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Recognition, Intersubjectivity and Service Work: Labour Conflicts in Call Centres

Ursula Holtgrewe

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The paper explores the concept of recognition as a link between organisations, work and subjectivity.¹ Looking at relations of recognition offers a focus for analysing the multiple ways subjects are being addressed, (re-)positioned or indeed constituted by organisations and a way to approach the dialectics of control and resistance. This is especially promising for such service work in which interaction and thus intersubjectivity is an integral part of the labour process even though the work may be routinised. The paper is first going to sketch the theoretical place of recognition as a concept, then to analyse the relations of recognition in service work and finally explore empirical examples of labour conflicts in call centres in terms of struggles for recognition. It will be shown how both the inherent contradictions of recognition and the multiplicity of relations of recognition shape labour conflicts in a symbolic and normative way.

1. Recognition at work

When studying work experiences and labour relations one inevitably comes across workers' subtle notions of respect and disrespect which do not simply translate into material or political interests. Such findings point to the concept of recognition which is able to link such empirical evidence to social theory. Recognition is understood here in the sense of Honneth (1994) as a basic medium of social integration and of the constitution of subjectivity (cf. Holtgrewe et al. 2000). It places intersubjectivity at the very beginning of the development of subjectivity. Humans constitute their identities in an intersubjective way, through recognising

¹ The paper was originally presented at the 18th International Labour Process Conference at Strathclyde University, Glasgow in 2000. It is based on work the author is doing with Stephan Voswinkel and Gabriele Wagner on recognition at work and on a study on call centres in Germany which is funded by Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft („Call centres in between neo-taylorism and customer orientation“). Preparatory research for that project was done with Lars Gundtoft; presently the project team consists of Sandra Arzbächer, Christian Kerst, Julia Althoff, Hanns-Georg Brose and the author. Thanks are due to all these colleagues and our anonymous interviewees as well as to Carsten Dose, Johanna Hofbauer, Hannes Oberlindober, Karen Shire, Jörg Sydow and an anonymous reviewer who all have contributed ideas and advice. Faults and imprecisions are the author's responsibility.

one another, both seeing oneself through others' eyes and in turn taking the role of the other, anticipating others' reaction and acting upon these anticipations (Mead 1934/1972). These processes are both cognitive and evaluative. According to Mead, they have an evolutionary logic: Individuals learn to internalise wider and wider perspectives and from there come to integrate a "generalised other", meaning society as a whole.

However, recognition is not just about conformity to others' or society's expectations. On the one hand, it involves subjects and their identities in the reproduction of social norms and values. On the other, it is inherently conflictual and dynamic (Honneth 1994: 30 ff. with reference to Hegel). Since individuals interact in multiple and diverse relationships and continuously discover new dimensions of their individuality (Mead's creative and dynamic I), they potentially find themselves restricted and misrecognised by existing norms and social expectations: Thus they come to *claim* recognition for their own identities. Such claims to recognition have a critical element of contrafactual anticipation and social change: a community is anticipated and through struggles for recognition may eventually be built up which will honour these claims. Through this tension existing relations of recognition carry misrecognition with them. Self-respect is not simply generated by being recognised by others for conforming to their expectations, and often requires a certain amount of non-conformism – for which in turn recognition is sought and claimed.² Thus, in relations of recognition the dimensions of normality and distinction, equality and difference are interrelated (Mead 1934/1972; Todorov 1996: 98).

I am arguing therefore that the exploration of relations of recognition at work along its different aspects may offer some insight into the tensions, possibilities and restrictions of the formation of subjectivity in and through work organisations and into the ways in which subjugation and claims to self-realisation appear to be inextricably linked.

