.

Anthony, a 25-year-old supervisor of market research call centre for eight years, musician.

Donald, a customer service representative at a multinational company providing Internet accounts for past 18 months, young university student.

Randy, dating Donald, recently quit an eight month tele-marketing job and is awaiting an Employment Insurance review, a 25-year-old university graduate in Sociology, actor.

Ellen, a 44-year-old survey researcher for past three years in four different call centres, university student.

Camilia, a 29-year-old survey researcher for past three months, worked in food-service for prior 12 years, taking courses in a healing therapy.

Sylvia, a 45-year-old tele-marketer for past 18 months, former career as executive secretary working with high government levels, seeking secretarial position.

Paul, a 40-year-old former tele-marketer, university graduate in artistic field, seeking computer industry positions.

Allison, an 18-year-old survey researcher for past eight months, would like to become a call centre supervisor before pursuing a social work career.

Toronto

Amanda, a 31-year-old survey researcher, has done tele-work for approximately 18 months, mainly in the financial industry.

Louise, 24-year-old student and telephone interviewer for past year. Work flexibility assists with care responsibilities for a relative.

Claudine, 34-year-old youth advocacy worker who worked in a call centre for eight months to bridge a gap between social service jobs.

Ben, 23-year-old student who has done outbound tele-work for past two years, also a rock/alternative musician.

Serene, 25-year-old student and outbound tele-worker, speaks English, Cantonese and Mandarin languages. Relies on Government loans to pay \$14,000 university tuition for her professional program.

Marco, 37-year-old new immigrant from Eastern Europe. A market researcher while seeking work in his established arts-related career.

Shingo, market researcher and young student.

Shawna, 24-year-old student, customer service taking sales orders over the telephone, at position for 3 years, has participated in company-sponsored computer courses.

Simon, a 24-year-old who works intermittently at outbound call centre jobs, interested in work as a race car mechanic.

Maia, 23-year-old student, has combined tele-marketing and food service jobs for past 3 years.

Benoit, 25-year-old, former customer service representative at a mutual fund firm, currently seeking degree-related science work.

Provincial government office tele-workers

Brian, 53-year-old, works for the Provincial government providing service information to citizens on the telephone.

Jasmine, 52-year-old colleague of Brian.

Brenda, aged 43, colleague of Brian.

Lisa, 18 years old, has worked at nine outbound call centres in the past two years, actress, plans to study theatre as a mature student.

Helen, 42-year-old relation of Lisa, former interviewer/tele-marketer at several call centres, paid a large settlement at one job, labour activist.

Cynthia, 29-year-old trained musician and tele-bank worker. Former colleague of Helen, who is owed approximately 1200 dollars from past tele-marketing job, case is pending.

Ann, 24 years old, multi-tasks in her government tele-service job, combining phonework, website setup, and guidebook preparation. Had quit a 1996 tele-marketing job, university graduate.

Tariq, 24-year-old journalist, former tele-service representative at a large long-distance company.

Rosa, former tele-marketer for 20 months, turned union organizer.

Melinda, 25-year-old financial service worker, final year of International Relations university studies, immigrant from Eastern Europe.

New Brunswick: Fredericton, Moncton and St. John

Fred, 29-year-old tele-marketer, *"a natural born salesman"* who has worked with *"sleazy fundraisers"* for nine years.

Cindy, 23-year-old hotel reservation tele-worker for two and a half years, university degree in microbiology.

Lana, 22-year-old inbound and full-time call centre worker for past two years, ready to take stress leave.

Phyllis, 48-year-old outbound call centre worker, a top performer who collapsed at work and was hospitalized, she now runs a home-based business.

Melissa, 22-year-old works at two inbound call centres, one much better than the other, university graduate.

Ellen, 22-year-old works at a large outbound centre for a temporary staffing agency. Very pleased to receive a turkey for Christmas from the firm.

Sample Generation

The stories of the call centre workers have been gathered through a series of samples. The primary technique is a snowball sample, which uses social networks to approach new participants. Statisticians call this a convenience sample. Often participants had discussed this project among colleagues before setting up an interview: Amanda explains that she heard about this study through a coworker, *"She ripped it [a poster] off and she called"*. Louise also heard of this study through word of mouth generated from the posters, *"We were exchanging an email on another subject ... and she said, 'Oh by the way, I heard about someone doing a survey on tele-marketers.'"*

Six of the twenty interviews of workers in New Brunswick are included here, as copies of the remaining fourteen were unavailable for this study. In a New Brunswick pilot study, Ruth Buchanan conducted interviews in call centres in Fredericton, St. John and Moncton. Approximately half of these interviews had been done on site at call centres, where employees had been chosen by the employer for the purpose of the interview, conducted during work time. The second half of this sample had been asked to participate through social networks, over the course of several years, when Ruth Buchanan lived in or near these communities.

Winnipeg interviews covered thirteen people. Postering was a highly effective way of gathering a sample of workers in Winnipeg, where six telephone calls were received within two days. The downtown Winnipeg area where most call centres are located is relatively small, and we distributed posters outside most major call centre buildings as well as transit stops in the area. We also generated interview participants from contacts and friends I had in the local industry where I had worked in three call centres between

1991 and 1995. The remainder of participants were referred to us by those we had interviewed spreading the word among friends. Further, two telephone interviews were conducted after our return to Vancouver.

In Toronto, twenty-one call centre workers were interviewed. Toronto proved a difficult city to find interview subjects, possibly because of limited personal networks of both interviewers. An initial wave of downtown postering focused on subway stops. This led to two interviews. At the suggestion of our first interview participant, we decided to pay interview participants 20 dollars for interviews. The scarcity of participants stepping forward for interviews also encouraged us to budget funds towards participants. One participant, Helen, particularly delegitimized our altruistic approach to gathering information, and made a comparison between our approach to research and that done by the market research firms where she had worked. The poster was soon revised with an honorarium included and publicized in two additional ways. First, we had the information added to the University of Toronto student job search website. Second, at the suggestion of Helen, we faxed the poster to *FAXLEFT*, a service that distributes community information to approximately 4000 non-profit organizations in Toronto. Ruth Buchanan had also completed one early Toronto interview as part of the New Brunswick pilot research.

Considerations: Power, Confidentiality and Recording

How is this interview going to be used? Are you going to be sending it to the actual call centres to improve the working conditions? I'm not exactly sure how this research is going to be used. – Shawna, Toronto

This method of qualitative policy research brings with it a set of unique considerations for participants and researchers. For example, participants raised the topics of power, uncertainty, democracy, impositions, recording techniques, and advance preparation during interviews. This section will outline such comments from participants on method as found in transcripts and notes.

My situation as a young researcher, having a 'good job', while many similarly aged participants did not, was noted by two participants. Shawna noted our unequal positions in that she was combining call centre work with her undergraduate studies, while I was studying her practice for my graduate studies. She indicated that she felt inferior in this research situation: *"But you are a graduate student. I feel like I should be further in life now - added pressure on myself."* There was an additional consideration of job prospects for numerous participants, who indicated they were qualified for the type of qualitative research I was conducting after the interview. As part of the transcript, Tariq indicated his interest in assisting with the report as a consultant, *"If I can help you guys with the report or whatever because I'm freelancing right now, if you guys have an opening where you can use my sort of skills."*

The issues of confidentiality were significant to participants in several instances. I feel it is important that the practice of confidentiality be considered before undertaking interview research, and that these details be articulated to participants. For this research, the research ethics committee at the University of British Columbia was helpful in establishing a basic framework. One vivid interaction was with Fred. He was concerned that a settlement he had accepted from a former employer precluded him discussing the case. Further discussions were entered into with the tape recorder turned off. Fred explains, *"I arrived at a settlement from a company I was with and part of the settlement through their firm was that I could not discuss the case ... their law firm is pretty powerful you know [break in recording]."*

Participants were keenly aware of recording. The recording device seemed to represent a border between formal and informal research participation. The tape recorder could also be a symbol of respect and seriousness in the interview process. Its visibility on the table was part of making this border clear. Phyllis was disconcerted when she lost track of the recording status, *"oh you did that without me even seeing it."* Ellen repeated a similar concern, *"well I know you turned it off, I just did not think you turned it back on."* Paul explained his familiarity with informed consent and recording issues from his call centre work, *"yeah, I understand that from the call centre actually. We need to hear your verbal authorization on the tape."*

Issues of 'Truths' and Authenticity

When we tell stories, we cannot avoid also saying indirectly how the subjects involved in them are faring, and what fate the collectivity they belong to is experiencing (Habermas 1989: 173).

A series of choices were made as I selected quotations and trends in the interview narratives. Such judgements shape the opinions I have articulated in this thesis, yet often are difficult to assert with certainty. On different days, people may have said different things, or I may have asked different questions. I have organized the analysis in chapter five with confidence in my choices, and have expressed uncertainty when appropriate. The selection of relevant narratives, however, is ultimately my own.

At times, the comments of workers would be tentative and indefinite. For example, Bonnie commented that, *"You caught me on a relatively good day. Nothing really bad happened. I wonder how I would have answered all these questions if it were a really, really bad day."* On the topic of work skills, Jacqueline noted, *"I can't believe I am saying that."* after commenting how she found call centre work difficult and felt, *"really overwhelmed. I always thought it was a lot simpler than I thought it would be. Like when I walked in, I was really naïve about it. I thought you just phoned people, and that was pretty much it. I didn't realize all the ins and outs and monitoring and all the people and how quickly you had to respond to all the things and that kind of disturbed me."* Such uncertainty makes establishing a 'true' nature of tele-service work in a particular

case study difficult, if not impossible. Yet for policy formulation, such estimation is required.

In other cases, an unwavering position was given. Simon explains his certainty that tele-marketing is a bad job, "*Oh yeah, let me make that clear. Tele-marketing is a bad job!*" To counter this negative experience, Melissa clearly explains that she works for an excellent inbound firm, "*They treat the people very well. They are so friendly there. They bend over backwards to accommodate me.*" Derived from such quotations, I have drawn the conclusion that inbound jobs are better than outbound telemarketing work, and am confident in some 'truth' to this trend in the data.

Troubles of Participatory Policy Research in this Project

Research of this nature consumes the time and energy of workers and citizens. These costs should be considered in research design. Time limits of participants exist; for example, I interviewed a group of adult public employees in a Toronto office building food court on their lunch break. While I was interested in further discussion, Brian and Brenda had to return to work, saying "*We have to get back to the phones*" and "*back to work!*". It is easily comprehensible that some workers may delay or miss personal plans due to researcher requests. This research puts real impositions into the lives of its subjects.

To my surprise as a researcher, many people prepared in advance for interviews. It would often be in a response to a question from myself such as, "*What sorts of comments do you have for me?*" that these materials would be displayed. Helen had collected a set of press clippings for us to photocopy, "*I have a list. ... This is all the press coverage I've gotten for us so far. ... There is a place right across from my house that only charges three cents a page.*" Louise had made notes on her recommendations for change. Participants would be involved in reading interview intentions. For example, Tariq commented, "*I have not been able to find a pattern in your questions. Usually I listen to a question, and I see. Okay, this is what you are getting at.*"

Conducting an Analysis of Resistance

This section describes the framework used to analyze the content of interviews. A preliminary framework on the basis of a series of known resistance tactics was undertaken. This was informed by a framework developed by James C. Scott (1990) which was selected due both to its relevance to this case study, and widely cited nature of Scott's work on resistance. A series of seven topics were identified for preliminary coding: (1) quitting jobs; (2) grumbling and complaining; (3) bodily appearances; (4) unions; (5) technology and sabotage; (6) other resistances; and (7) empowerment. The first five topics became analytic areas, while the final two subjects, *other resistances* and *empowerment*, were integrated across analytic areas.

This thesis used a software tool to assist with analysis of interview data named Non-numerical Unstructured Data Indexing Searching and Theorizing (QSR NUD*IST 4). The traditional principles of qualitative analysis are maintained in using this flexible tool, that is: (1) a document system; (2) an index or coding system; and (3) a search technique. An index system, or *coding tree*, was developed using the paragraph as a unit of analysis. Several independent categories, or *freenodes*, were also used for newly emerging categories. From this framework, six paper packets were printed. Despite the technological analysis, at this point a highlighter pen was used in discerning patterns and interesting narratives. These interview segments, like sound-bytes, were then composed into an analytic text in chapter four.

This research builds on analytical ideas of James C. Scott and is not inductive. By inductive, I refer to a popular style of qualitative data interpretation where the researcher intends to listen as the data speaks. The issue of respecting 'voice' is highlighted in many discussions of inductive research. In my opinion, inductive analysis is an impossible goal and evades a clear position on issues of researcher standpoints and institutional context. Such theoretical debates aside, I found that a preliminary attempt towards inductive analysis did not work in practice for this thesis. While the NUD*IST *freenode* feature is particularly useful for analytical flexibility in an inductive analysis, I used this component sparingly in this study. A preliminary attempt to use a freenode system, in an inductive approach to develop an analytic framework, was found unwieldy. After four interviews were coded, I found myself becoming lost in the forty categories I had created. As a result, I turned to Scott's typology of resistance.

James C. Scott's Contribution to Resistance

Most of the political life of subordinate groups is to be found neither in overt collective defiance of power holders nor in complete hegemonic compliance, but in the vast territory between these two polar opposites (Scott 1990: 136).

When the great lord passes the wise peasant bows deeply and silently farts (Ethiopian proverb, in Scott 1990).

Political scientist and anthropologist James C. Scott provides a working definition and history of resistance as "hidden transcripts" (1990) which are not immediately found on the surface of social relations. Scott asks that his expansive study, which admittedly brushes over detailed conditions, be used in culturally specific case study research to assess its accuracy and relevance. His background is in researching Malaysian peasantry. In Scott's opinion, prescribed roles are performed by both 'elites' and 'the poor', where resistance tactics by poor peasants are the norm. For example, a gradual and informal dismantling of the tax system has occurred through peasant acts:

Quietly and massively, the Malay peasantry has managed to nearly dismantle the tithe system so that only 15 percent of what is formally due is actually paid. There have been no tithe riots, demonstrations, protests, only a patient and effective nibbling in a multitude of ways: fraudulent declarations of the amount of land farmed, simple failures to declare land, underpayment, and delivery of paddy spoiled by moisture or contaminated with rocks and mud to increase its weight. For complex political reasons ... neither the religious authorities nor the ruling party wishes to call public attention to this silent, effective defiance. To do so would, among other things, expose the tenuousness of government authority in the countryside and perhaps encourage other acts of insubordination (Scott 1990: 89).

A distinction between “*elementary* forms of disguise” and “*elaborate* forms of disguise” is made in Scott’s typology of resistance outlined below in table one. Acts of resistance are frequently veiled in Scott’s opinion. Major forms of disguise include anonymity, euphemisms, grumbling, oral culture, folk tales, and role reversals (1990). Gossip and rumour, for example, are anonymous means of resistance, which can ruin the reputation of its subject. Trickster tales are another case of veiled cultural resistance. For instance, the Brer Rabbit tales of North American Slaves, where Brer Rabbit is pitted against Brer Wolf or Brer Fox, whom he defeats through agility and guile. I have developed my analytic framework, as described earlier in this chapter, with close attention to the particular examples of *how resistances are used* in Scott’s typology.

Table 1. James C. Scott’s Elementary and Elaborate Forms of Political Disguise

Elementary forms of Disguise:	Examples of use:
Anonymity – Declaring the hidden transcript while concealing identity	Spirit possession; gossip; aggression through magic; rumour; anonymous threats and violence; the anonymous letter; and anonymous mass defiance
Euphemisms - The veiling of the message	Folk tales; songs
Grumbling - Veiled complaint	Muttering; groans; silence; winks; stares
Elaborate forms of Disguise:	Examples of use
Popular culture	Ritual; dance; drama; dress; folk tales; religious beliefs
Oral culture	Folk song; folk tale; jokes
Symbolic Inversion	Drawings and prints; newsletters; festivals
Rituals of Reversal	Carnivals; fetes; satire; parody; ridicule

These distinctions enrich my understanding of how resistance is used by Scott, though in this study I rely more on distinctions between collective and non-collective resistances. Ultimately, Scott is most interested in collective resistance, the point at which a group of people will recognize an act in a moment of ‘truth’. As Scott explains, “Our analytical

attention is focused less on the subjective experience of an isolated individual in openly declaring a previously hidden transcript than on the collective experience of groups that have shared a more or less common subjugation" (Scott 1990: 210). Resistance matters most when the veil of deceit is lifted for others to see. According to Scott, "It is only when this hidden transcript is openly declared that subordinates can fully recognize the full extent to which their claims, their dreams, their anger is shared by other subordinates with whom they have not been in direct touch" (Scott 1990: 223).