The sphere of work in modern societies is central for experiences of agency and solidarity. Yet a look at the real world of work in modern societies makes it clear that recognition of and in work, central as it is to modern subjects, is only available through specific misrecognitions. Neither work organisations nor interactions going on within them are primarily concerned with the self-realisation of the organisation's members. Instead, organisations pursue purposes of their own and induce members to co-operate by specific rewards. In return for getting paid,

² Yet non-conformism and distinction are based on notions of normality: If a person is going to stick out and be recognised for being special, she must have established that she is perfectly competent to act in the normal manner – that it is choice and not inability which leads her to act in a different way (Goffman 1990; Voswinkel/Lücking 1996).

members open up “zones of indifference” (Barnard 1938), i. e. a sphere of action in which they (need to) accept authority and infringements of their autonomy and their needs and wishes. On the other hand, work offers recognition as well: of competence, accountability, solidarity and being needed. Thus, work organisations institutionalise relations of both recognition and misrecognition. Organisational divisions of labour, labour contracts, relations of control and co-ordination all recognise workers’ agency and discretion in order both to restrict and use it. Pay and appraisal systems, skill formation, routines of performance evaluation and control thus institutionalise relations of recognition. On the level of work, of course, recognition is communicated through everyday interactions with co-workers, superiors and subordinates and also customers. Not just praise and blame, but also asking for advice and giving help, modifying and resisting organisational standards of performance and behaviour are ways in which relations of recognition are played out on the shop floor, with or against its organisational institutionalisations.

Thus, since misrecognitions experienced at work carry recognition with them as well and vice versa, subjects cannot *really* remain indifferent to the demands of their work roles. They draw upon these organisational mechanisms of recognition to form and transform work-related identities, and it is only through these subjective actualisations that such mechanisms can be said to work. And in being addressed by the mechanisms of recognition and relating to them, subjects of course do not just reproduce and/or possibly transform their own identities but also the system of valuation they are based on. This is, how conformism is re/produced through subjective involvements and investments in ‘the way things are’.³

However, considering the multiple dimensions and inherent tensions of recognition, recognition does not wholly translate into just another subjugation-generating mechanism operated by its addressees (though it often is that as well). Relations of recognition at work are diversified through the different and often disparate claims that work organisation, co-workers, customers and the labour process make upon workers. Beyond the sphere of work, subjects are active in diverse social spheres with contradictory expectations and also diverse articulations of the dimensions of recognition. They experience diverse standards, interactions and relationships and need to make sense of that very diversity. In terms of recognition as well, “formation of the self of necessity exceeds what organisations require from their ‘subjective factor’” and therefore cannot simply be subsumed under organisational demands (Flecker/Hofbauer 1998: 113). Indeed, it is subjects’ diverse experiences and their ability to

³ Influencing these mechanisms of recognition and subjective involvement is what the managerial debates about commitment and “organisational citizenship” are about.

draw upon diverse relations of recognition that enables them to pursue struggles for recognition.

Voswinkel (1999; 2000a) argues that in the sphere of work, recognition for normalcy and for distinction translates into the central dimensions of appreciation and admiration. *Appreciation* is awarded for efforts and contributions, for ‘doing one’s job’ and *belonging* to an organisation. It connotes the normal, a sense of belonging and collectivity and is expressed e. g. in collective bargaining, status rights, and seniority norms. It is long-term and unconditional except for membership in the organisation. *Admiration* is awarded for *performance* and success, for the distinguished contribution and the extraordinary feat. It connotes distinction, individuality, excellence and prestige and is expressed in awards, incentives, appraisal systems, performance-related pay systems etc. Both are complementary in an unequal way. Appreciation addresses work which is often disregarded and is based on moral sentiments of gratitude. It may even be mobilised to compensate for lack of admiration (e. g. for menial work, hard work and the ‘bad jobs’ of caregiving, housework etc.). Cases in point are for instance low-level public sector jobs where traditionally job security, benefits etc. compensate the generally low prestige (Billerbeck 2000; Holtgrewe 2000). Admiration is linked closer to the market and may indeed mirror successful pursuit of interest. However, Biggart’s study of direct marketing organisations (1989) shows that extensive and ritualised admiration may also compensate for self-employed sales workers’ lack of access to secure and “normal” jobs. Not surprisingly, Voswinkel suggests that in organisations and indeed societies, which flexibilise themselves and orient themselves towards the market, recognition is increasingly tied to admiration of excellence and success. Conversely it is becoming difficult to claim recognition in the form of appreciation which is based on belonging (cf. Munro 1998).

2. Service and recognition

2.1 Service work and recognition

In service work and service organisations, the multiplicity of relations of recognition is especially crucial since interactions are an integral part of work itself. This paper focuses on such service work that is performed “on the frontline” (Frenkel et al. 1999), in direct interaction with customers.⁴ From an organisational perspective, it can be described as

⁴ This addresses both personal services and production-related services which involve customers in the production of the service.

'boundary work' (cf. Thompson 1967; Berger/Offe 1981; Tacke 1997) which consists in accommodating organisational outputs and customers' demands and translating one into the other. This suggests that standardisation of service work is limited since an organisation can only influence demands from the outside to a limited extent. Yet exercising these attempts at influence and getting the customer to co-operate with organisational routines is part of service work as well. Intersubjectivity is thus immediately at stake but relations of recognition multiply between workers, organisations and customers.

Service workers "on the frontline" are expected to represent or indeed "be" the organisation in relation to the customer and act on behalf of it. The organisation needs to maintain a reputation for being both competent and obliging. These ambiguities come together in the demands of frontline work and position frontline workers in a paradoxical way: To satisfy the customer they need to present themselves as willing servants and competent actors (and to balance both), to anticipate customers' needs and wants and respect their autonomy. To act on behalf of the organisation, they are to perform as obedient agents and proactive entrepreneurs. Since these relations of recognition operate between persons, frontline workers need to present themselves as competent, accountable and "unflappable" (Giddens 1990, p. 85) individuals in order to generate trust – and then to 'step back' and make their customers transfer that recognition and trust to the organisation.

For all these reasons, in frontline work relations of recognition take a particular and paradoxical shape. Considerable parts of service work in general (Offe 1984) are concerned with producing and maintaining normality and service workers are appreciated for guaranteeing an organisation's reliable and predictable performance consistent with customers' expectations. This entails limits on the recognition available for personal authenticity, particularity and uniqueness:

"There is a trade-off between the gain in personalization when one is treated as an individual and the loss in predictability as the guidance provided by role expectations dissolves" (Solomon et al. 1985: 107).

There is, however, a continuum of types of work. Gutek (1995) distinguishes service relationships and encounters. Relationships extend over time and share a history of repeated interactions. The application of knowledge and expertise in the interaction is seen to rest with the individual provider. (Quasi-)professional work or traditional banking are cases in point. Encounters are single interactions with different persons who offer standardised services. Here, expertise rests with the organisation as a whole and individual jobs are deskilled. Some

of the competencies and tasks are shifted on to the customer who needs to take them over and adapt her demands to what is on offer.

In terms of recognition, service *relationships* do offer more space for the recognition of uniqueness. Since this is limited to the relevant problem, precisely this point makes them vulnerable to disappointment and feelings of misrecognition. This is why professionals in interactions with clients tend to gloss over the part of their work, where their clients or patients are seen as cases to which codified knowledge is applied. *Encounters* tend to conveniently ignore claims to uniqueness, and routine standardising is performed on both the side of the service provider and the customer (cf. Leidner 1993; Voswinkel 2000b). In return, encounters offer the security that this particular need will be met in a predictable way. Beyond this, in the smooth handling of a service encounter, both sides recognise their respective competence and autonomy. Misrecognition is likely when the customer's problem does not lend itself readily to the organisation's standardised offers and the service worker's standardising efforts.

Thus, there is not a simple line to be drawn between skilled and professional service work on the one hand and unskilled jobs on the other, and indeed the recognition of relations of autonomy and dependency, of normality and special treatment is struggled over between organisations, customers and employees. Norms of "helping people" which translate into recognising their neediness and restoring autonomy are not restricted to personal services and care, but they are also effective in frontline work. Here, they conflict with organisational attempts to create standardised encounters and increase efficiency even though such norms and expectations may be a necessary prerequisite for co-operation in this standardisation.

2.2 Customer Orientation: Reorganising Recognition

In recent years, the "Cult(ure) of the customer" (Salaman/du Gay 1992) appears to have changed the standards and also the relations of recognition in service work. Organisations claim to reorganise themselves in order to be closer and more responsive to customers' wishes and expectations. They make up a nexus of company success, quality of service and the importance of individual employees' styles and ways of rendering that service. Customer orientation as a strategy of business process reengineering (Hammer/Champy 1995; Heskett et al. 1997) thus translates into the implementation of specialised units for customer relations such as call centres, and then into increased attention to service workers' performance of interactions with the customer under the heading of quality management (cf. Neuberger 1996;

Knights/McCabe 1998, 1999). Recognition thus circulates through mutual expectations in the hierarchic triangle of organisations, customers and service workers.