This is a change from Scott's earlier work, which was more focused on the importance of the individual as an agent of change. He argues, "Just as millions of anthozoan polyps create, willy-nilly, a coral reef, so do thousands upon thousands of individual acts of subordination and evasion create a political or economic barrier reef of their own (Scott 1985: 8)."³

Resistance remains unpredictable: according to Scott, "we will never be able to predict why one employee quits when insulted while another doesn't, why one slave suffers a beating in silence while another strikes back, why one servant returns an insult and another turns away ... How can we explain the sudden acquisition of guts?" (Scott 1990: 217-218). He claims that our definition of the political act must be expanded to include disguised resistance.

It is on his focus of a large event where I depart from Scott. Does the act of resistance itself, and the potential for psychological and economic empowerment, not continue to matter at an individual level? Scott's focus on the collective is echoed in much economic development writing, which concludes this chapter. Postmodern approaches better incorporate the strength of the individual, while sharing an element of unpredictability with Scott.

Economic development plans are considered in Scott's most recent book (1998), where he builds on his notion of resistance to make a theoretical case against a hegemonic planning mentality that excludes local know-how. He illustrates evidence of modern planning tragedies such as the city of Brasilia, and compulsory villagization in Tanzania. Practical knowledge from local people can reduce the instances of such failures. Scott considers the role of the professional, and challenges a practice of stereotypes replicated by well-meaning social scientists and bureaucrats: "... I would say that the progenitors of such plans regarded themselves as far smarter and farseeing than they really were and, at the same time, regarded their subjects as far more stupid and incompetent than *they* really were" (Scott 1998: 343). Development policy recommendations by Scott include four flexible practices: (1) take small steps; (2) favour reversibility; (3) plan on surprises; and (4) plan on human inventiveness (Scott 1998: 345).

³ I thank Jim Delaney for pointing out Scott's evolution of thought on non-collective resistance, and drawing my attention to this quotation.

Gender and Collective Resistances on the Assembly Line: Aihwa Ong

What can we learn about resistance through layering a gender analysis onto the political economy approach of James C. Scott? Both Scott and Aihwa Ong successfully synthesize political economy and postmodern ideas in their writing, yet key differences remain. I tease out a few distinctions here. While Scott understands resistance as mattering most when it is expressed collectively and attains a degree of public truth, Ong asserts a feminist perspective in understanding effective resistance as being closely linked to cultural gender roles.

Modern workers in industrialized societies employ similar resistance tactics to those of peasant farmers and slaves. Aihwa Ong conducts an ethnography of women electronics workers in Malaysia (1987b) which illustrates striking similarities between the circumstances of these workers and call centre workers in Canada: high turnover (often five to six percent per month); state strategizing to regulate integration of the labouring poor in this sector; and patience skills related to routinization of the work (Ong 1987b: 150-152). Ong echoes the emancipatory sentiments of Scott in her focus on "scattered, fragmentary acts of rebellion by subjugated people" (Ong 1987b: 143).

Resistance tactics focus on the self-construction of a new feminist identity rooted in human dignity, according to Ong. Hers is a shift towards a feminist notion of empowerment, from a traditional economic focus in gender and technology literature on commodity relations (Ong 1987a). Ong considers empowerment to be central and contested, "the constitution of new subjectivities unavoidably calls forth countertactics ... insisting on an ancient equality rooted in common (ungendered) humanity" (Ong 1987b: 213). This focus on women's empowerment distinguishes Ong from Scott. Scott does not draw gender distinctions in his writing, and focuses rather on domination related to social class.

The tactics of factory workers in this Malaysian study are diverse: female workers cry; lose their tempers with supervisors; and make excessive use of "female problems" as an excuse from work. Other tactics include careless parts assembly, slow work pace, or spontaneous machine wrecking and sabotage. Ong particularly focuses upon spirit possession episodes as a resistance tactic, whereby workers effect "mass hysteria": in 1975 forty operators were seized by spirits, and in 1978, 120 operators were involved similarly in the microscope section of an American electronics plant based in Sungai Way. Ong analyzes spirit possessions as an unconscious idiom of protest, "ritualized rebellion", against labour discipline and patriarchal practices, by conjuring up devilish images. Factories had been built on the burial grounds of Aboriginal groups. These spirit possessions also reinforced existent stereotypes of female maladjustment:

Some girls started sobbing and screaming hysterically and when it seemed like spreading, the other workers in the production line were immediately ushered out ... It is a common belief among workers that the factory is "dirty" and supposed to be haunted by *datuk* (ancestral male spirit

associated with a sacred place). (*Sunday Echo*, November 27, 1978, as cited in Ong 1987b)

More direct tactics were anonymous machine sabotage without the cover of spirit possessions, as explained by a Malay technician in the Telok free trade zone. This quotation resonates with the call centre detail in chapter four. The technician explains that such tactics went unspoken to management:

There is certainly a lot of *discipline* ... but when there is too much *discipline*, ... it is not good. Because of this the operators, with their small wages, will always contest. They often break the *machines* in ways that are not apparent. ... Sometimes they damage the *products* ... This is entirely up to the *individual operator*, [an action taken] on their own. I feel that it is indeed proper that they do this because their wages are small and we cannot *blame* them. *Blaming operator is nothing* [sic] because ... if they have problems they are not about to tell anyone. Because others will not listen to their complaints. Because they do not have a union. I cannot [propose wage increases on their behalf] because if you value yourself you want to get *promotion* if you can, and so we can't talk about this [to the management]. Thus, all that I do is behind the scenes. Because if one cares about one's future, one's *career*, then one is forced to keep quiet. Thus, even if one sympathized with the operator (*simpati dengan operator*), one is not brave enough to speak up (italics in text as cited in Ong 1987b: 211).

While both Scott and Ong seek to synthesize economic and cultural approaches to resistance, they employ the concepts in distinct ways. I am most interested in non-collective resistances and how they function in labour markets. The cultural approaches to resistance analyzed in this case study are further informed by the ideas of writers in postmodern social theory.

Non-Collective Resistances: Postmodern Accounts

Postmodern social theory deals with resistance in a non-collective sense. Two representative writers on power and resistance, with key differences, are Michel Foucault and Judith Butler. Postmodern social theory has been heavily criticized for its disengagement with social and economic everyday practices. However, scholars are applying the ideas of postmodern writers in policy and case study settings. For example, Shoshana Zuboff applies Foucault in technological case studies. Many scholars argue that the use of Foucauldian ideas is most exciting in current fieldwork and case study applications (Rose 1999). Such a case study approach is employed in this thesis.

Postmodern theory argues that power is diffuse and fragmented. Power, according to Foucault, comes "discreetly" from below, "... the disciplines have to bring into the power relations, not above but inside the very texture of the multiplicity, as discreetly as possible" (Foucault 1977: 220). Foucault further develops his approach to power in

Power/Knowledge (1980). Power is not an issue of the domination by one over another. It is rather a "net-like organization" which must be analyzed as "something which circulates, or rather as something which only functions in the form of a chain. ... In other words, individuals are the vehicles of power, not its points of application" (Foucault 1980: 98). Political theory, Foucault claims, has never ceased to be "obsessed" with the idea of a sovereign power, someone in control. He feels this is misguided, particularly as it focuses upon the state. He rather argues that we must explore "indefinite power relations".

The technological workplace is described by Shoshana Zuboff (1988) using an analysis developed from Foucault's "disciplinary society", one in which bodily discipline, regulation, and surveillance are taken for granted. She argues that repetitive energy from the human body is central to industrial modes of production: "the body became the central problem of production. The early industrial employers needed to regulate, direct, constrain, anchor, and channel bodily energies for the purposes of sustained, often repetitive, productive activity" (319). The updated version of the panopticon⁴ outlined by Zuboff no longer requires an observer, "Information systems can automatically and continuously record almost anything their designers want to capture, regardless of the specific intentions brought to the design process or the motives that guide data interpretation and utilization" (322). A control tower is no longer necessary. This induces compliance without conflictual and "messy" management interventions.

The call centre workers interviewed describe statistics-driven management systems that they experienced in terms which correspond with Zuboff's Foucauldian analyses. Workers and supervisors became frequent allies in the face of off-site upper management analysis of statistics gathered by new information technologies.

Foucault and Zuboff are useful in understanding the organization of power at call centres, but lack an explicit gender analysis. A gender analysis is useful in understanding service employment, which is typically marked by gender divisions of labour according to social norms of femininity and masculinity. Here Judith Butler's concept of *gender performativity* assists in explaining persistent gender divisions of labour in call centres. Feminist theories have been deeply troubled by Judith Butler's collapse of the categories 'woman' and 'man' (1990). Unlike most feminists, Butler does not take 'woman' as a given. Butler asserts that even biological sex is a fiction and considers how dualisms operate counterproductively in gender and feminist discourse. This interesting debate aside, I focus on two significant contributions of Butler: first, that of gender performativity; and second, her concept of power.

⁴ Michel Foucault describes the panopticon as pervading society through the disciplinary enforcement of power. "Each individual, in his place, is securely confined to a cell from which he is seen from the front by the supervisor; but the side walls prevent him from coming into contact with his companions. He is seen, but does not see; he is the object of information, never a subject in communication", Foucault 1977: 200.

According to Butler, gender performativities are merely superficial. Gender itself exists through a set of acts that produce the effect of an essence on the surface of the body. Her concept of power, derived from Foucault, relates to agency and the power of individuals to refuse to play their gender roles, thus subverting power systems. Butler sees the body as defined by boundaries through taboos, and is interested in exploring bodily margins. She establishes the concept of performativity to describe the parodic acts that reinforce a fictional natural basis to sexual categories:

Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are performative in the sense that the essence of identity that they otherwise purport to express are fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means. That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts, which constitute its reality (Butler 1990: 136).

In fact, being a woman or man is very much a social construct. Butler uses the concept of drag to claim that there is a parody going on with no original actor. Gender parodies subvert cultural ideas of natural gender identities (Butler 1990: 138). Gender itself is a regulatory fiction "...because gender is not a fact, the various acts of gender create the idea of gender, and without those acts there would be no gender at all" (Butler 1990: 140). Butler further clarifies her position on performativity in *Bodies That Matter* (1993). Performativity is a series of replicated acts, which are seen as natural. The dramatic qualities gain a certain inevitability due to the compulsory nature of performativity. "Performativity is thus not a singular 'act', for it is always a reiteration of a norm or set of norms, and to the extent that it acquires an act-like status in the present, it conceals or dissimulates the conventions of which it is a repetition," argues Butler, "moreover this act [performativity] is not primarily theatrical; indeed, its apparent theatricality is produced to the extent that its historicity remains dissimulated" (Butler 1993: 12-13). That is, no essential self remains beneath the layers of drag performances.

Butler is keenly interested in resistance. Her idea of gender performativity is intertwined with a belief in human agency, and the importance of individual actions. Power must constantly be quietly cited, claims Butler, as we pay homage to the gender traditions which have gone before us. For her, agency is closely aligned with power as a, "... reiteration or rearticulatory practice, immanent to power, and not a relation of external opposition to power" (Butler 1993: 15). That is, power moves quietly through workplace corridors where it is occasionally noted in particular instances. I, along with Butler, am interested in how power gets noticed in these moments.

Putting Postmodern Ideas to Work: Labour Case Studies

The application of Foucauldian ideas of power in fieldwork creates further possibilities for the consideration of independent worker actions in economic development research. Many labour studies have already been influenced by Judith Butler's idea of performativity. I have chosen three recent labour case studies, which have employed

postmodern analyses for illustrative purposes. First, Philip Crang's focus on collective and "transformatory" resistance. Followed by Nicky Gregson and Gillian Rose's insistence on socially constructed and gendered identities. Ending with Lisa Law's interest in contradictions and aversion to stereotypes.

Philip Crang uses the case study from his job at one restaurant to consider the character of service employment in advanced capitalist societies. He discusses the routines of his restaurant work involving a "staging of display" which combine strategies of hiding, masquerading, distancing and posing. Crang shares Scott's emphasis on collective action, and distrust of resistances which do not "fundamentally transform social relations". These processes are all a way of 'getting by' and work against the long-term interests of the worker. Limited resistances which contradict managerial and customer control combine avoidance of management, parody and adaptation, but do not "fundamentally transform social relations" (Crang 1994: 694).

In expressing disagreement with the approach Crang uses in employing a postmodern analysis, Nicky Gregson and Gillian Rose argue for a closer reading of Judith Butler, and claim that two aspects of her ideas must be retained when working with her arguments (Gregson and Rose: 4). These aspects are her radical anti-foundationalism which denaturalizes social categories and dominant forms of social reproduction, and her claim that identities do not preexist their performance (Gregson and Rose: 4). Gregson and Rose provide two case studies: a study of community arts workers and projects in Edinburgh and another on car boot sales⁵.

It is in stepping outside of familiar representations of low-wage workers where postmodern ideas attract me. I see opportunities for new ways of learning about social change through examining contradictions. An excellent illustration of this is in Lisa Law's examination of resistance in service employment. She urges us to look at the contradictions in "contested terrain" in her case study of sex tourism work in the Philippines. Stereotypical representations are decried by Law, who calls for a nuanced and subtle geography of resistance through the notion of a "third space", adopted from Homi Bhaba. In this approach to third space resistance, a simplistic characterization of dancers in a Cebu bar as "victims" is problematized, and identities of the various parties involved with sex tourism are seen as ambiguous. Law asserts that we can look at resistance to better view power, "it is useful to focus on what becomes defined as contested terrain, and how resistance can, and does, surface" (122). The preceding case studies set exemplary precedents for policy writers to incorporate non-collective analyses of resistance as an important complement to the resistance studies of Scott and Ong.

⁵ Car boot sales are called outdoor fleamarkets in the North American setting.

Conclusions: Knowledge As Linked to Research Practice

Qualitative policy research is an ideal format for understanding how resistance operates in a labour market. However, the analytic trend in much analysis of resistance and low-wage service work is towards examining cases of collective resistance, which I argue is only part of the story. I assess exemplary concepts of resistance by James C. Scott and Aihwa Ong. Further, I turn to postmodern theories of power that prioritize independent acts of resistance, which have been successfully used in labour case studies outlined at the end of this chapter. These studies establish precedents for policy studies. Several of the accounts of resistance discussed here suggest a need for ongoing detailed case studies. This thesis responds to these calls by providing a case study of resistance in a newly restructured sector, the call centre industry.

Qualitative labour studies carry a set of recognized methodological drawbacks, the most serious being that the studies primarily replicate the institutional and researcher contexts in which they are produced while striving for some truth about the world. The transformative potential of qualitative methods remains a work in progress, and is influenced greatly by the micro-politics of the researcher and the policies of the involved institutions. This being the case, this thesis remains a product of my identity and interests, and does not claim to be inductive.

This chapter makes the case that the cost of qualitative studies in time of the participants is neither adequately compensated in financial terms, nor through democratic ideals. The transformative contributions this research can make to further democratization of knowledge via *social reflexivity* is diluted through publication norms that continue to neglect the circulation of knowledge to participants and their cohort.

Yet despite such profound reservations, qualitative policy research remains an essential component in improving the call centre sector - perhaps because listening to human stories is the best option we have at the moment in understanding what is happening in this sector. The stakes are so high: economic development planners use tax dollars to create multi-million dollar incentives through training grants and tax cuts for call centre firms. One head economic development planner in a Canadian city explained his difficult position in a telephone interview for another research project. He was confronted with a difficult choice: he knew that his city could gain ten thousand jobs in five years through a call centre initiative in a time of high unemployment. His agency, with a series of industry and government stakeholders, made the choice to organize their efforts around call centre jobs for the next five years, aiming for the best possible high-quality jobs, but ultimately accepting the 'bad jobs' too.

Wise decisions made by economic development professionals can influence positive changes in the lives of citizens, and poor decisions can have tragic implications. Jacqueline, a 20-year-old former survey research interviewer, describes the acute impact of economic development decisions for her everyday life:

I think [policymakers] should put more emphasis on training and job placement right after training because we have a friend who just went to South Tech [school] and he went with some kind of government incentive and they did a job placement for him. He's working for a company and has a real job but those are so hard to get. He had to wait almost three years for that but now he will be making 30,000 dollars a year instead of this incentive at a call center where you make 10,000 dollars if you stick with it. I know it is a job that I got because I couldn't get another job or because it is a real slack job - and it didn't encourage me to go any further as a young person. I didn't go to school, which I should have done, because I thought I could do this as a job. It was always seen as such; that this is something that I could keep doing, that I could keep making good money at. I want a house. That's it. That is my big dream right now. My dream before was to get a career, and it's not going to work.

In Jacqueline's case, it is for reasons of empowerment, poverty alleviation and social mobility that research itself matters. These serious job goals of the economic development planner can be assisted through qualitative policy research. The following chapter outlines the context and background of the call centre sector.

CHAPTER 3 - BACKGROUND TO THE CALL CENTRE CASE STUDY

I don't think there is anything necessarily horrible about working for a call centre now. I think it is part of modern life, and I think people who don't think that the telephone is part of ... modern life ... are left behind ... Anybody who thinks that they'd be fine without anything related to the phone, well, they are wrong. - Randy, Winnipeg

It is almost like the army. It's very regimented. You punch in with a time clock. You come in and you sit down, and the numbers are all computerized. As soon as you finish a call, the minute you hang up another call comes up. It is just this constant, all day, repetitious ... constant sort of like beating on a drum, but day after day. - Ellen, Winnipeg

Growth Business: A Case Study of the Call Centre Sector in Canada

The people whose words you are reading speak from situations marked by profound and rapid economic and cultural changes. In cities across Canada, thousands of workers in call centres, like Randy and Ellen, provide the voices behind telephone business interactions. These tele-service voices are expected to be pleasant, efficient, friendly, and knowledgeable. In the summer of 1998 I spent four weeks listening to complex stories of how tele-service work fits into the lives of 36 people in Winnipeg and Toronto, Canada. This research built on interviews with 19 workers in the province of New Brunswick done by Ruth Buchanan between 1994 and 1998 (Buchanan 2000). My task in this research has been to document the complex stories for workers, policymakers, firms and academics.

The call centre industry is an ideal case study as it incorporates many of the most current thoughts on economic restructuring related to globalization. The call centre industry has been restructuring itself geographically within Canada from Toronto, the financial centre of Canada, to sleepier cities like Winnipeg, Moncton, St. John and Fredericton. Call centre agents in Canada are frequently calling households and businesses in the United States and can be considered the *voices* of international trade. From technologies and sales materials developed in Europe and North America for management in the industry, the bodies of workers are quickly connected with information technologies to guide work performances. The travel-related products and services themselves, such as long-distance telephone plans, airplane and hotel reservations, and tele-banking to replace branch banking, also contain global effects.

Call centres have been called 'the sweatshops of the nineties'. The labour fits into a category of low wage service jobs related to food service and retail. Several telephone agents interviewed, who have recently left this industry, are now working as waiters or retail clerks. Examples of a few common call centre functions are tele-marketing, survey market research, Internet and long-distance support and sales, financial and banking

services, charity fundraising, hotel and airline reservation, or dispatching. Randy offers an excellent description of call centre work:

In terms of the subjective comparison, I think I would much rather be in a retail, not necessarily restaurant, but retail environment. Again that has a same comparison with the inbound/outbound. I think inbound call centre work is very similar to retail sales. I think it sort of functions in the same sort of way. People come looking for a service. They are not in person - they are on the phone. Outbound is akin to the door to door salesman going around selling vacuum cleaners or encyclopedias.

While call centres are generally acknowledged to be a rapidly expanding sector, reliable data beyond consultant reports is unavailable. As a group of British academics explain, "Our knowledge of the nature of call centre jobs is, therefore, still rather sketchy" (Belt et al. 1999). Anthony, an experienced supervisor in Winnipeg, explained the growth of the national market research firm he has worked for since 1990, "*in our centre alone, it's expanded from 18 stations to 76, and it will be expanded to 100 or 110 by September. ... It's blossoming.*"

To address this research discrepancy in Canada, mail surveys were sent to 150 call centres in the five cities participating in case study research for Status of Women Canada (Buchanan and Koch-Schulte 2000). According to the managers and human resource directors who filled out the surveys, women most often do call centre work. Proportions of women workers in call centres range from a low of 58 percent in permanent employment in Toronto, to a high of 81 percent in temporary employment in New Brunswick (Buchanan and Koch-Schulte 2000: 18). Regarding the status of such jobs, more than half of call centre workers are permanent full-time employees; between half and a third of agents are part-time and/or temporary employees (Buchanan and Koch-Schulte 2000: 21). Winnipeg has the highest number of such non-standard employees, at 45% (21).

Call centre work pays significantly better than minimum wage in these provinces, but below average employment income for Canadians. The mean starting hourly wages reported for permanent, full-time staff was consistent across study sites, between \$12.71 and \$12.91. This translates into \$24,784 annually, much lower than the average Canadian full-time employment income of \$37,556 (Buchanan and Koch-Schulte 2000: 21).

Sexual Divisions: The Facts of Call Centre Life

Gender matters in the call centre sector. Call centres employ an average range of 70-72 percent women and 28-30 percent men (Buchanan and Koch-Schulte, 2000). This gender gap fits in with an understanding of transformations in employment patterns which has accompanied restructuring of the past two decades, often referred to as the "feminization of labour". The feminization of labour is a two-step process, which involves an increase

in women's labour participation, and an increase in non-standard employment such as part-time, seasonal, and casual work. Unfortunately, rather than eroding the traditional sexual division of labour, such economic transformations appear to be bringing about its consolidation and growth (Sassen 1991; 1998).

It's funny though because in our call centre, it was overwhelmingly male, but that's because I think the supervisors themselves were kind of chauvinistic, admittedly. They felt that, I guess, in the mutual fund industry specifically ... a lot of males had taken the exams relating to mutual funds. They just thought that there were more men first of all, taking these courses, and they would be more experienced and more knowledgeable in investments and how to answer questions regarding money. There were only, when I started, two full-time reps out of 27. It was overwhelmingly male dominated and absurdly enough, the administrative staff is overwhelmingly female.

Benoit above explains the gender segmentation of his workplace, where most of the mutual fund representatives are male. By segmentation, I mean workplaces which are *either* female *or* male, and seldom reflect a societal ratio. Workers could explain this gender gap in a variety of ways. In reflecting this pattern, Benoit was one of the call centre workers at the high end of the job and wage spectrum, in a mutual fund firm in Toronto. His story illustrates a dominant pattern of strong gender segmentation in workplaces, most often dominated by women workers, although in his case dominated by men at the upper end of the pay scale.

Some workers felt that women were better at this work, and cited a general impression rather than specific reasons. Shingo would notice that women tend to do better at call centres than men, but did not state a reason; *"I don't know why ... Like for instance, you'd all be in booths. If I had a guy beside me and a girl beside me, during our break I'd be like: 'So how did you do?' I always noticed that the girls used to do a lot better. Basically, complete more surveys, get a lot less hang ups"*.

Several people commented that males are not attracted to this work, and that the younger workers tended to be of greater mixed genders, whereas older workers would be predominantly women. Shawna comments, *"I think it is [the gender ratio] about 80:20 ... I don't know why males aren't attracted to it as much. I think maybe because it is a public service or you're dealing with the public ... As you become more of a full-time rep[resentative] or older, it tends to be predominantly women."*

Another suggestion is that women are associated with public contact work in a sexualized sense. Male consumers would often flirt with female tele-service workers. According to Tariq, *"women get hit on, almost on a daily basis. ... I mean I think we should give women more credit than just pretty faces and nice sounding voices. No, I think, in that sense, this society has failed women because we keep them confined to public contact sort of positions."*

Non-standard forms of work have been described as a way of marginalizing feminized labour. Despite their increasing labour market participation over the past decades, women continue to occupy a secondary position in the labour market. Generally, working women have been concentrated in the part-time and low wage end of the expanding service sector (Armstrong, 1996). Casual work is increasing in this sector. Marco explains the nature of casual employment in his call centre job, *"That's the legal trick. You can't be employed. I'm actually not employed at all. I am not a full-time worker. I'm not a part-time worker. I'm a casual worker. It means that I have no benefits and rights like regular workers ... 434 of the interviewers are casual workers. Some of them have worked for eight years ... Next week there could be no job at all. That happened quite a few times."*

The Culture of Tele-service Work

These stories of tele-service work have sketched how economic changes related to globalization have impacted this sector. Yet such an economic analysis limits the ability to understand how workers have adapted to restructuring in cultural terms. Cultural approaches can help formulate analyses that encourage new voices and strategies to emerge from the stories of workers. As political economy theorists Gibson-Graham describe this, "highlighting the glimmers and murmurings of non-capitalism" (Gibson-Graham 1996).

Job stress was the most important concern about their work raised by interview participants. The most commented-upon effects of stress were both physical and emotional fatigue. This description accords well with that of Arlie Hochschild, who documented how the "emotional labour" by flight attendants was a workplace hazard (Hochschild 1983). Several workers related stories of emotional or health crises precipitated by call centre work. One of the most common difficulties of the job for workers was technology-related stress.

Text Box 1. Cyborg Workers: Being Technical

Workers embody technological changes in the call centre industry. Job stress was often related to fast pacing of telephone calls, and bodily connection to the computer. The emancipatory potential of cyborgs (Haraway 1991) has not yet reached the headsets of call centre workers.

Rosa: You are standing waiting to be used by the technology, and it is a physical embodiment of that. You are standing, waiting until that call comes in to use you to make money. And you are simply another part of that machine.

Jacqueline: ... just go onto the next thing without even kind of dealing with it at all, just like a robot, and that was difficult to deal with.

Sylvia: ... you're totally tied to the phone. You're logged into a computer, you know, so you have no control over eight hours of your life.

Simon: you are just reading numbers, leaning on your elbow, headset against your face, press the same buttons over and over. I get jittery. I want to get up. I want to stretch. I want to run around, do a few laps. I just get really restless doing this.

Through the workplace descriptions detailed in many interviews, I visualize a virtual cyber-guard pacing the rows of tele-workers. One is reminded of Foucault's discussion of Jeremy Bentham's panopticon. The major effect of the panopticon is to induce "a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power" (Foucault 1977: 201). No direct supervisor needs to be in control; rather, power becomes assumed by all parties as a matter of tradition. Foucault's more diffuse approach to power opens up an area of micro-resistance beyond collective action, through the opportunities individual workers have to interrupt such traditions of power.

New information technologies are used in call centres to maximize production. The new information technologies used in most outbound call centres are automatic dialers. Inbound call centres will generally bring up files on the screen. The supervisors can reset this pacing of calls, much like an assembly line. From information provided in interviews, supervisors negotiate between management and workers in setting a "dispatching rate", or the speed of the records which will maximize production. In a few cases, workers employed an old-fashioned technique, and dial random "cold-calls" in charity telemarketing; or in another case, for a stock broker. Outbound firms guarded their data bases of telephone numbers carefully, which might be organized along the lines of income or donation histories.

Anthony has been working as a supervisor in a call centre for eight years, and describes in further detail how his job has changed.

Basically, it involves maintaining quality standards of the work; making sure that the workers are actually working; actually making the calls; not necessarily getting the surveys as I said before about a quota and all that stuff. We're still pretty lax in terms of telemarketing and specific quotas you have to meet and if you don't meet it one night then you're fired basically. We give people more of the benefit of the doubt and allow them to have bad nights, and, over the course of weeks and months, we may monitor people and come to some sort of judgment in terms of their ability. At that point, we come to some sort of decision as to whether or not we can retrain them or whether it's not working out. Generally [the supervisor job coordinates] issues involving interviewing and staff, and the maintaining the research projects from the start, in field, to the end.

Related Tele-service Research

A series of case studies similar to this thesis project have been prepared in the past four years. For example, Jarman et al. (1998) conducted qualitative research in call centres in Nova Scotia. Thirty interviews with workers, managers, government and union officials were combined with eleven site visits. Their conclusions on call centre work practice and gender analysis differ from those expressed in this chapter. Jarman et al. argue that the pace of call centre work is similar to other jobs in the service industry. They claim that, "these jobs appear to be similar in terms of the pace of work to supermarket check-out clerks, waiters/waitresses, fast food workers, bank clerks and insurance clerks."

Many of the observations of tele-service workers here directly contradict the characterization of call centre work made by Jarman et al., and suggest rather that there is something distinctly 'bad' about call centre work (Buchanan and Koch-Schulte 2000). For example, Randy claims he would rather work in retail due to the slower pace of work compared to call centre work, where "*there is never any break except when your scheduled breaks are ... the calls come in continuously*". Sylvia also notes that there is less freedom in tele-work than in other jobs; "*I always had so much freedom in my [past] jobs. I could take my coffee when I wanted ... This you are totally tied to the phone.*" Benoit notes that midway through a shift he would be especially tired, "*I definitely noticed a difference in this job in comparison to other jobs that I have had ... I was very fatigued. I found myself irritable a lot.*" Margaret also discussed the mental stress of this work, "*I have seen people start nerve pills, I have seen people walking out of there crying ... My son is going to be 16 ... if he was ever going to work in a call centre, I would want to know, especially if it was his first job.*"

In discussion of gender, Jarman et al. appear predisposed to find equitable gender roles in call centre workplaces. For example, they repeat stereotypical gender attitudes with limited discussion. While they note that call centre technicians met during their research are without exception white men, who describe their jobs as "satisfying, exciting, fast paced", they state with no substantiation that low level tele-service workers "are almost

as likely to be male as female" (11). This directly contradicts both qualitative and quantitative research findings in three other provinces in Canada (Buchanan and Koch-Schulte 2000). Jarman et al. note that few older men were found working in this field, and explain this as related to traditional roles as an income provider: "particularly men with families to support, would find it difficult to sustain a role of 'provider' at these levels and presumably would look elsewhere" (11). This assessment contains a complicit assumption that women should be paid less. I find the gender analysis here to be potentially misleading. This illustrates the variability of qualitative research findings, and the influence of the researcher's orientation.

The remaining call centre studies conducted in the past several years are from Britain. A qualitative study by Vicki Belt, Randal Richardson and Juliet Webster look at call centres to examine questions regarding the changing nature of women's work in service economies. The relationship between cultural gender roles and call centre work is the focus of this study. They argue that labour feminization must be at the heart of understanding service economies. They concur with research that women do the majority of call centre jobs, and cite a consultant study estimating that 70 percent of call centre agents in the UK are women (Mital 1998 in Belt et al. 1999). The delivery of many services is commonly linked to identities, appearances and emotions of workers, argue Belt et al., citing several other studies (8). It is specifically heterosexual femininity which is marketed in many services, where women act as 'ambassadors' of the firm. Belt et al. suggest the need for further research of such front-line workers, particularly women. They stress the burnout factor and computer monitoring of this field, and then focus on the representation of skills. Skills were often acquired through "some sort of osmotic process in the course of their everyday duties" (23). This is described as an "apprenticeship in womanhood" (24).

Another British study series has produced numerous papers on local economic development strategies and illustrates contemporary changes in the spatial division of labour. The themes include: women (Marshall and Richardson 1996); underdeveloped regions such as the Highlands and Islands of Scotland (Richardson and Gillespie 1996); and analyses of gender and region in a case study of British Airways call centres in Tyne and Wear (Richardson and Marshall 1996). In the most recent paper, Randal Richardson and J. Neill Marshall argue that the characterization of call centres as the "new sweatshops" is an exaggeration (Richardson and Marshall 1999). They find call centres in Britain to be generally friendly places with good ergonomics and solid worker-management relations. This perhaps reflects the fact that they interviewed managers rather than workers, which the authors admit may have led to "some discrepancy between management and worker perceptions" (102). In their conclusions they note the importance of economic development planning in this sector, "... various economic development agencies are going to great lengths to try to attract these activities to their country, region, or city." (115)

This overview of recent call centre research establishes a gap in understanding of workers to understand the call centre industry. Call centre research to date has had

contradictory findings, and a tradition of qualitative studies. Much of the research focus is on gender relations, although not explicitly feminist (Belt et al. 1999; Marshall and Richardson 1996; Richardson and Marshall 1996). Regional development has been another focus for analysis (Jarman et al. 1998; Richardson and Gillespie 1996; Richardson and Marshall 1999). It is difficult to say whether call centre work takes a radically different form in different places, or how strongly the researcher interests influence the data analysis, yet it is clear that the research findings vary immensely. To complement the research in these studies, I seek to focus on the assets and resources workers draw on in conducting call centre work while further detailing gender and regional economic development issues.

Call Centre Economic Development is Intentional

A concerted research drive is urgently needed if telecommunications are to take their appropriate place at the centre of current conception and understanding about the development, planning and management of cities.
(Graham and Marvin 1996: 384)

Economic development planners are frequently the people who link decisions made in the call centre sector with state institutions. Examples of state actions in the call centre sector are numerous. The three provinces involved in this study, New Brunswick, Manitoba and Toronto, all have public/private partner agencies specific to the call centre industry, which coordinate activities in this sector. These agencies have staff, websites, promotional materials, and conduct promotional tours and trade fairs. Public educational institutions such as high schools and community colleges are also involved in the recruitment of workers directly through guidance counselors, or via course materials and programs specific to the call centre industry.

Despite such support for public/private partner agencies, communications infrastructures can be comparatively invisible to other planning departments, especially in relation to more traditional urban infrastructure such as transportation. Steven Graham and Simon Marvin (1996) explain that telecommunications is less planned than many other areas of urban development. They quote a senior politician within a Northern industrial city in the UK: "within the council, we've got a lot of bright local politicians, but they're not very good at working within the conceptual frameworks [of telecommunications]; they like to touch and feel, to know what's happening. They like to be very practical" (Graham 1995, in Graham and Marvin 1996: 73).