At first sight, customer orientation as it is presented to customers appears to recognise their autonomy in ways unknown before. It gives customers the right to raise their expectations and to have extended and more particular needs and wishes met by the organisation. Following the rhetoric addressed to employees, their discretion and responsibility is increased to entrepreneurial proportions as well so that “paid work and consumption are just different playing grounds for the same activity: different terrains upon which the enterprising self seeks to master, fulfil and better itself” (Salaman/du Gay 1992, p. 627). Scripted, predictable roles thus would be replaced by negotiations with a strong element of expressiveness. This would indeed suggest that recognition relations are being transformed in the direction of mutual admiration and respect for autonomy, while at the same time this autonomy is being de-differentiated across all social spheres to the image of the entrepreneur (du Gay 1996). However, the organisation controls and continuously evaluates whether workers have used their discretion in the “right” way.

Yet a perspective of recognition on the discourse of customer orientation reveals that there are rather more complex dialectics of control involved. Obviously, service workers’ celebrated empowerment immediately turns discretion into subservience to the customer’s needs and wishes, and what remains is extended responsibility. Indeed, ‘the’ customer is invoked as a figure of authority for the evaluation of workers’ performance (Korczynski 2001). Neuberger (1996) quotes a German motivation brochure, in which employees are exhorted to “continuously ask yourself: Did I think of my customer’s every need?” (p. 36) and to solve their problems before they have even been uttered.

However, customers’ autonomy is a mixed blessing as well. The customer is to be recognised as a free agent who is able to choose. On the other hand, organisational strategies of marketing and customer retention try to turn her into a dependent being who ideally foregoes her choice and depends on the organisation to have his/her needs satisfied. This contradiction again is processed in and through frontline work interactions. Organisations invoke and promise customer satisfaction, while frontline workers need to deliver and in addition interactively to shape customers’ expectations according to what they and the organisation are able to perform.

This analysis may indeed cast some doubt on the usefulness of recognition as a liberating concept. Yet the customer orientation discourse and the model of recognition relations it provides should not be overrated in their power to structure social realities (Fournier/Gray

1999), especially considering that actual interactions are the field where relations of recognition are played out. Here, customer orientation becomes a “contested terrain” (Gabriel/Lang 1995). Authors such as Taylor/Bain (1999); Knights/McCabe (1998); Korczynski et al. (1999); Taylor/Tyler (2000) have explored the recalcitrant redefinitions which service workers employ in order to defend their spaces of discretion and their work-related identities. Yet, in terms of recognition the question is whether workers struggling to appropriate service quality and customer orientation just try to conform to expectations and buy into the managerial discourse which undermines their own grounding for resistance (Knights/McCabe 1998). The following examples should support the view that as long as there is a diversity of lived experiences and relations of recognition, alternative discourses may reassert themselves.

3. Recognition Relations in Call Centre Work

3.1 Call Centres: Routinised Work by Not-Unskilled Employees

Call centres in the last few years have become exemplary of organisations’ attempts to standardise encounters with customers. In this form of work and organisation, standardisation of products and interactions is supported by information and communication technology while talking on the phone introduces a degree of flexibility and intersubjectivity into organisations’ interactions with customers. The contradictions of standardised frontline work, which is still expected to satisfy customers and recognise their needs and wishes can be investigated here and the concept of recognition relations between organisations, workers and customers may even help to explain some of the more puzzling research findings.⁵

To balance these contradictory demands, organisations rely on a particular workforce.⁶ Call centre agents across Europe are young, roughly two thirds are women and part time work is frequent. In Germany, half to two thirds are working part-time. Education here is fairly high with more than a third having completed higher secondary education (*Abitur*) or even university degrees, and especially students and skilled women returning to work are an

⁵ Our own project on call centre work has only started in April 2000. In general, there is very little research evidence on call centres in Germany yet (cf. D’Alessio/Oberbeck 1999; Gundtoft/Holtgrewe 2000 and Bittner et al. 2000 for an overview), and quantitative data chiefly come from call centre associations and consulting companies. I therefore present preliminary results from one case study and empirical evidence from British research literature (Taylor/Bain 2000).