Similar to this thesis study, Graham and Marvin seek to integrate two theoretical approaches to studying the relations between cities and telecommunications: political economy and social constructivism. The emphasis of this thesis is admittedly more focused on the social and political constructions of call centre work. Graham and Marvin categorize social constructivism for their purposes as the belief that: "individuals, social groups and institutions are seen to have some degree of choice in shaping the design,

development and application of technologies in specific cases" (Graham and Marvin, 1996: 105). They caution that such social constructionist approaches can neglect wider power imbalances related to poverty, unemployment or marginalization. However, they call for grounded and complex policy research, which can recognize apparently contradictory situations where: "The same technologies can be applied to empower and assist disadvantaged groups as well as to disenfranchise or exploit them" (383). My approach is very similar to theirs in its exploration of contradiction.

State planning continues to be vital to economic development in unique ways, according to three state-planning arguments from globalization writings of Bennett Harrison, Paul Streeten and Linda Weiss. I chose these three writers on globalization as they argue that a strong state continues to exist; an argument often diminished in hegemonic descriptions of multinational corporations. I infer from their arguments that economic development planning as a profession is deeply embedded in labour market issues. Harrison encourages caution in understanding local firms as removed from large firm networks in economic development. Regarding resistance, Streeten encourages us to consider the increased bargaining power of service workers who provide non-storable services. Weiss focuses on the discursive effects of considering state-planning extinct, and argues that restructuring works differently in different places.

Bennett Harrison (1994) argues that economic development planning remains a state-driven activity. He further illustrates how network forms of organization are the signature institutional form of this era. He concludes that we must join public and private sectors in the three Ts: technology, training and technical assistance. He sees big firms leading the way, and small firms as "neither as bountiful nor nearly as beautiful as we have been led to believe" (221). Harrison sees small firms as dependent upon the bedrock of large firm contracts. Further, a strong home base is important to large firms, to develop strong supplier relations, and to familiarize with new operating technologies.

Paul Streeten (1996) claims that free trade is always managed. He concentrates on government trade management practices to preserve national institutions, practices and lifestyles. He argues that people often like quiet, stable lives rather than competition. Interestingly, Streeten claims that service workers have greater bargaining power than the producers of storable goods. Services cannot be stored, by and large. However, Streeten does not consider resistance tactics on the part of particular workers, but focuses on international trade structures: "Whether this is important in international trade, say, in the case of trade embargoes and sanctions, remains to be seen" (362).

Globalization is advanced through the state, according to Linda Weiss (1998). The myth of the powerless state, with accompanying reports of declining industrial policy, "is fundamentally misleading" (188). She critiques "the political construction of helplessness" (193) as operating powerfully to serve political interests. While not directly calling for case-specific research, Weiss does highlight the case-specific effects of economic restructuring on government capacity (189).

This section has briefly outlined the significance of state actions for the call centre industry, and how the policy environment has the potential to shape the call centre industry. However, the analysis that follows in the next chapter focuses primarily on the firm and individual worker as sites of resistance. From reading the narratives of telephone agents in this study, the workplace level is where independent resistances are enacted.

Conclusions

This chapter has sketched both material and cultural factors in call centre development. To summarize, call centres are a growth industry with a predominantly female workforce. Two thirds of this work is permanent and full-time. Call centre work is physically intense and fast-paced, using new information technologies. Recent qualitative studies make contradictory conclusions focused on gender and regional development. As such, important economic development decisions in this sector are, at best, educated guesses. Professional planners are significant actors in economic development for this labour market. What follows in the next chapter are detailed descriptions of such work by telephone agents in their own words, organized along themes of resistance.

CHAPTER 4 - ANALYSIS OF RESISTANCE AT CALL CENTRES

This thesis asserts that telephone workers strategically employ a collection of resistance tactics in the workplace, and seeks to interpret the effects of such tactics on individual and collective actions. Resistance acts are embedded here within workplaces where they can pose political dangers. This chapter addresses trends found in the stories 39 workers tell about their lives at call centre jobs. At various points, case studies are used to illustrate the details of a particular story. I shall begin by summarizing the five categories of resistance used by call centre workers:

- A. Grumbling and Complaining
- B. Missing work, Calling in Sick, and Quitting
- C. Bodily Appearances
- D. Unions
- E. Sabotage and Technology

A. *Grumbling and complaining* are powerful strategies used by workers in covert communications with managers and supervisors in multiple ways. While everyone complains about work on occasion, sometimes it matters more than others. Jokes and humour can be used to express serious dissatisfaction with a workplace practice; for example, motivational slogans are frequent targets. Rumours and gossip serve the important functions of disseminating private information in call centres, and many workers discussed the secretive nature of firms and managers in this industry. As described in interviews, various styles of complaints could be transformed by workers into unionization activities, or responded to by firms through strategic firings. Complaints would also take a more concrete form, as workers refuse to perform expected roles. This might be donations for the birthday of the owner's wife or refusal to work in icy room temperatures.

B. *Missed work and quitting* is another category of resistance. Quitting plays a defining role in the call centre industry, impacting recruitment strategies, wages, and city choices across North America. The social safety nets and labour market dynamics in a particular region can influence the decision of when and how to quit. In general, call centre jobs are very easy to get and difficult to be fired from due to labour shortages. For example, many former call centre workers I interviewed refuse to consider new tele-service positions because they dislike the work. Missed work and carelessness is an alternative to quitting altogether. Stories of quitting frequently express ideas of injustice and include psychological distress in many cases. However, justice may prevail in other narratives where cash settlements are negotiated and wages reclaimed.

C. Many call centre managers desire 'professional' *bodily appearances*, particularly for male agents. 'Unprofessional' men are more noticeable than 'unprofessional' women, according to interview stories. Dress codes were often described in interviews as disliked and unclear workplace policies. The appearances of many call centre workers we interviewed did not match dress codes sought by the firms. During research interviews,

workers were generally casually attired, and many had 'alternative' appearances with distinctly dyed hair and piercings. Interestingly, the dress codes could alienate workers, who frequently responded by quitting. Ultimately, firm interest in the appearances of telephone agents seems as related to domination as it does to productivity. These two interests are frequently contradictory.

D. The *role of unions* is murky, although generally positively viewed, by workers in this sector. Discussions of unions focused on empowerment, although diverse opinions on how unions affect productivity were raised. Non-unionized firms appear fearful of unions, and in numerous accounts gave explicit orders forbidding such discussion. Close monitoring of rumours involving unions would result in strategic firings. Limited information and advice about unions in this sector were available for workers, or for the purposes of this research. A minority of workers interviewed work in unionized call centres.

E. *Technology is sabotaged* by workers in ways that involve human relationships. No accounts detailed the wrecking of computer equipment. Rather, ways around new information technologies were often through human ingenuity and human relationships. Breaks from the phones would be maximized by knowing the exact parameters of the technologies, and taking breaks concurrently through relaxation activities such as knitting and computer games. Workers described how sales would gravitate around a generally acceptable work pace, much like an assembly line. Alliances with supervisors were key in organizing effective resistances in technological settings here. Frequent accounts of "passing the buck" were described where new technologies were used to transfer calls to different departments. Privacy issues were actively negotiated by workers, who could refuse to ask for particular information in work transactions.

A. GRUMBLING AND COMPLAINING

It is often in muttered comments and shared jokes where workers exercise defiance. Complaints, jokes and rumours are both used to relieve stress, and respond covertly to managerial and supervisory practices. Complaints are often pointed at particular supervisors and specific programs. Group political actions, such as walkouts, have begun with directly voiced complaints. And finally, in the case of firings and layoffs, vocal employees may be targeted for employment termination.

'Venting' and complaining are important ways to relieve stress and communicate messages to managers. Some managers are adept at assisting workers to 'vent'. For instance, Cynthia's supervisors "*don't mind if you get up and go for a walk, or, you know, blow off at your supervisor because, I know some people can be really ignorant. ... And our supervisors, they are all sensitive to that, but they all have a keen sense of humour.*" In other call centres, complaints are hidden from managers, but operate usefully among colleagues, such as in Bonnie's description, "*It is very important ... You stand up and yell at your neighbour at the next cubicle ... They [the company] kind of mind, but as long as you're not doing it in front of a manager or something, it's okay.*" However, Candice

explains complaints as an energy drain, *"It is constant complaining. Constant. No-one is ever happy to be there."*

Jokes and Humour

Humour and jokes are used in call centre workplaces for pleasure and political purposes. Marco explains that different accents can be used to relieve the boredom. For Lana, jokes make work fun, *"We have a hoot at work. We e-mail funny little things to each other and just things like that."* But humour has a time and a place, and can be regulated and monitored at the same workplace for Lana as described later in our interview:

You can't let your guard down. You always have to be professional. I'm sorry, but I'm a Cape Bretonner, and there is a time to laugh ... Penny got in trouble for laughing ... [The supervisor] just came up to her in the hallway and said, 'You were laughing, I heard you laughing the other day ... You know that is not good if there are irate customers on the phone.' ... - but who cares? It is not that call.

Jokes could function as pointed barbs at management tactics. Accordingly, Melissa explains how motivational strategies would be destroyed through worker jokes. Interestingly, such motivational inspirations were removed before massive layoffs:

If you are more motivated, you are more cheerful, you are doing your job better ... For example, they had these big banners that they had at the back of the office ... that said 'Quality, Trust, Commitment, Education' (laughter) ... I would joke, 'Trust, Quality, Commitment, Liberation of the Proletariat.' ... Well the ironic thing is that two weeks before they laid everybody off, they took them down. And they were going to put them up one by one, once the employees learned what they meant (laughter). ... They are an odd bunch.

Motivational strategies were frequent targets for pointed humour. Where Donald worked, an enthusiastic supervisor was the target of jokes, *"Let's go, go, go, go. Make sales. At this point half the team has been there long enough that we are cynical enough to know he was just a 'newbie' [inexperienced]."* Randy refers to *"dumb things like candy or like markers"* as prizes to make campaigns fun. He did not find these motivating. Helen explains her love/hate relationship with the motivational industry, *"I hate them because of the bullshit ideas that they sell to these people [management], but I think I love it that they are soaking them for money because there are all these people whose job it is to just fucking bug you all the time and have these peppy little things they say and monitor you and keep after you, and I cannot believe that is cost effective."*

Worker consultations could be treated with similar cynicism to motivational slogans. Amanda explains that surveys would begin with a worker sheet seeking improvements that was *"ironic"*. She explains, *"We have a joke about it because they rarely change*

anything we put on it ... Even though they want our input, it has to be such a big thing to fill out those sheets." Randy appreciated that U.S. West was the only company he worked for that had a disposition [survey question] that said, "*dislikes U.S. West*". He explains, "*We all thought it was a big joke ... people are like, 'I am sick and tired of U.S. West calling me.'*"

To negotiate their workplaces, workers use rumours and the disclosure of private information. The pay scales of temporary and permanent workers became fodder for rumours in Louise's call centre: "*there was a rumour that the temps were getting more than us. It is one of the things I had to ask about.*" Fred discovered the extent of fraud at his charity tele-marketing workplace after 'seeing' some papers in the administration office. He later negotiated a cash settlement, arguably blackmail, with this firm: "*... one of the ladies that I developed a friendship with there, she worked in the administration office ... But you know, I saw some pretty disturbing figures on paper, you know.*" Some firms would attempt to limit rumours and the distribution of information among workers. Randy describes how he was among several staff reprimanded, and the firm unsuccessfully attempted to keep this secret. He shared this information with his colleagues immediately:

They brought each of us individually in and they were starting to crack down on us, and when they gave us this one month ultimatum time kind of thing, what they did was after each of these little interviews that they did with each of us, they escorted us out of the building. They didn't want us to talk to anybody. They didn't want us to talk to our friends and let them know what was going on, that they were cracking down on us or whatever the case might have been, which was silly because the next morning before we all started working, we were in the coffee room and just like comparing notes. It was just ridiculous. I don't know what the purpose of that was.

Complaining

Complaints can act as strategic interventions into managerial or workplace strategies. For example, Donald describes his responses to a condescending manager, "*There's still kind of a condescension about how he's got all these extra responsibilities ... It has gotten to the point where I have to sit on the opposite side of the floor from him because I can't handle being near him.*" Lana explains her strengthened way of dealing with supervisors, due to her lack of fear:

We have new supervisors now, and I've just learned that I can be more firm with them. ... Like I'm not intimidated at all ... I am not intimidated by anybody at work just because they are on a big power trip, and I can't stand that. I won't let myself, but that is a more personal thing. I won't let people talk down to me ... I respect them, but I'm not scared of them at all.

Complaints also become a way of resisting supervision covertly. Benoit describes how grumbling worked *"behind everybody's backs"* at one major financial services firm. Huge outbursts would not happen, but rather a steady erosion of supervisory respect, *"A lot of women staff basically complained non stop about the supervisors ... there was not big huge outbursts, but just behind everybody's backs. The consensus was that the supervisors don't know what they're doing. We don't like them. They don't treat us well. ... It would have been really funny to tape everybody on the first day and on the last day. That would have been hilarious. ... We had one girl, and she was so bubbly, so nothing could get her down. She was just incredible high on life and just an unusual person, and she was the last person - of course. It makes sense. She was also complaining, 'I hate this job. I can't take it anymore. I can't stand it. I really want to leave.'"*

Complaints might be strategically directed to a particular firm program. An example of this is customer service training, which Donald slept through, *"because I'd seen it already, and the videos can be really boring. You have got to love those corporate training videos. The people look like they should be on the Home Shopping Network."* This was a minor act of resistance, compared to the staff uprising at Lana's firm over inappropriate advance customer service training. This session of complaints resulted in her quitting this firm, *"... the people that were there for four years were ripping, ripping mad ... 'I can't believe you're teaching this to us, and we've been doing it for four years. We need other training!' And it turned out to be just a big beef session. I didn't want to be there because I can't handle it. I find that I can't handle negativity anymore."*

A real effect from complaints by workers is punishment through firings. For instance, grumblers may be the first to receive layoff notices, as happened at Melissa's call centre workplace:

And when I saw the people at the employment centre the next day, because they [management] had a meeting set up for us, it was anybody who had ever had a problem with the management and spoke their mind ... I wear it like a badge of honour, because you know, the thinking people get laid off, and I was one of the thinking people. ... I didn't get along with one of the supervisors because I found that she had an attitude problem and that was it.

The Power of No

The act of refusing is important. Helen believes one clue to a bad job is if they say it is a family, and *"they treat you like a family pet."* Helen refused to play along with the family symbols, and refused to contribute for an anniversary present for the owner's wife, *"while she is by the pool with her cell phone, I am tethered to this computer with a headset stuck to my head, and I'm making her husband rich. That is my contribution to her happy marriage."*

Workers could quickly transform complaints into spontaneous political actions around the act of refusal. The day Lisa was interviewed, she and her colleagues had refused to work in an icy room. The air conditioner was on very high, and an older colleague started crying from back pain. The supervisor explained that the temperature was more comfortable for the people that work up on higher floors. One of the women refused, by responding, "*We are not working until you turn the heat back on.*" Some other colleagues consulted Lisa at this time, and she explained, "*It is in the Employee Health and Standard Act. You can refuse to do work if the work is not safe for you to do.*" There is no union in her workplace and Lisa identifies drawbacks, "*we could go to a shop steward and say, why don't you sit down with someone and try to get them better chairs and forming keyboards ... I'm only 18 and I'm already getting what my doctor would consider was arthritis in my wrists.*"

There could be family solidarity in negotiating the call centre job of a young person, where the moral and political perspective of a parent would intervene on behalf of a child. Interestingly, two interviews discussed how mothers of workers refused to take messages. One mother of a colleague of Melissa refused to take a telephone message the firm requested, firing her daughter. Lisa's mother also refused to accept a message on her daughter's behalf. Lisa was called to work during a strike by a former call centre job that she did not enjoy. Her mother, Helen, responded, "*You are calling the NDP [New Democratic Party] youth representative for the riding. She won't cross the picket line.*"

Fred said no to further involvement with management issues in the call centres he believes were involved with illegal activities. Toronto managers asked him to report information on the New Brunswick supervisor activities. Fred lied, "*I basically lied to them. I knew what was going on, but then again I developed friendship ... So I basically said, 'No, I don't know, I don't know.'*" Fred was fired shortly after this.

Text Box 2. Refusing to be an Insurance Agent: Phyllis in New Brunswick

Phyllis upgraded her skills to become an insurance agent, a position that requires special training and is needed to sign sales at her call centre firm. Unexpectedly, her tele-marketing firm would not pay her the accordingly higher wage. Phyllis refused to use her additional qualifications without compensation. This resulted in a cat and mouse game over her role as an agent. Phyllis describes how she negotiated this job through a series of acceptances and refusals of insurance agent responsibilities.

But I had to cave in. And here is what happened: I did my own sales. At first I said, 'Okay, I'll be an agent, but I'll only do my own sales'. So I would stand up then and wait my turn, same as everybody else, to get an agent over ... And then when they saw we were losing sales ... they would ask me if I would please get up. And you know what, in fairness to everybody else that worked there, they work hard to get a sale, I would get up and help them. I would when it was really, really busy. I just couldn't see myself sitting there. People knew why I was doing it. And people, a lot of them understood and they agreed with me, but if you were a worker and you sat down beside me and you would say, 'Oh come on Phyllis, this is my first one today ...' And I would only do accident and sickness ... in the end, when I still went back as a TSR, I did not do my own sales. I stood up, just like everybody else. And I thought, you know, they make a lot of money, and they just really don't care.

B. QUITTING, MISSING WORK, AND CALLING IN SICK

As a worker myself, I think the best way to deal with it would be to get out. That is the best way. I don't think they have to deal with implementing some policy to deal with mental health. - Benoit, former financial services tele-worker

High worker turnover is a central dynamic of call centre work. Yet the stories of quitting frequently receive less attention than narratives of firing in studies of service work. Perhaps because we seldom understand low-wage service workers as powerful agents in dealing with firms. Before leaving a call centre job permanently, workers frequently employ strategies such as missed work, calling in sick, and leaves of absence. Such techniques, incorporating related strengths and weaknesses, have been built into the very structure of call centre work practices.

Quitting

My aspirations are not to be with the company for very much longer ... I had applied for a variety of positions and been turned down and told that I wasn't qualified. ... And I got the impression that it was basically because I have long

hair and did not conform to any kind of appearance standards that are somewhat backhandedly enforced in the sense that they hire their own.
- Anthony, Winnipeg

I'm actually working on something right now that should have me out of there by September. I'm into a business with a couple of people who are also looking to leave. I think it will pan out for me pretty good. I don't plan on being there too long. – Moura, New Brunswick

How is quitting resistant? Quitting can be a powerful act of refusal within the larger scope of how workers negotiate job markets. Worker scarcity is one serious result for firms of mass quitting. The moves of firms between Canadian and U.S. regions can be understood as forced relocations rather than strategic exploitations. Quitting a call centre job depends on the context of social safety net regulations and job creation funding in a particular jurisdiction. Many workers explain that they feel “in-control” in the call centre labour markets where firms are anxious to recruit and keep workers.

Employees shape the commercial practices of their firms, rather than simply responding through uncoordinated resistance.⁶ Workers' acts of quitting influence the macro structuring of tele-service work. Nonetheless, policies of supervisory domination that alienate a workforce continue to thrive despite the contradiction faced by the potential alienation of scarce workers. Evidence of such domination is particularly detailed in thesis sections titled: *Pain and Danger*; *Professionally Gendered Bodies*; *Looking Good, Feeling Good?* and *Breaks From the Phone*. Worker scarcity can result in wage increases; for example, call centre jobs tend to pay better than their counterparts in retail and food service (Buchanan and Koch-Schulte 2000: 19). This worker scarcity issue is so grave that many call centres have policies of paying existing workers to recruit friends into the firm.

[When you refer a friend, this multinational call centre] ... gives you 50 dollars upon hiring and another 50 dollars if they stay for six months. – Sandra, Winnipeg

My best friend was working for [a national call centre] ... it was pretty much a guaranteed position. Interviewer: And so did she get 50 dollars? - Yeah ... she took me out for dinner ... It has got a great turnover. Candice, Winnipeg

The high turnover in the call centre industry forces call centres into a default position of globalization as they exhaust the labour force in one location. Donald provides an example of this phenomenon in Winnipeg where he got hired through his high school guidance counselor.

... There has been a lot of competition to get people in ... When they first got here there were a lot of people who would do it, who could do it. They got

⁶ I thank Jim Delaney for this wording in his review of this thesis.

hired on and have since quit working for the industry. ... They are running out of people in the category they had to hire, and I think that is why they're going to high schools more because there is more people who haven't been through it yet.

Yet there are limits to understanding quitting as a powerful act of resistance. The human body is unable to continue to perform the work required at some call centres, particularly after an extended period of employment of a year or more. Few research participants had worked in this industry for longer than two years. Employees stress levels can reach crisis points where productivity demands are too high. This workplace health and safety issue caused several workers to resign due to breakdowns. Other workers we interviewed who were currently doing call centre work referred to the "pressure cooker" environment of their workplaces.

Text Box 3. Quitting Too Late: Losses and 'Losers'

Despite the focus on worker empowerment in this analysis, it is also important to recognize the limits of an approach focused primarily on resistance. Stories of depression, tears and crisis were frequent from call centre workers.

The day that I actually collapsed it was just ... you could just ... any agent in there could tell you. Management knew that they should have cut the lines down. They should have slowed the records down. – Margaret, New Brunswick

After the holidays I do plan to take stress leave just because I don't want to get to the point that I'm, whatever. I feel like a loser. I do. I feel like a loser because I'm only 22 and I have got to take stress leave. ... I feel that I can't handle life or something. Too bad that there's those negative feelings about it because I'm not a loser. I know I'm not a loser. Lana, New Brunswick

At some point, there has to be something better out there. I only think of it as a means to an end - a way to pay my rent, or to pay my tuition. It would be the most bitter twist of fate, but I hope it would have nothing to do with the end. I hope to God I never have to do this. – Maia, Toronto.

Changing Meanings of 'Quitting' and 'Firing': Social Safety Nets Matter

Call centre labour markets are socially constructed through social safety nets, job creation schemes, and social assistance programs. That is, governments are deeply involved in defining the terms of call centre work. One government requirement is the record of employment, which clearly asserts the status of the termination of employment. The employment record is frequently a site of disagreement between workers and firms, as

discussed in several interviews. Firms and workers may have conflicting interests related to incomes from job creation government funding (firms) and unemployment insurance programs (workers). Firms appear to have power to make singular decisions on employment records, which many workers found to be used dishonestly.

Job creation schemes can define the terms under which firms would prefer employees to leave their jobs. Randy explains that his company got a government grant that contained requirements to hire a specified number of people by a set year. Thus, quitting was one of the only ways to leave this firm; *"they really couldn't lay people off when it really seemed like that was a requirement. ... When you apply for unemployment insurance, they review why you have quit and decide whether or not it is a good reason. As far as I'm concerned, all they should have to do is look at where I have quit from, and that should be answer enough why I quit. ... I feel like I have retired after a long career."* Randy indicated people would be encouraged to quit through bullying and reduced work hours. Randy was unsure of the status of his application for unemployment insurance in Winnipeg, and was waiting to hear a decision. In his words, *"It was not so simple."*

Unemployment insurance, renamed employment insurance in Canada, can be linked with the quitting decisions of call centre workers. Lisa was laid off by an employer who wrote an untruthful account on her employment record. *"They told me, 'You are laid off.' In turn, when they wrote me up my employment record, they said it was job abandonment. Unemployment Insurance, they would not give it to me because I had abandoned my job. It was like I quit."* It is difficult to understand why false employment records were so often mentioned, although several workers alluded to quotas for government job creation loans and grants.

There is also discretion on the part of government bureaucrats, who further decide the terms of unemployment insurance. For Phyllis, sympathetic bureaucrats assisted call centre workers at her firm in successful claims:

I was in tears, literally in tears. And I think I was just so frustrated because of the things that were happening and I couldn't change it. And everybody was complaining, so I walked over. And I stood in line, crying still - I don't do that. And I just said, 'I would like to know if I could speak to someone about... I don't know that I can take much more, but I, you know, somebody has got to take note that...' See the laws have been changed for unemployment insurance if you quit your job. But you know what? When you went over there from XXX firm, you got unemployment just like that.

Social assistance plays a similar role in helping workers determine the point at which they want to quit. For some, like Sylvia, they will remain at a call centre job until nearing a crisis point before considering social assistance. Sylvia used this alternative in bargaining with her employer, *"... I was burnt out. I told them, 'Either give me two weeks leave or take me off the campaign or I quit.' And I didn't care that I would have to go on welfare at that point because I was cracking up really. ... They gave me a new campaign. I*

don't think they wanted to lose me." For others, call centre work can be a flexible way to earn additional income within welfare guidelines. Marco explains the effects of the changing welfare structure in Ontario in his call centre workplace, *"People are interested in working at [X firm] to score 250 dollars. After that they are not interested to work. The first 250 dollars they are working for, let's say, eight dollars an hour, and for every other hour, they are only receiving two dollars, so they are not interested to work more."*

Easy to be Hired, Hard to get Fired?

It was pretty much a guaranteed position. – Candice, Winnipeg

Companies can easily take other tele-marketing employees away with better wages. – Sandra, Winnipeg

Staffing situations is always like he [manager] wouldn't turn anyone away unless it was a really crappy interview. - Anthony, Winnipeg

Tele-marketing, today there is probably 75-100 postings in the University of Toronto career centre. - Ben, Toronto

Call centre jobs are easy to get. By most reports, firms are constantly looking for new staff. Shingo describes the situation at his call centre where he was hired immediately. *"The lady just took me into her office and gave me a quick 15 or 20 minute interview, and then she was like, 'When can you start?' The group when I came in, there were six or seven of us. By the end of the week, there were only two of us left. I guess it is not for everyone."* Many people looking for employment refuse to consider call centre work. Firms will de-emphasize the telephone aspects of the job in order to recruit applicants. This is often done in advertisements, as described by Serene in Toronto, *"... some people do not like applying for tele-marketing jobs. Sometimes I tell them I can't because I have other things to do. You have to tell me specifically what it is because I can't just go to highway 7 or highway 14 for a job that I'm not sure. Then they say, 'Oh, there might be a possibility that you might do tele-marketing.'"*

Many former telephone agents are very negative about call centre work and refuse to consider new positions. Donald describes people being negative about the experience because they resigned or had low sales, *"Who is going to be positive about that? For the most part it is a negative thing."* Melissa describes herself as burnt out on phones, *"The thought of tethering myself to another desk, to be stuck there for eight hours, only being able to move within a ten foot radius, for eight hours doing the same thing every 90 seconds. It is monotonous ... looking at a computer screen, talking to nameless voices."* Maia describes the shift work hours as socially isolating.

It just sucked the life out of me. I was just so miserable. I worked from 5:00 to 11:00, so I couldn't even talk to my family because when I got home from

work, they were all going to bed. [I did telephone work] for one month only. I couldn't do any more. It was like a black period in my life. The turnover is completely crazy. There were a couple of people who had been working for two years, and they were like lifers.

Labour shortages in the call centre sector can be generalized, but is also context specific and more severe in some locations. Anthony describes the opening of a field centre in Minneapolis compared to Winnipeg by a Canadian market research firm; *"it was the opposite [of Winnipeg] because there was like less than one percent unemployment in Minneapolis. You can basically get fired and go to 100 other places and get hired the same day without even having a resume because it is so bad ... We ended up closing that office."* Several workers in Winnipeg spoke of a bonus system for signing up new employees (Anthony; Candice; Sylvia; Sandra; Paul). Donald explains that he was recruited through a general call to high schools in Winnipeg, *"Just to lure people in. ... And they called a couple of high schools around the city."*

Labour shortages sometimes mean improvements in working conditions. According to interviews, call centre jobs may pay higher salaries or offer better work conditions due to labour shortages. Donald explains how competition for workers alters the dynamics of his technical support job; *"We lost a couple [of] people. And then they had to revamp their pay scale because the tech support people and a lot of other people were underpaid as compared to the rest, and then they were starting to lose people, and then they realized. ... Usually if people leave, it is because they have been enticed to go to another centre."* Donald describes how recruiters from new call centres will entice workers from existing firms, *"Another company opened up a centre and started trying to steal the employees. It was kind of funny because they had people standing outside the building asking, 'So how long have you been working for [firm X]? Well we're opening up a centre, maybe you would [be interested]?'"* In Winnipeg, Paul explains that on a lunch break he went across the street and submitted a resume at another firm *"because they offered more money"*.

Large numbers of call centre workers quit their jobs. Jacqueline in Winnipeg explains that she quit three times before her resignation was accepted: *"They didn't really let me quit either. I told them, 'I quit.' Then I had to go back and pick up some stuff, and they are like, 'So you want to work today?' I'm like, 'No'. It happened about three times. They were in denial. ... their turnover rate is 70 percent."* Marco in Toronto tells a similar story of few firings; *"No-one was actually fired. In two and a half years, maybe two or three people, but they were really bold. ... We have good data on that [turnover]. People are staying there an average of two months, two and a half. Lots of people may just come and stay there for a day or two and give up."*

Firings are often political acts, such as employer responses to threats like theft, rumours of unionization, or other forms of resistance. For example, Helen tells how an elderly colleague was fired for fraud. Workers were often described as having a careless response to being fired. In Winnipeg, Sandra describes how several colleagues were fired

after less than two months of work, *"No warning. Just come to the office - 'You are canned, sorry.'* And then it is like, *'Okay, it is off to the next call centre.'* And the attitude was just like, *'Well!'"* Dramatic narratives of firings were related to worker burnout. There were also firms who immediately fired employees who could not meet a set quota, however, at careful reading of the interview data, such firings occur infrequently. One firm in Winnipeg fired rapidly, and Shingo and Christopher recounted two reports of similar firing practices by Toronto firms through industry rumours.

Economic development planners assist firms in gaining access to new workers. This social construction of economies is exemplified at a call centre convention in Moncton, described by Ellen, *"I came up for the convention and I found out about all these companies. You could apply and have your name entered into a database. Any new call centres that were opening in Moncton, or any existing call centres that were looking for people in the future could go to this database and get names."* Her name was called by a temporary staffing agency for work soon after.

Missed Work

Many workers choose to remain at call centre jobs, but on their own terms. These terms, which I call 'resistance tactics', negotiate the rules and regulations which govern call centre work. Missed work is one highly effective tactic, judged by the frequency of its use. Simon points out the flexibility. Casual work allows him to complete only 15 shifts in eight months of a tele-marketing job he does not enjoy: *"I haven't bothered to go in the past few months. ... I get really restless if I'm sitting down for that long. I get jittery."* Lana misses work by refusing valuable overtime hours, as detailed below.

Text Box 4. Choosing to Remain at a 'Bad Job'

Lana is a 22-year-old call centre worker in New Brunswick who has chosen to remain at a call centre job she does not enjoy. She describes the shame she would feel before her family at being unemployed. She resists her call centre job by putting forth limited effort, refusing overtime hours, and seeking a year's leave without pay:

Like the stress level is way just way too high, but that is the kind of job it is. You can't help it. If you can't handle the stress, quit. ... I'm not going to bust my butt anymore. I know that is not a good attitude. They are asking people to work overtime. They come up to my desk, and I just say, 'No, I am not working a minute of overtime.' I asked for a year leave without pay. Like to look for another job, but just to have this as a cushion if it didn't work out. They said no. I'm at the end of my rope; I need the time off. ... I was so angry I thought I would say something that I would regret. ... Why can't I just quit? I'd love to just quit; it is not that easy though. Just because if I went home to my folks' house, they would be like, 'You are not working?' ... You know people are very curious. ... They are going to think, 'She can't handle that when she is 22, she is not going to handle life when she is 50' ... My parents will not support this decision ... because I have a history of making really bad decisions. ... They never ever came out and said it, but I got the vibes. Anyway I knew they would not support me quitting my job.