⁶ For data see Bittner et al. (2000) for Germany, Belt et al. (1998) for the UK and the Netherlands; Bain/Taylor (1999) for Scotland.

attractive, “not-unskilled” part-time workforce (Gundtoft/Holtgrewe 2000). These groups have particular temporal needs and their skills and demands do not need to be fitted smoothly into the traditional employment relations and career patterns. In employing students, especially call centres with higher skill demands as in parts of the financial sector can profit from de-institutionalisation in the field of higher education (cf. Arzbächer et al. 2000). The length of university courses in Germany and their often fairly un-regulated character especially in the humanities give students the time and motivation to work during their studies. On the subjective side, a university education is frequently less a distinct phase in the lifecourse but an extended lifestyle in which studies, work and other commitments are pursued simultaneously, eventually leading to degrees and/or a regular career or not. Call centres thus draw on particular subjective dispositions to develop a certain employee *habitus* in between servility and professionalism through selection, training and control for which these employee groups seem suitable. Yet, both students and working mothers bring multiple commitments and social relations to the workplace which they may convert into claims to recognition. .

In interactions with customers, a considerable amount of the emotional labour performed is indeed about recognition. On the front line, workers are vulnerable to explicit disrespect by customers through complaints, sexual harassment, bad jokes and general rudeness. They are trained (and necessarily have to learn) to control the resulting emotions of shame and fury by various acting and framing techniques, to keep their cool and indeed not to feel them (Taylor 1998; Taylor/Tyler 2000, cf. Hochschild 1983). These techniques on one level suspend affective reactions and thus negate the appreciation of a person’s authenticity. In return, they may offer workers a way to go on interacting by recognising competent indifference and affective independence instead of vulnerability.

Recognition relations in call centre work – as in work in general - thus shift towards competence and indeed towards creating “indifference” at the expense of misrecognising physical and emotional needs. This happens while call centre agents’ position in the organisation and often the actual layout of their workplaces tends to undermine this positioning of subjectivity. This is summed up in the statement of an ex-Citibank works council member:

„The hierarchical structure of the enterprise made it always clear that on the one hand you are the lowest link in the chain and you were controlled and treated accordingly, on the other the message was that you are immediately responsible for everything that happens“ (my translation, U. H.).

This suggests that there is a gap between the capabilities that organisations demand and the contributions they recognise. To bridge this gap, they also draw on gender relations which naturalise the complex of subservience and competence (Holtgrewe 1997; Taylor/Tyler 2000). While Korczynski et al.'s interviewees found it „difficult for an individual to feel that the customer is the king while at the same time empathizing with the customer and feeling concern for their problems“ (1999: 22), women in male-dominated societies have been socialised into just this dialectic (Pringle 1989).

Yet selection and socialisation for such balancing acts are intertwined with routines of control which confer (mis)recognition relations between the organisation and workers. If we consider that recognition is often conferred through very routinised parts of interactions, the material design of call centre workplaces mirrors the contradictions in the demands of call centre work. In everyday phone calls, communication is framed by routines of dialling, ringing, answering the phone and hanging up. These routinised actions communicate elements of control over interactions, their beginning and end, which let a person be recognised as a competent, authentic, accountable and thus trustworthy interaction partner (Goffman 1990). In call centre work, often exactly these framing routines are rationalised and automated. Headsets f. i. link the technology directly to workers' bodies and senses, and dialling machines replace dialling and render incoming and outgoing calls indistinguishable. Thus, agents find themselves reduced to a “human interface” and yet are expected to present themselves as authentic human beings.

Yet the organisationally inculcated norms of both competence and customer orientation have a way of striking back: Workers insist on following a customer's problem through in spite of organisational attempts to keep calls short (Korczynski et al. 1999) and may even mobilise customers to complain about decreasing service standards (Knights/ McCabe 1998). If they are instructed to act naturally and in a personal style, they resist attempts to prescribe their style of interaction (Taylor 1998: 95 f.). In these instances, they appropriate the norms of customer orientation but redefine them in a sense of increased professionalism and authenticity in order to resist rationalisation. For frontline workers then the multiplication of recognition relations and dialectics within work has an enabling side. All in all, it appears that workers reconstruct recognition relations in a way which lets them mobilise more discretion and individuality than the organisation and technical layout of the work would suggest. Struggles for recognition thus appear to take place around “ownership” of the labour process in both a material and symbolic sense.