Careless Employees

Another technique for negotiating a 'bad job' is to become careless while performing the work. Sylvia in Winnipeg explains a careless attitude at her tele-marketing workplace, *"the people were not really serious about doing the work. That was one reason for the high turnover because the students didn't really care. They come in, and a lot of them have this attitude. Not all of them, but a lot of them did. They had the attitude about their work. It was this 'I don't care' attitude type thing."*

Carelessness to call centre work is further displayed in how people quit jobs in this sector. It is often a straightforward walk out the door. In Toronto, Ann describes her careless attitude to leaving a commission-based tele-marketing job, *"Every time someone would make a sale, they would gong this gong. It was awful, and in the background they had this really awful music from Q100.7 which is the hard rock station in Toronto. You are trying to be professional on this phone and it was not paid work. I was on commission, nothing else, so I lasted three hours. As of noon, I left. I thought it was ridiculous and I left. Then I got another job and that was fine."* Christopher describes his cousin's use of tele-marketing jobs for some extra money. She would quit call centre work after a couple of weeks and say, *"I can't take this job anymore."*

Pain and Danger

For some workers, negotiating the job market can be a painful and traumatic experience. There are psychological aspects at work, which are strong for many people. Phyllis ended up crying in an unemployment insurance line-up feeling out of control, *"I was just so frustrated because of the things that were happening and I could not change it."*

Jacqueline explains she just could not handle tele-marketing work any more. Lana was *"at the end of her rope."* Sylvia explains her moods changed dramatically while she was working on a particularly difficult hard-sales tele-marketing campaign. Once she changed campaigns, taking a fifty percent pay cut, she felt much better, *"I was cracking up ... my old friends ... everybody said as soon as I got off that campaign, there was just a change in me, totally back to normal."* Paul had a particularly traumatic experience being fired from his call centre job from a nervous breakdown, *"One day after about four hours on this long distance campaign. I started crying, and they asked if I was all right, and I said no. ... After about a month, they said I could come back to work on the phones or I could resign from the company ... With our wonderful U.I. regulations, if you resign, you can't collect a dime. So I was stuck. I went back. I lasted less than a week. I was under a doctor's care for a while for anxiety and depression. They had me on some medication."*

Yet for other workers who leave jobs, while also difficult, the move is made with defiance. Camilia and Fred have pursued cash settlements, through formal and informal avenues. For Camilia in Toronto, quitting her call centre job meant using social assistance to pay her rent. She describes this job, done for one month, as *"terrible"*. She was paid on a commission basis and made no money, *"I told them I didn't want to work there ... I said I want to get paid. My rent is due. I went to the president of the company, and he said that he couldn't pay me anything. I was desperate. So, I said to them the next day that I was leaving. ... Then I spent more time out of work and went on social assistance because I couldn't find anything. I hate being on social assistance because it is terrible, but what could I do?"* Next time Cynthia sued the call centre firm for back wages, and was awaiting the court decision when we spoke. Fred, in New Brunswick, also claimed money from a former call centre employer, through an informal settlement. He describes a process where the firm just stopped paying their people. According to Fred, the limits to which employees would remain depended on the level of trust and faith, *"I mean I know a woman that was there that had gone ninety hours, and was still thinking they were going to pay her. I mean eventually after a week had gone by, and I did not get a paycheque, [I spoke with the owner] ... He made me sign a waiver that his wife scribbled down very quickly. Basically that, 'This takes care of you. And you hereby swear you will not approach the media, the press, etc.' ... I mean I didn't want to cause any trouble for the man. ... And you know he seemed rather alarmed. ... I arrived at a settlement with a company I was with. And part of the settlement through their firm was that I could not discuss the case or anything surrounding the case."*

Are cash settlements the norm for politically dangerous workers in this sector? Shawna explains that the people she knows who have been fired from her call centre were given

packages and asked to sign a waiver "to silence them." She wonders if this is the standard or condoned by the labour board as a practice by firms, "You have to wonder? I do not like secrets. You have to wonder what it is they are scared of. What are they doing wrong?" Randy recounts that he was paid two weeks severance pay with several colleagues, rather than having to work the final two weeks.

Text Box 5. A Politically Dangerous Tele-marketer: How Lisa Got Her Paycheque

In Toronto, a teenaged tele-marketer named Lisa explains how her involvement with an anti-poverty non-governmental organization made her former employer nervous. This narrative of obtaining an outstanding paycheque both depicts the extremes some employers will pursue to evade payment of wages, and the ultimate inability of the firm to succeed in appropriating wages. Lisa received her payment within three weeks.

On Thursday I had taken my friends from the O.C.A.P. (Ontario Coalition Against Poverty), and we went to get my cheque, and they would not give it to us. The cops came because the people inside the call centre thought we were going to kill their employer so eight cop cars came from every direction on Yonge Street and Eglinton, and sixteen cops came upstairs and realized that we were not killing them. There was something definitely fishy going on here. The cops sided with us after a while after hearing the story and after hearing that they were running an eighteen year old girl around for two days pay. I mean come on. Two days pay. ... It took me from June 17th to July 3rd to get my money. The night before I got it I got a threatening phone call saying that if I didn't keep my nose out of their business, and keep my mother's mouth shut and keep the O.C.A.P. away from their offices, that they didn't want to have to make a trip to our apartment because I was a really nice girl and they knew I would listen to them. And they said, 'We do know that you are at home alone.' I was home alone at the time. My mom had gone out twenty minutes earlier, and they said that we know you are home alone. I flipped. Although it was just a phone call. It is so easy to say that I could have said, 'Fuck off' and hung up the phone. But when you are eighteen and you are playing the who-are-you game with the guy on the phone, you know. He literally called himself Joe Blow, 'Just call me Joe Blow then if you need a name'. I went to bed that night and we locked all the doors. My mom had called the police and the fraud squad. They said that they were playing tit for tat. You pissed them off, and they want to get back at you.

C. BODILY APPEARANCES

I mean you walk down Broadway, and you come into our building and it's like the people sitting out front don't look like all the other people sitting outside all the other buildings - Randy, Winnipeg

In fact, they are stricter than most companies are. ... No jeans. - Sylvia, Winnipeg

If you go into your average phone room, I mean, it's an interesting cast of characters. Sometimes it is quite the motley crew. - Anthony, Winnipeg

We weren't allowed to go to the bathroom in the same hour that the Royal Ontario Museum [ROM] was closing because patrons of the ROM couldn't see us coming or going. - Lisa, Toronto

Call centre workers were frequently described as distinct in appearance from workers in adjoining urban spaces. Despite the context of a regulatory work environment, the dress codes enforced for workers at call centres are startling. This focus on appearance contradicts the effective invisibility of the worker to the client while conducting business over the telephone. The effects are recounted in narratives of workers focusing on gendered dress codes, sexual orientation implications, and choices to quit workplaces which focused negatively on appearances.

Professionally Gendered Bodies

The reasons for the enforcement of 'professional' dress codes in call centres are unclear. In this sector, 'professional' means many things to many people. Shawna illustrates the murkiness of call centre dress codes, *"Every once and a while you will get a call centre that cracks down on professional dress. It is almost hard to say which ones they are."* Anthony explains that as a supervisor he has enforced a dress code in the last few days, mainly because of pressure from his immediate supervisor, *"He has this code and it doesn't always get enforced."* Randy in Winnipeg thinks firms felt certain styles of dress improved psychological work factors, *"They figure that the dress code more related to your feeling and to your professionalism and your professionalism will relate over the phone."* Economic reasons cited by workers relate to office tower dress codes for the employees of all tenants, presumably to maintain a 'professional' environment in the property. Candice explains, *"It is a business building. There are lawyers on certain floors."* Apparently, casually dressed employees could also create 'bad images'. For example, the Royal Ontario Museum would minimize the view of call centre workers from patrons as expressed above. Similarly, in Winnipeg Jacqueline explains that dress codes would change when client visits were anticipated.

What is the most desirable appearance in a call centre? Candice explains the general guidelines for her tele-marketing job, *"Business Monday to Thursday and casual Friday, but there are still limits on professional Friday."* Generally speaking, a tie and collar for men, whereas skirt lengths are important for women. No visible tattoos. Piercing should only be visible for women, in the ears, except for traditional 'ethnic' wearers. Hair should be a natural looking colour, at a gender-specific length. Sylvia explains that the local call centre firm she works at in Winnipeg is stricter regarding appearances of workers than the multinational firm where she was formerly employed: *"there is one fellow who had some sort of a tattoo. It wasn't a huge tattoo completely all over, and he had worn a short-sleeved shirt on casual day, and he always wears long-sleeved shirts, and he was talked to about it, and it wasn't a huge dragon or anything, it was just a tattoo, so that's what I mean that they are stricter [than other call centres she had worked at]."* Jacqueline also details the changeable nature of the dress code at her call centre firm, *"used to be that it wasn't a big deal which was another big plus when I worked there because I looked a lot different, and I had body piercings and pink hair and all that sort of stuff, but then they changed it that you have to have professional-casual, no visible piercings, no visible tattoos and hair colour that is in the normal hair colour spectrum."* Interviewer: *So you had to get rid of your piercings?* - *Well, I just didn't wear them to work."*

'Professional' dress codes enforced at call centres in Winnipeg carry strong gender subtexts. Inherent in such dress would be the maintenance of gender norms. Alternative styles, often unisex, are discouraged by such a dress code. Despite such discouragement, research participants were a stylish group, and many did not adhere to traditional gender stereotypes: some used cosmetics, dyed their hair, had piercings and tattoos, and wore long hair. Ruth Rubinstein argues that clothes matter in her analysis of *clothing semiotics* (Rubinstein 1995). Clothing directs and informs public behavior, "Like words, clothing images become significant only when they are used in a specific social context. Images may function as signs that convey a single, relatively clear-cut meaning, or as symbols that have multiple meaning and connotations or associations" (Rubinstein 1995: 7). Rubinstein provides historical examples of gender-specificity in dress. I argue that this historical phenomenon is followed in modern call centres.

Narratives indicate that men at call centres were expected to display a 'professional' appearance more than women. *"Our dress code was really sexist,"* explains Randy, *"like in reverse in that the men's dress code was so strict. There was very little room for anything where women could technically get away with coming to work in a pair of tights and a big T-shirt."* Sylvia also illustrates the gendered nature of call centre dress codes, *"they're stricter than most companies are ... women can't wear open toes shoes - your skirt can't be more than two inches above your knee ... The only difference is the men don't have to wear a tie on Fridays."* Sandra notes that dress codes focused much more on male workers, *"I think for men it is more uniform what professional is."* The main asset given from call centre work for Donald is *"a good wardrobe"* and *"silk ties"*.

Hetero-normativity can be implicated in the enforcement of gender here. That is, a notion of compulsory heterosexuality (Rich 1980) is enforced through a dress code, according to several accounts. Sylvia explains that workers with earrings would not be hired by her call centre, *"they would never hire anyone who was openly gay, but I know that there are a couple of them who are gay. ...They won't hire a man who wears an earring in his ear."* Randy's workplace would hire people with 'alternative appearances', but was perceived to be stricter with such staff: *"I mean you had people there with every colour hair, piercings wherever so they were fairly lenient that way, but they were certainly not easy on those people though. Those were the people that they watched more closely, I find."*

The imperative for strict monitoring of gender here could be related to the 'real' presence of gay, lesbian and bisexual workers at Winnipeg call centres. The word 'alternative' was often used by workers here to describe themselves and colleagues. I further base an 'alternative' workplace on workers' descriptions of visible signifiers such as tattoos, hair "outside of the normal spectrum of hair colours", or piercings.

Text Box 6. Queer Places: Call Centres in Winnipeg

Of fifteen workers who participated in Winnipeg interviews, five people identified as gay, lesbian or bisexual. Most of the fifteen tele-service workers would nod in agreement when asked if they had many gay, lesbian and bisexual colleagues.

They have a lot of gay and or lesbian or bisexual employees, maybe higher than most other industries, and it might have to do with the fact that it comes off as a service industry as well and that is a stereotypical, if nothing else, that people tend to be working in ... talking about street youth or people that, well, in general, and this is not necessarily sexuality related but in terms of appearance related, people that can't, appearance-wise, get jobs in many other places. - Randy, Winnipeg

I've also noticed that about 80 percent of the males that do work there are homosexual. - Candice, Winnipeg

I just notice it, that there are more gay men in this kind of working environment. - Allison

A lot of the gay men I know look a bit more extreme than regular people, and working in a call centre, your looks, your appearance, doesn't matter a great deal so they can be who they want to be and wear what they want to wear and it doesn't affect their job. No one sees them. - Christopher, Winnipeg.

Why are gay, lesbian and bisexual workers present in large numbers at Winnipeg call centres? Perhaps because the privacy afforded by call centre workplaces is complementary to a 'coming-out' period (Woods 1993). There is also the possibility that gay, lesbian and bisexual youth accept low wage work as a result of societal heterosexism. Christopher explains that gay youth may be less

confident due to homophobia, or want a job that enhances privacy. He compares straight young men and gay and bisexual young men on the job market, *"because they've been accepted as straight men their whole lives, so they have that confidence to get all of the jobs ... You're going to look for a job that is a little more obscure ... that you can go to and the people that you deal with don't see you. They don't really know anything about you until you're comfortable with yourself I suppose."*

A geographic understanding is also possible, as the downtown location of most Winnipeg call centres is near existing 'gay ghettos' (LeVay and Nonas 1995). "I think it's all location, location, location," explains Sandra. She further illustrates this point; *"Osborne Village is where there tends to be the majority of the gay community. I think that would have a lot to do with it."*

A Point of Clarification: Performativity, not Performance

Why might appearances be such a focus at a call centre? How are benefits towards firm goals of profit and productivity derived from appearances of employees who provide tele-service? I find a structural argument focused on economic factors is too limited to explain this phenomenon, and turn instead to the cultural approach developed by Judith Butler (1993). Performativity is a series of replicated acts, which are seen as natural. The dramatic qualities gain a certain inevitability due to the compulsory nature of performativity: Butler's possibilities for change and transformation are found in a failure to repeat parodic repetitions of gender. Power must constantly be repeated, claims Butler, and where it is not being repeated exists subversion. Thus, the 'alternative' appearances of tele-workers is a site of subversion where, *"...the contentious practices of 'queerness' enacts performativity as citationality for the purposes of resignifying the abjection of homosexuality into defiance and legitimacy"* (Butler 1993).

A more familiar argument on 'performances' of service workers is one posited by Erving Goffman. I would like to briefly explain Butler's theory of performativity in contrast to the Goffman-esque notion of performance, which has been a popular approach to theorizing service work. Frequent approaches towards understanding service work builds on Goffman's analogy to theatrical performance in daily work encounters (Goffman 1959). This tradition suggests that service sector labour is best understood as a performance with an explicit script, governing speech forms and dress. Butler's theory of performativity differs from Goffman in two areas. First, due to her anti-foundationalism, or lack of a stable self; secondly, due to her approach to power which builds on that of Foucault.

That Butler and Goffman are two contrasting approaches is confirmed by Nicky Gregson and Gillian Rose (1999). They agree with Butler that performance must be subsumed within and connected to performativity, that is to the repetitive practices which produce and subvert discourse and knowledge. As explained by Gregson and Rose,

“performativity then, involves the saturation of performances and performers with power, with particular subject positions” (Gregson and Rose 1999: 4). Possibilities for disruption and subversion exist in failing to repeat typical performances.

I concur with Gregson and Rose that the Goffman tradition of performance lacks the anti-foundationalism of Butler. Goffman assumes that a more authentic, subconscious human self lies beneath the skin of the service worker. According to Gregson and Rose, “behind Goffman’s analyses of interaction then, lies an active, prior, conscious and performing self” (Gregson and Rose, 1). It is too simple to claim a Goffmanesque argument, where an alienated self can be liberated through a better workplace and work culture. If this dominant vision is true, then change should simply be a struggle over the enforcement of fair dress code policies. I argue that this is not the case, that gender and dress codes go deeper than this. How can we be sure that we are not confusing Goffman’s ‘performance’ with Butler’s ‘performativity’? First is Butler’s claim that gender norms are naturalized through repetition, and that subversion occurs through making these normalized assumptions visible. Second is her diffuse notion of power, stemming from Foucault. Note that in the context of this call centre case study, Butler would likely encourage a focus on the actions of worker in both claims. Her interest does not lie in understanding the problems and challenges workers face, but rather the opportunities and resources such workers may call upon.

I find Butler particularly helpful for analyzing resistance at call centres, because she locates power for transformations of social systems strongly with workers. Also, she sees subversion in the everyday refusals to perform heterosexuality and gender norms, particularly significant for this sector. This way of understanding gendered dress codes provides an immediate opportunity for change in the interplay between workers, managers and supervisors. For example, workers can actively subvert the enforcement of ‘professional’ dress in their call centres, reducing productivity through time spent discussing and enforcing dress codes. Workers can use dress codes in strategies of subversion. ‘Professionalism’ must be exactly articulated to the staff - made explicit as Ellen explains via disruptions to motivational circles at her call centre, “*We got around in a circle every time before we started our shift ... And there was always this big debate about is tomorrow casual day or dress-up day ...on dress up day, you couldn’t wear blue jeans, and they had certain little rules like you couldn’t wear sandals without socks so it seemed like every time before we started the shift, there were always these people asking – all these young kids – asking all these silly questions. ... And I was like, come on! Let’s just get going.*”

Looking Good, Feeling Good?

Worker turnover can increase when managers apply pressure regarding appearance. Presumably, the productivity goals of managers and firms are limited by this practice of workers. Anthony plans to quit his supervisory position as he feels his goals for mobility in the firm are limited by upper management attitudes towards his appearance, *"my aspirations are not to be with the company for very much longer ... I had applied for a variety of positions and been turned down and told that I wasn't qualified. ... And I got the impression that it was basically because I had long hair and did not conform to any kind of appearance standards that are somewhat backhandedly enforced in the sense that they hire their own."* Sandra also explains that the strengthened enforcement of a dress code contributed to her quitting her job, *"I just didn't like it anymore, and I was having problems with some of the supervisors there. ... Before that [a strict dress code], it wasn't such a big deal which was another big plus when I worked there, because I looked a lot different."*

Several telephone agents prefer working in 'unprofessional' call centres. Jan explains that she found working for a large bank *"tiresome"* due to the dress code and focus on presentation. She explains that everyone had *"the same look"*, and that she felt awkward and awful, *"Even when they left, they didn't even say goodbye ... I felt like the second person after the cleaning lady on the floor."* She is looking forward to working in a "looser" atmosphere at a University call centre. Tariq commends the loose atmosphere at the call centre he worked for, which he enjoyed for some time, *"it was like a party. We would work, and then we'd party, and then we'd work some more. ... After 7:00 you were even allowed to walk in there in t-shirts, shorts and sandals. We'd recline our chairs and put our feet up on the counters and almost made it a second home."*

Many workers would voluntarily contribute to the 'professional' environment at work by wearing 'professional' clothing, but they often indicated a preference in choice of attire. An ideal situation, described in several interviews, was where they could choose their own appearance. Ben explains that many people come to his evening job for the Toronto Star well dressed from their day job. Cynthia explains that while she likes to dress up and get into that frame of thinking, she enjoys flexibility in attire. Jan found dressing for work at her call centre job to be stressful, where she has to think carefully about *"nice"* shirts and skirts for work.

D. UNIONS

I don't want to be like Norma Rae and raising a fuss, but ... - Louise, Toronto

Unions are a key component in transforming call centre work as understood by those who prioritize collective resistance. Stories of unions in the tele-service sector are recounted in this section. Some call centres are unionized, others are not. Limited research on union activity in call centres does not allow any more specific claim than this.⁷ The scarcity of strong union activity in this sector provides an important justification for my individualized resistance approach. What follows is discussion of empowerment, fearful firms, a case study of union failure, and the relationship between knowledge and power.

Rosa explains the process of establishing a union in her Toronto call centre. The initial catalyst for unionization was related to an act of resistance to managerial practices, as Rosa explains, "*You had no idea whether you would be working that day or not, whether you could pay your rent that month or not. People who work in tele-marketing depend on every single dollar that is coming in. They are there because they are desperate ... So one man stood up and said ... that it was terrible. ... He stood up and said, 'this has got to stop! You are playing with people's lives.'* ... So I went round to him and told him, '*It is incredible what you did.*'" The next day a small group discussed organizing a union, and got cards to sign up employees over the next two weeks, "*I went home and made up a petition, the next morning we got people to sign it. ... That is when this man, two others and myself started to talk about a union... You just get cards. You get these little white cards, the law has actually changed. We had to get 55 percent signed up. We had about 70 percent within two weeks.*"

These stories vary from union success such as Rosa describes, to the more ambiguous story told by Lisa. She has chosen to "*move on*", while recognizing the transgression of labour law. Lisa has made the popular choice of the tele-service worker, based on the numbers of stories people told of leaving their jobs, compared to the fewer stories of workers organizing call centre unions:

Lisa: *I worked there 89 days. Just under my three months because once you've worked there for three months you got put into the union, and they fired me just before my 90th day, so around 89 days.*

Interviewer: *So that was pretty clearly calculated to keep you out of the union?*

Lisa: *Yeah.*

Interviewer: *Did you think about complaining about that, or did you just move on?*

Lisa: *I just moved on.*

⁷ I remain unsure of the status of unions at call centres in Canada. According to key informant interviews, it was clear that most outbound lower paying call centres were not unionized. However, many inbound call centre workers were unionized; as such, it is difficult to assess the nature of unions in this sector.

Empowerment

Lisa believes that unions empower young workers, *"I am one of those teenagers that thinks being affiliated with a union at a young age and sort of taking over from the older union bosses ... showing [young people] that there is an alternative to accepting bad labour practices from your boss."* She feels a union will save the company money in the long run, because people will seek expensive compensation for neck, back and wrist injuries if they work in unhealthy conditions.

Another account from a unionized agent explains that reduced productivity is an effect of the relaxed work environment. Shingo worked at a unionized call centre and believes lower productivity was related to unions, *"I've heard stories about other places where if you don't fill the quota, you are fired on the spot. At this place [call centre], they were really relaxed because they were unionized, and maybe a bit too relaxed."* Despite this misgiving, he still supports unions in call centres, *"I definitely think that unionized positions do help in this industry."* Shingo also claims that work performance similarly suffers when workers are crying at the day's end because they have missed their quota.

The union dues are discussed in another account from a unionized agent. Lana does not see direct benefits from her union dues. She pays about 50 dollars per month in dues and hopes to never use them. *"I hope to never go on strike."* As a postal worker in the call centre, she worked during strikes by workers in other unions and describes this time as *"blissful"*. As a result of the reduced workload, she played solitaire, and took new training.

Scary Unions, Fearful Firms

The fear of unions provides an incentive for employers to treat employees well, according to worker narratives. Lisa explains that her call centre offered benefits to their employees because they threatened to bring a union in. Anthony, a supervisor in Winnipeg similarly explains, *"I would take more preventative measures because if you do not want things like unions for example. There have been some union scares [in other research sectors] of the company."* Employers told Phyllis they never want to hear the word 'union' around. Shawna was implicated in trying to form a union within the call centre. She thinks the company was scared, *"I do not know why they were afraid."* She explains that one telephone agent was fired because her husband was *"in on the whole union deal"*, and that part of the reason she was fired was the fear that she was going to unionize the company. Before being fired, Melissa wishes that she had discussed unionization more vocally at her former call centre, *"It certainly would avoid any problems with 'home earlies' [reduced shift lengths announced during a shift]."*

Text Box 7. Union Failure in Toronto

A Christian tele-marketing firm in Toronto was the site of a sordid union battle. Camilia and Helen discussed their experiences working throughout this time. When I spoke with them in separate interviews, they were involved with hearings at the Toronto labour board for 200,000 dollars with seven colleagues.

Camilia explains her experiences in joining the union and being fired by the firm as a type of betrayal, *"I joined the union ... I didn't know about it at first, but then as I saw what the company was like, I agreed with it. ... I received this letter in the mail saying that I was no longer needed there by one of the other supervisors ... They said I sounded bored."* After she was fired, she responded with an angry letter, *"It was a two or three page letter ... they say that they are religious, I said, 'Dear Christians, you are not acting like it. ... you are a disgrace.' ... but when the case started I noticed that they used my letter as part of their complaint against me. Anyway, I said my opinion."*

Helen's story of forming a union begins as one of empowerment. The call centre was organized over six shifts, and every worker was consulted, including supervisors. One unsupportive colleague was told last. Helen explains her reasoning, *"I insisted that is what a union is. It is everyone together."* This final colleague sent an e-mail to the manager immediately, who promptly began calling people in for questioning. After the second round of questions, the union representative arrived and said, *"I understand that you have some labour problems here that your staff need some help in resolving."* The vice president responded, *"No, I am very sorry. You are terribly mistaken."* The guy from the union explained that half the employees have joined the union, and he is applying for a vote at the Ontario Labour Relations Board. Helen now questions this approach, *"Which from what I understand now, is rather bizarre for someone to go and tell management that you are applying for a vote. Usually you file the application at the board, and you let the board tell them. Somehow he screwed up the board application so you are supposed to have a vote in five days. In fact, until Mike Harris [premier or Ontario] got in, you just had to have 55 percent sign cards, but this was a new thing having this vote so it gives management five days to mobilize. Because of him filing the papers the wrong way, they actually had twelve days, but we won by a two to one margin."*

Things went badly immediately after the vote to become a bargaining unit. Workers' shifts were canceled and supervisors were demoted. The employers enforced rules closely, sending disciplinary memos and firing for lateness. People were quitting. Bargaining meetings occurred infrequently. Helen lost faith in the union, particularly when the representative missed meetings and was not corresponding closely with labour board officers. She feels now that this union is a decoy, *"posing as a union"*. *"If they can get away with it, they walk away, if not they stay in places to prevent the C.A.W. [Canadian Auto Workers Union] or the Teamsters from coming in."* Her colleagues were also disappointed with their choice of union; *"within a short time they wanted the Teamsters. They wanted the steel workers. They wanted the C.A.W."*

Ultimately Helen was fired, and paid a five thousand dollar settlement. The employer claimed, *"this is to assist you in finding other employment."* She thinks they hoped she would leave the other applicants at this point. Helen continued to represent the workers before the Ontario Labour Board who responded positively: *"After hearing Helen, this is a complaint that needs to be heard."* At the time of our interview, the hearings remained in progress. Helen presented records of this process, and various media reports, to us.

Knowledge and Power: Limited Information for Workers

Good advice was important in navigating good and bad jobs. Public servants could be valuable advisors for workers. Phyllis explains that she would seek advice from an unemployment insurance public servant and find out about the different laws. However, all bureaucrats and agencies do not accept this role. For example, the labour board in Ontario does not see their role as offering such advice, according to Helen. In light of her weak union explained in the above case study, the labour relations board would not assist Helen and her colleagues by providing advice. Helen was told over the phone that, *"the whole board would be sued"* related to a past legal problem when poor advice was given. Information kits are mailed out now.

Little information is available to workers on labour regulations and union practices in this sector. Shawna posed the question to me in our interview indicating her interest in knowing standards for her job, *"Are there unions? ... There are? We do not have one. So there are set standards for call centres then? I'd like to know what those are. I'd like to know the rules being violated ... because I suspect there are many ... I'd like to poke [rattle] a few people."*

E. TECHNOLOGY AND SABOTAGE

How do workers negotiate the new information technology systems at call centres? These systems first appeared overpowering through the descriptions by workers. I set aside startling narratives of domination, control, discomfort and surveillance, in order to encourage further stories of resistance related to technology emerge. Most of these narratives highlight the point that human beings - workers, supervisors and managers - are very much in control of new information technologies used in the call centre sector.

Breaks from the Phones

The overwhelming narratives of domination and monitoring of workers via new information technologies is only partially interrupted by using a resistance lens. However, it is clear that workers test the limits of statistical environments that scrupulously document time taken for rests and breaks.

Ultimately, norms are set via electronic surveillance in the call centre sector. Workers responded by producing expected results. Randy explains that about eighty percent of his time is supposed to be spent talking on the phone, *"If you lingered afterwards [a call], then that was more of a worry. ... It would set it up so you would have a certain percentage, I think it was something like 80 percent, was the amount of time during your log on time in the computer that was for actual talking."* In a related story, Cindy explains how breaks are measured at her call centre workplace, *"A-U-X. That is when we are on our break, we put our phone in A-U-X. So that means we are still logged in and getting paid for it, but we are not taking any calls. So that is only supposed to be 30 minutes a day for an eight hour shift. [Laughs] If you have to go to the bathroom then you can, or if you have to run and do this, just for a second, then you can put your phone in A-U-X and do that. But they calculate it all and they keep track of it and when they do the average for the year when your raise comes around, as long as it is within the target, then you are all right."* Cindy feels aware of this target, although she does not specify the exact time measurement.

Lana also explains a sense of control over additional break time, knowing that it is measured via computer. She does not see this additional time as jeopardizing her job, *"When I get up to take a two minute breather, I have to write it down. Like, 'Stressful call, I took a break.' We're not allowed to, but I got to do my job, right? People will call me and I'll get all shaky."* Shawna explains that she must get off line to prevent calls from coming through, *"The only way you can prevent a call from coming to you is by getting off line."*

Workers' paycheques are calculated according to the minutes worked, thus workers keep close track of how this is recorded in strategizing timeliness. Sandra explains how closely she monitors her timing, *"It is a fine system as long as you are really careful, but if your are in three minutes late, and you leave one minute early - that is four minutes rounded off to fifteen. ... You have to be either on the phones or if you are not actually on a call, then your phone has to be logged onto a different split, and that time accounted for by your manager."* Jacqueline also takes great care in this; *"You have to be careful though to check your hours ... they try to dock you as much as possible. Like if your swipe-in time isn't as much as your log-in time on your computer, they will dock you that amount."*

Breaks would be taken concurrently with telephone service interactions. This was a frequently debated strategy. Reading, knitting, drawing, crossword puzzles, and computer games were some relaxation exercises workers would utilize while continuing work. Policies regarding this were enforced at varying levels. Some firms would ignore set policies. Camilia explains how she likes to read at work, *"My department is pretty easy ... they don't mind that you're reading. We are not supposed to though, and the policy is we are not supposed to be reading."* Sylvia's workplace allows crossword puzzles, but not books; *"They do not allow you to read anything on the floor. They think you are going to be distracted. If they only knew! So I used to do crossword puzzles. ... I love reading, and I would have loved it if they would have allowed me to bring a book*

between calls." Lana explains stricter rule enforcement as she was reprimanded for playing computer games while conducting business; *"I got in trouble for playing solitaire. ... She [a manager] comes up and says, 'How do you find time to work with your customers and play solitaire.' I just looked at her. I was like, 'What?' I was on the line with a customer. ... a couple of minutes between the calls."* Similarly, a colleague of Candice in Winnipeg does origami all day.

Pretend Calls, Low Sales and Bad Service

Despite firms' uses of technologies to improve productivity, workers continue to set their own pace, wherever possible. Marco would regulate his work performance with no apparent consequence, *"For me, five hours means around two hundred phone calls, and in that two hundred calls, I can make between 15 completes to zero completes. I really don't care. They are not going to fire me because of that."* Not all firms use the most up to date automatic dialing technologies. Relatedly, Melinda explains that she ultimately regulated the speed of her calls, despite computer monitoring, *"If you want to make money, you dial fast, and if you do not, you can sit there. You are supposed to dial all the time, and they monitor you so they know if you are not dialing."* Randy furthers this point of an intentionally poor performance occurring within a workplace where all technologies were directed towards increasing sales. Technological incentives ultimately rested on his will to heed firm objectives: *"I wasn't necessarily going out of my way to make the sales."* Randy's firm paid commission for sales on some contracts, and in others, paid an hourly wage.

The old-fashioned technique of using workers who are friendly with management to regulate colleagues continues to exist. Phyllis would monitor her colleagues on behalf of management, despite a highly technological monitoring system. Phyllis explains, *"I get along well with management. I also let management know when certain things were happening. Which I also believe I am not a rat, but if you work for a company ... Somebody could answer the phone, and just hang up, 'I don't want to talk to them.' Like if she is sitting there all day doing things like that and getting no sales."*

Bad service can continue to be a tactic of displeased workers in a highly technological environment. Lana explains the meaning of good service being related to effectiveness, *"At the end of this call, did you help this customer?"* Donald explains the intangibles of providing such technical support help, *"Often in order to keep the customer with the company you can not be referring them - 'Well that has to do with Windows, you will have to call Microsoft.' I mean, usually they will just say, 'Fine, cancel my account.' Not for any rational reason, but just they want help."*

Passing the Buck

You actually learned a skill of how to pass the work, the buck, onto somebody else any way you can. - Benoit, Toronto

The often contradictory goals of good customer service and fast calls lead to many inbound call centre workers 'passing the buck'. Benoit explains strategizing with his colleagues on how to do this most effectively, *"everybody would just know that this was a problem call, a lot of work involved. If there is any way I can get rid of it, I would do it. You can pass it on to not necessarily anybody on your call centre staff, but you can pass it on to another department. That was something that everybody learned to do. ... Just pick up the extension list and say, 'Can you hold please?' And just dial up and get rid of it. ... You could just transfer the call, and that person would have no idea who had sent that call to them."* Bonnie explained a similar, albeit unintended, phenomenon of 'passing the buck' to another department in the insurance firm she worked for. When the call centre lines were busy, people would call other firm telephone lines, *"not only are our immediate supervisors upset, but the managers are upset and the people in group health are upset because then they start getting the calls."*

Alliances with Supervisors

Much technological strategizing would rely on cooperation among workers and supervisors or management. Benoit found supervisors to be important allies, *"They could be there to help you in a situation ... It is fun actually, to meet the people in administration and use them as a tool, and they would use you because they would have problems as well."*

Managers controlled the work pace, but were frequently themselves evaluated by off-site upper management. The goals of supervisors could often contradict firm interests. For example, Phyllis explains that Cathy, her manager, had the ability and responsibility to slow down the pace of telephone records dialed by the automatic dialer, *"They should have slowed the records down. All they had to do, Cathy had to do that day, she was in charge of the floor, was go in and slow down the records [pace of telephone calls being received at the call centre]. Just slow it down."* Phyllis had a nervous breakdown that afternoon, a hot day where the air conditioning and women's washrooms were broken.