3.2 Explicit Recognition: Control and Evaluation

Not surprisingly, control and performance evaluation are particularly sensitive issues in terms of recognition. There has been some controversy over the consensual or conflictory character of control and coaching in call centre research (Frenkel et al. 1999; Taylor/Bain 2001), and indeed the findings are puzzling. Frenkel et al. (1999: 139 ff.) report that even though measurements of call-handling times, service levels etc. are detailed, actual supervision mostly occurred in a “facilitative” manner stressing coaching and improvement and was perceived in these terms by agents as well. Such controls acknowledge that the way the work is done actually makes a difference to the organisation. In our study, we find evidence for the same pattern: Bank 1⁷ is currently implementing a coaching system which simultaneously evaluates and trains workers against detailed quality criteria. Each agent is to be coached ten times per year with each session lasting 50 minutes and feedback given immediately. The results will be part of the pay-relevant performance appraisal as well. A quality manager reckons that employees will approve of the coaching system:

“They say: I’m good. I want to have that put down in writing. People, listen in, I want to show that I’m good” (Bank 1, QualM: 11).

Here, agents are expected to see evaluation under the perspective of self-improvement. Control through coaching is not just seen as a chance for organisational recognition of their competence. It recognises people as self-developing subjects as well and thus draws on the dynamics of identity formation (cf. Grey 1994; Newton 1996). According to this developmental norm, agents take over parts of training and quality management as well. Agents are put in charge of certain subjects for which they offer their colleagues training and “fresh-up” sessions, and informal advice by peers is encouraged. Trainers also are recruited from the ranks of agents with psychology or education courses or degrees. This kind of job enrichment recognises especially students’ extrafunctional skills or skills which they are currently learning. It also draws on a willingness to consider exams and evaluations as an integral part of skill formation and of personal development, which is shaped in university socialisation. The recruitment of students thus enables the organisation to

⁷ This banking call centre belongs to a large German bank and handles telephone requests for the banks' branches, operates a support hotline for online banking, and offers direct brokerage services by phone. It has more than 300 agents, three fifths of whom work part-time. Of the part-time agents, 40% are students or graduates. Here, interviews with management, agents and supervisors and a survey of agents' work demography and experience have been conducted.

mobilise the norms and disposition of (future) highly-skilled and professional workers in a less than professional field. Possibly, their expected conformity to the organisation's evaluation criteria is based on an anticipation of managerial roles: It is however supported by the organisation's own focus on the quality of output and service as opposed to quantity (cf. Taylor/Bain 2001).

However, agents' statements are more ambiguous. It appears that they distinguish between such performance measurements they feel they can influence themselves and those – such as call handling times – which depend on the dynamics of the interaction with the immediate customer. Here, they frequently feel measured on inappropriate and unfair terms. Taylor and Bain have found evidence that the implementation of control measurements such as sales targets can be rather conflictual as well. The imposition of strict call handling times which agents found to be unachievable led to the one-day strike in 37 British Telecom service centres on November 22nd, 1999 (2001: 41).⁸

This evidence suggests that performance criteria are seen as carrying misrecognition when they are contradictory in themselves or when agents perceive them to hinder their competent performance of their jobs. Hypothetically, agents accept or even embrace such performance criteria which are in line with their own perception of what is relevant in their jobs and with their own job-related identities. Changes in evaluation, for instance the introduction of “harder” measurements or a shift to sales targets then may upset relations of recognition. An extreme case in which management tried explicitly to use shame as a means to boost achievement of targets is reported by Taylor and Bain (2001). In an inbound financial call centre with highly pressurised workflows which involved sales as well, management and team leaders “had come up with this wonderful idea of making dunces' hats for Sales and Services Advisors which they were forced to wear if they did not make a sale within an hour's period” (union representative, quoted by Taylor/Bain 2001: 59). This escalation of the symbolic and affective side of underperformance, however, turned into a golden opportunity for the trade union. Until then, it had been deliberately excluded from the call centre and now it demonstrated competent representation of workers' symbolic interest by getting rid of the hats.

These cases suggest that recognition needs and wishes may indeed be mobilised to involve subjects into producing conformity. However, recognition creates its own dynamism. If

⁸ “The strike quickly led to an agreement with the company, in which BT pledged to develop a model of best practice for the call centre industry, to reduce its use of agency staff, to adopt a stress management programme and to revise staff performance criteria” (Bibby 2000: 13).

workers are recognised as competent, empathetic and self-developing individuals, an organisation's infringements of their discretion, a stepping up of sales targets or a tightening of control may all be experienced as disregard of existing 'moral economies' – all the more since the demands of the job are contradictory already.

3.3 Distinction, Professionalism and Style: The Citibank/Tekomedia Case

Such struggles within multiple relations of recognition may even transcend the arena of conflict, control and consensus in which they started. Indeed, in labour conflicts beyond the everyday this is essential. Organising labour actually means shaping a new community or organisation in which feelings of disrespect are made sense of, in which the situation is defined and claims are collectively established. This means that claims to recognition at work take a detour through a different sphere of action and even start by establishing that sphere of action. This will be explored through the events around the most intense call centre labour conflict in Germany so far which happened around the closure and centralisation of Citibank's call centre operations in Duisburg in late 1998 and early 1999.⁹

Citibank, now Citigroup's private banking operations, specialise in providing a standardised banking service worldwide, in self-service banking and also in tying banking to other services such as hire-purchase arrangements and loans arranged through retailers. Citibank pioneered telephone banking in Germany, opening the Bochum call centre in 1989 and another one in Duisburg. The Ruhr area was specifically chosen for its high density of universities, and students were recruited as a highly educated, yet cheap and by definition temporary workforce. Here, students' multiple commitments came into effect in a different way: Inadvertently, the particular students who were recruited had experience in student activism, left-wing politics and a diversity of artistic and political projects which at the time were still a presence at Bochum university. Though the call centre was established outside the collective agreements in the banking sector, soon a works council was demanded and established.¹⁰

⁹ This case study is based on interviews by the author and Lars Gundtoft with participants in the struggle, on observations of solidarity meetings and on an analysis of the press and the extensive internet documentation of the events. This is to be found under <http://www.labournet.de/call-op/home.html> and <http://www.citi-critic.de>, though the material is chiefly in German.

¹⁰ In Germany, the system of industrial relations works on two levels (cf. Weiss 1992; Visser/van Ruyseveldt 1996): On the plant/company level (above five employees), both unionised and non-unionised workers are represented by an elected works council with extensive information, consultation and co-determination rights. The law binds them to exercise these rights in the interest of the company.

Activists report a critical event with mythical traits as a starting point (cf. Girndt 1997): Citibank tried to charge roughly 50 Pfennig (15 p) more for cups of coffee. This was interpreted as the organisation's withdrawal of recognition of a very basic physical need: refreshment and stimulation are indispensable to the type of work in question so that a moral economy of appreciation was violated (cf. Moore 1978).

After the works council started work, soon other issues were at stake. From 1991 – 1997 they negotiated an increase in basic wages from 12 – 14 DM with pay rises according to the time worked in the company, 25 – 50% extra for work at nights and Saturdays, continued pay in case of sickness and – importantly for the student personnel – contracts could be interrupted for periods of practical training or exams. Thus, for a potentially marginal staff, they were not doing too badly.

Beside the material gains, works council activists reflected and indeed stylised their activities in political and cultural terms as well (Girndt 1997; Oberlindober 1999). Citibank was seen as not just exploiters but promoters of a universal service mentality extending to all social spheres. This self-positioning of the activists mirrors and reverses Citibank's global orientation and both extends and transforms the organisation's ascription of universal responsibility. Contrary to their world-view of global companies promoting global subservience, agents claimed a valuation of frontline service professionalism against the organisational disrespect for it. They thus extended their appropriation of service professionalism on the frontline to a distinctive role both in the organisation and in global struggles – extending relevant communities which can confer recognition in the process. The works council saw their resistant position both as contingent upon the novelty of the field of telebanking and as a resource of the Bochum site. We were thus told a quite macho story of mutual recognition between strong opponents:

Such councils are not mandatory, but elections can be called by three employees or a union with at least one member in the company.