The technological focus allows off-site upper managers to assess workplace conditions from afar. This can lead to both antagonism and cooperation between supervisors and workers. This point is brought forward from experiences in one New Brunswick call centre, with Ottawa headquarters. Lana explains that the head office in Ottawa presses supervisors to improve statistical indicators, *"They [supervisors] have to answer to their managers. They are pressing us to get our statistics right meanwhile making us feel that they could care less about us. I had such a bad headache the other day, I had to go into*

the employee's couch and lay down for a while, and it was just like they could care less." Yet Lana explains how quotas are not pushed to such a high level by supervisors to result in layoffs. *"It is really weird. They can not be too high or they would lay people off."*

Alliances with supervisors could break down. The contradiction between customer service goals and supervisory success via statistical indicators are explained by Benoit, *"they have a problem, and they want it solved immediately. Your supervisor doesn't want you to solve it immediately. Your supervisor wants you to take as many calls as possible during that seven hour shift. The goal is to cut somebody off and not have anybody on that line for more than a minute."*

Privacy

One call centre worker would refuse to ask personal questions, despite their appearance on a survey. Jan explains that she would refuse to ask for financial information from callers, *"If it is the Royal Bank, they want me to ask a person information about their accounts, and about their money, and how much money they have. I don't ask that question, and for that I do not think I am a good tele-marketer. I am quite embarrassed or I do not feel comfortable to ask people these questions."*

Another worker explained his concerns over the frequency of faulty financial transactions at his mutual funds firm. Benoit explains his unease with such problem calls; *"They would call in and say, 'How can I trust you people?' And you really couldn't answer them. I mean you are not supposed to say, 'Yeah, I understand. I totally agree with you.'"*

Alternatively, call centre workers are trusted to assess identities of callers, in order to achieve secure and private transactions. Brenda explained the impossibility of doing this, and explains that she has knowingly released confidential information, *"I had that where a person called twice for information about her husband, and I told her, 'I cannot discuss it under Freedom of Information.' About an hour later, she called. She could have gotten another operator, but she got me again, and she identified herself as the man, and I asked all the questions I possibly could. She had all the information. I cannot say – 'no, I cannot give you that.'"* Brenda also outlined the interest on the part of several companies to get information about her clients, involved in the education system. Ann also explains the merits of improved confidentiality for educational services provided by her agency. Yet funders are interested in collecting identities of anonymous callers, *"One of their [independent evaluation] recommendations was that we take down names, but again it goes back to that privacy issue."*

Conclusions

This chapter describes significant independent and collective resistances of call centre workers. Examples of independent tactics might include theft or arguing with a supervisor over playing solitaire during a slow transaction. Similar individual actions may rapidly transform into collective action, which involve a group of actors. An example of this is the anger expressed towards their call centre firm by workers at Lana's workplace during inappropriate customer service training. However, a solid distinction between the collective and independent is difficult to assess. The relationships between independent and collective resistance appear to be mutually constitutive, or interconnected. As explained by Lisa, the tears of one woman whose back was sore from a cold room temperature initiated discussion among her colleagues. Such discussion led to a work stoppage, in tandem with Lisa providing some legal knowledge to legitimize such action. The action of the individual was necessary before that of the group in this case.

In many instances, resistances appear to be primarily controlled by the individual, yet significantly impact the collective. Quitting is generally an independent action, as described in interviews, yet is a reason for labour unavailability in several cities in this sector. The ease of finding work in this sector, particularly outbound jobs, is related to the fact that few people are willing to do call centre work. In another example, 'passing the buck', as described by Benoit, would divert problem calls to other departments. This strategy was discussed among workers while socializing, and ultimately took on collective legitimacy.

In other cases, a route to empowerment develops primarily through collective resistance. For example, firms are wary of the collective power of unions and organizations. A case study here illustrates how Lisa, a teenaged tele-marketer in Toronto, was considered politically dangerous when linked with an anti-poverty organization. In contrast with Lisa's success in claiming outstanding wages, Melissa was fired due to rumours she was involved with a union. In hindsight, she wishes she had discussed unions more vocally at her former call centre. Melissa felt that the result of management fear from a potential union would have improved the bargaining power of workers in negotiating better work conditions.

In other cases, independent resistances never become collective action. Such acts by individuals often appear most 'deviant'. There is a secretive aspect to such acts, and arguably, the very 'speech act' (Butler 1997) of writing and describing independent resistance acts immediately transforms them into a collective action. Some examples of such independent resistances are: theft; providing bad service, pretending to make genuine phone calls (for outbound agents); and blackmail. Examples of these are provided throughout this chapter, although details are the least available in this area of resistance. Several workers would brush over these discussions, and others would speak in reference to the experiences of a friend. For example, Helen spoke of a colleague fired

for theft, although she expressed disbelief in the truth of the charge. Randy spoke sheepishly of providing bad service after he began deeply disliking his call centre job, yet he simultaneously expressed overall pride in a job well done. Serene refers to colleagues who would hang up as soon as a telephone was answered and mark it as 'no answer'. Elements of blackmail can be found in Fred's behavior. He negotiated several cash settlements from former employers; and in one such case, Fred describes the firm owner as "*scared*".

The lesson in this resistance analysis of tele-service agents is ultimately the context-specific nature of how power is negotiated in everyday work practices. Understanding the blends of individual and collective resistances can assist us in understanding what James C. Scott calls "the acquisition of guts" (Scott 1990). As we better understand how empowerment and resistance operate in work settings, we can learn how to use these insights for thoughtful policy research. The concluding chapter details further directions.

CHAPTER 5 - CONCLUSIONS

Recognizing Ambiguity

What I have done in this thesis is choose trends in the diverse accounts 39 people tell about the world. What I have not done is reach for an unmediated true representation of 'the world itself'. If there is one important qualitative policy message from this thesis, it is this: context and micro-political engagement in policy making is vital, since social reality resists generalization. However, despite such benefits of case study research, explorations into the micro-politics of work continues to reflect the image of the researcher rather than any higher truth. The author vision of the data frequently relies on stereotypes and generalizations in qualitative research in a way similar to quantitative methods. In recognizing such research and writing practices, I advocate qualitative approaches that tease out and recognize the stereotypes we rely upon.

Ideas and theories matter profoundly for professional practice. Shifts in analysis among different theories *can* produce unique results. As a case in point, *resistance*, as understood by James C. Scott and postmodern social theorists, has provided a framework for this thesis; whereas previous analysis of this data was influenced more by a political economy perspective. Very different 'truths' emerge in each study, which makes a coherent policy position across contexts impossible. Yet some generalization is required for research to be useful for diverse practitioners.

Ultimately, decisions made in this sector are educated guesses. At this point, knowledge of call centre work is weak, as such, this thesis contributes new details into the general nature of this sector. Several recent research conclusions in the call centre literature are contradictory, although a clear research area is emerging around gender and regional economic development issues. In fact, one year ago I argued that many workers were fired from call centre jobs related to productivity goals (Buchanan and Koch-Schulte 2000), yet after new analysis in this thesis I find that interview participants often had either quit of their own accord, or were targeted in political firings. Such contradiction makes knowledge about call centre work ambiguous.

This thesis directly explores how resistance can be analyzed in qualitative policy research. *Resistance* is defined as: *the interruption of rituals and performances of power*. By qualitative policy research, I refer to anthropological methods of organizing narratives for public policy development derived from ethnographic techniques. Qualitative methods generally prioritize the micro-analysis of particular situations in developing macro-policies. The problem here concerns a persistent focus in qualitative policy writing upon constraints and problems. This thesis engages issues of resistance at the individual worker level.

The call centre industry is an excellent case study of the modern service sector as it exists at the intersection of economic and technological change in a highly gendered

environment. Few men are telephone agents, whereas two thirds of call centre workers are women. Call centre business is rapidly expanding, and while little public information is available on their size in Canada, the United States call center industry employs about 4.5 million people, representing 3.7 percent of the labor force (Caporusso 1997: 5). Limited research on this sector in Canada is produced in consultant reports; one such report claims that the telecommunication services market is a 2.5 billion dollar industry in Canada (Azzarello 1998).

This concluding chapter responds to three research questions posed at the outset of this thesis. The first question is the foundation of this thesis regarding resistance in call centres. The next inquiry is process-oriented assessing the relevance of qualitative methods themselves. The final question concerns the professional practitioners who work with economic development ideas on an everyday basis.

How do worker resistances influence this sector?

Why does qualitative research matter?

How can economic development planners use these ideas?

Replies to these research questions organize the remainder of this chapter. First, narratives of telephone agents suggest that significant acts of resistance occur on a non-collective basis. Second, qualitative policy research creates opportunities to interrupt generalizations about service work; however, knowledge created by qualitative research remains embedded in the politics of the researchers and institutions where the research is produced. Qualitative policy research should be read accordingly. Third, if the call centre sector is profoundly shaped by worker resistance, it is worthwhile for professional economic development planners to consider these acts in policy development.

Non-Collective Resistances Shape the Call Centre Sector

I conclude that non-collective worker resistances play a significant role in shaping this sector, in tandem with political economy factors such as: local and multinational firm management acts, state regulations, social safety nets, and union practices. I found greater influence than I anticipated in the narratives of individual resistance by workers. While an earlier policy report incorporating the same interview data provides an overview of call centre work via narratives of workers, this thesis has undertaken a less ambitious task; rather, to sketch the role of resistance by workers; an area I felt I had underutilized in the first study.

Five areas of analysis related to worker resistance tactics are pursued. The findings clearly indicate the importance of such actions by workers for understanding how power is negotiated at the call centre workplace. Such rich and detailed descriptions of call

centre work can *only* be found through qualitative methods, such as key informant interviews. The findings in the five topic areas are as follows:

- A. *Grumbling and complaining* are significant forms of communication among workers, supervisors and managers.
- B. The act of *quitting* shapes the call centre labour market, wages and benefits.
- C. The *body* is an important site in determining how 'professional' this work is. Workers' choices in appearance every day are significant.
- D. The idea of the *union* is important in worker strategies, and is considered a real threat by firms. Workers are aware of this dynamic and use it to influence situations.
- E. Workers manage *new technologies*, in addition to being managed by them.

Qualitative Policy Research Can Both Shatter Stereotypes And Reproduce Researcher Interests

What are the policy implications of taking the micro-politics of low-wage workers seriously? It has been long acknowledged by researchers, that qualitative research methods are not an 'epistemological magic bullet'⁸. Although qualitative policy research has the possibility of interrupting generalizations about 'the low wage worker', this opportunity is not a given. Researcher strategies can easily limit narratives to those that fit neatly into a theoretical framework or stereotype. The politics of the researcher is thus vital to the results of qualitative research. While we cannot free ourselves from preferred ways of knowing, we can consciously play with ideas and theories to shed new light on policy issues. Our ability to play with ideas, and the ability of institutions to enable us to do so, is what makes qualitative research so appealing. Data can be interpreted to say many different things, as illustrated by personal reflections on my policy writing and comparisons between similar call centre studies. Research conclusions are ever-dependent on the interactions between the individual researcher(s) and the institutional contexts in which research is produced.

Qualitative research matters because it has the potential to break up research homogeneity. This 'break up' can take hold in a data analysis of diverse narratives more easily than that of numerical data. Will we use qualitative research opportunities to shatter stereotypes? It is ultimately up to the researcher, based on their context, to make such decisions.

I set out to fracture stereotypical characterizations of low wage workers as *weak* and *marginal* in this thesis. The ideas of James C. Scott, Aihwa Ong, Michel Foucault and Judith Butler, among others, lead me in pursuit of this goal. I concentrate on call centre workers in their most powerful moments in the hopes of both understanding and inciting

⁸ I thank Rajeev Patel for this wording.

further instances of resistance and power. Some of the most powerful statements I have collected in this thesis are repeated here:

Text Box 8. Empowerment Narratives

Empowerment is at the heart of this thesis, and provides the core of my conceptual framework of resistance. This concluding chapter allows me to combine selected narratives from different sections of this thesis to be considered as a whole.

I am not intimidated by anybody at work just because they are on a big power trip, and I can't stand that. ... I won't let people talk down to me ... I respect them but I am not scared of them at all. - Lana, New Brunswick

I wear it [her firing] like a badge of honour, because you know, the thinking people get laid off, and I was one of the thinking people. - Melissa, New Brunswick

I was on commission, nothing else, so I lasted three hours. As of noon, I left. I thought it was ridiculous and I left. Then I got another job and that was fine. - Ann, Toronto

I didn't want to cause any trouble for the man ... and you know he seemed rather alarmed ... I arrived at a settlement with a company I was with. - Fred, New Brunswick

The cops sided with us [Ontario Coalition Against Poverty] after a while after hearing the story and after hearing that they [the firm] were running an eighteen year old girl around for two days pay. I mean, come on! - Lisa, Toronto

We would work, and then we'd party, and then we'd work some more. After seven o'clock you were even allowed to walk in there in t-shirts, shorts and sandals. We'd recline our chairs and put our feet up on the counters and almost made it a second home. - Tariq, Toronto

One man stood up and said ... that it was terrible ... He stood up and said this has got to stop - you are playing with people's lives. ... That is when this man, two others, and myself started to talk about a union. ... We had 70 percent within two weeks. Rosa, Toronto

For me five hours means about two hundred phone calls, and in two hundred calls, I can make between 15 completes to zero completes. I really don't care. They are not going to fire me because of that [productivity]. - Marco, Toronto

You actually learned a skill of how to pass the work, the buck, onto somebody else. - Benoit, Toronto

Resistance Matters for Economic Development Planners

I have recently been reminded of my initial response after a meeting I had with James C. Scott in the autumn of 1999. I was interested by Scott's inattention to how his ideas could be used by policy writers. On this topic of practice, the most relevant policy aspect of this study illustrates that a lack of union movement and collective action does not show that all are happy with call centre work. In fact, I demonstrate that non-collective resistances shape the commercial practices of firms. These stories of resistance provide a persuasive moral and pragmatic argument towards participatory policy analyses that involve the perspectives of workers.

A danger of this research is in giving away the most effective secrets of service workers to management. By advocating a resistance analysis in public policy, firm managers will be able to access this information more readily than the primarily non-unionized workers. Such gaps in research distribution were well-described in this thesis. What are the ultimate effects in creating new ways of thinking about low-wage service work? The effect I am most intending is for workers to be considered important players in economic development of this sector, and for their actions and opinions to be taken seriously. I assume that altruism is not relevant for economic development processes here, and that if this had been the case, then workers and unions would have been included in economic development planning long ago. I seek two effects for this research. First that unions be recognized as a powerful *symbolic* ally for service workers. That is, the *idea* of unions is powerful, even when they are not 'ominously' present at a call centre workplace. Second, even in the absence of unions, workers will continue to shape their jobs to suit their wants and needs.

Irrefutably, worker resistance shapes the call centre sector, as I have demonstrated in this case study. Professional economic development planners should consider such tactics in policy development to advance better policies. Understanding resistance in policy terms is an emerging area in economic development research. Traditionally, resistance has been discussed in primarily collective terms through a political economy approach focused on unions. This thesis finds important independent resistance tactics employed by call centre workers.

Policy silences related to non-collective resistance could be cultural, economic, and discursive. A research culture may have established a set of stereotypes about *marginal* workers - the dispossessed victims of a post-industrial economy. As with many stereotypes - some truth does exist - but it is far more interesting to look beyond what we expect to see. The morally 'bad' worker is possibly an unpopular concept in the post-industrial research world of the academic left. Academic researchers may prefer to portray low wage workers in a consistently positive and kind light.

Economic factors may limit resistance as a frequent topic of policy research. Arguably, discussion of theft and sabotage, which could increase occurrences, are better left unsaid. Many have argued that the funders of research, be it government or the private sector, do not share the interests of workers, and that at times these interests are mutually exclusive. Others have argued that the very identity, and related middle-class visions, of most researchers greatly influences the structure and findings of research.

Perhaps we merely do not have the words to describe positions and tactics of individual workers. Ravi Kanbur (1999), director of the upcoming *World Development Report 2000/1*, suggests researchers need new grammar and language to bridge the gap of thinking about qualitative and quantitative inconsistencies. He asks policy researchers to consider how we can discuss our qualitative analyses with finance ministers. Kanbur raises the issue of agency, and calls for a focus on the resources people call upon, rather than a focus on problems.

What is the role of the intellectual here anyhow? Regarding the importance of words and language, call centre workers have demonstrated keen interest here in relevant knowledge that can shed further light on their situations, yet such knowledge produced by intellectuals is frequently unavailable to participants and their cohort. As quoted earlier in this thesis, Shawna is interested in research which informs how she negotiates her call centre work, "*Are there unions? ... There are? We do not have one. So there are set standards for call centres then? I would like to know what those are.*" Neither academic nor professional institutions necessarily see this as a central part of our job description. Many interview participants themselves were interested in reading research results, but due to publication practices, this requires unique researcher efforts to orchestrate. Obviously dissemination of results to direct participants is merely the tip of the iceberg for increasing democratization of communication and knowledge. As explained in several narratives, workers would generally seek out information on policies, social safety nets and opportunities from their colleagues and friendly bureaucrats. Information on unions was particularly scarce. I recommend greater attention in disseminating academic and policy research findings widely.

Few ideas contained in this thesis are new. We have been struggling with strategies of empowerment and social change for some time preceding issues of qualitative methods, and will inevitably continue to struggle with such big questions. As such, I end with the timeless words of Karl Marx calling for a greater focus on practice that leads to action.

Social life is essentially *practical*. All mysteries which lead theory to mysticism find their rational solution in human practice and in the comprehension of this practice. ... The philosophers have *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point however is to *change* it (Marx 1845: 84).

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