Collective agreements over wage rates and working conditions for industries and regions are negotiated by the union(s) and respective employers' association. They may and increasingly do contain frameworks for company-specific regulations. Collective agreements formally apply only to their members. This is why companies may leave employers' associations or establish subsidiaries outside these associations in order to avoid the industry-wide agreements and negotiate company- or plant-specific ones. For industrial relations in call centres see d'Alessio/Oberbeck 1999 and Arzbächer et al. 2000.

“We, as the works council, always thought that as long as we take such a tough stance, nothing can happen to us, we’ll be scrapped as soon as we fail to keep up that toughness, and that’s what happened.” (ex-Citibank works council member)

Yet in 1998 the closure of the Bochum call centre was announced for 1999. Citibank planned to centralise all its call centre operations in a new subsidiary and in a new building in Duisburg in order to gain greater flexibility in personnel planning and to move all its call centre operations outside the collective agreements of the banking sector. Also, previous site-specific agreements would be cancelled and standards lowered. Both in Bochum and Duisburg (where previously the call centre service to retailers was based) a campaign was launched which culminated in a strike. On December 8th 1999, from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. call centre services were unavailable. In addition, a campaign network has been built involving the union, churches and local politicians and also the international federation of service unions FIET. This coalition calls for customers to boycott Citibank (<http://www.citi-critic.de>). Citibank retaliated by not extending temporary contracts for employees who had gone on strike, by redirecting operations to a call centre in Nordhorn (in the north of Germany) which had not been involved, and by terminating existing contracts upon the opening of the new call centre.¹¹ Later, workers who had not taken part in the strike were invited to reapply for employment in the new call centre. Negotiations with the works council otherwise concentrated on severance pay arrangements and soon went to the labour courts. Since works councils in Germany are not allowed to call a strike, they had to have their union’s support. The relationship with the German private services union (HBV which stands for trade, banking and insurance)¹² has not been uncontroversial, though. Call centre workers and activists in Bochum had been arguing that it was far too defensive and oriented chiefly towards the past of fairly comfortable “normal” 9 – 5 jobs which precisely were under attack. Yet they managed to double unionisation under the motto “If you don’t like your union, join it to change it”.

While the strike predictably resulted in agreements on severance pay for the terminated workers, the participants in the strike took the appropriation of service professionalism and

¹¹ This caused considerable indignation among the original call centre employees since at the same time Citibank was advertising jobs in newspapers.

¹² HBV is currently undergoing major changes. Following the structural changes brought about by new technology especially, it is currently uniting with the postal and telecommunications union (DPG), the printing and media union IG Medien, the public services and transport union (ÖTV) and its traditional white-collar rival DAG to form ver.di (= united services).

customer orientation one step further: They drew on their experience both of work at Citibank and of the protest and on the distinctive and avantgardist reputation they had gained within their trade union to invest their severance pay in the start-up of an enterprise of their own.¹³

This start-up business, Tekomedia (<http://www.tekomedia.de>) specialises in information, communication, campaigning and publicity services to non-profit and public sector organisations and employs 21 people (as of December 2000). The company intends to transform itself into a “Center for Intelligent Services” which offers consultancy to other workers’ initiatives against plant closures, promotes the internationalisation of unions and workers’ initiatives, offers high-quality service training and presents a model for a learning, non-hierarchical self-organisation.

Thus Tekomedia is less a start-up call centre than a network of projects with diverse co-operators which range from national unions and international union organisations (FIET especially), institutions of occupational training, Bochum university, consultancies and so on. While its self-presentation should be taken with a grain of salt, it further changes relations and arenas of recognition: Tekomedia converts political and organisational reputation into entrepreneurship, their supporters into potential customers and/or collaborators, symbolic into material ownership and transformation of the labour process.

During the protest, activists and participants draw on multiple experiences and subjectivities and keep challenging the institutions, routines and rights they are drawing on. The global and pioneering orientation of their employer is converted to global solidarity and responsibility against McDonaldisation, the union is joined with the intention to change it, an enterprise is formed with the intention to change capitalism. Beside the central role of multiple experiences and relations of recognition and the dynamic of continuously transcending *relevant communities*, there is a continuous transformation of the *dimensions of recognition*: If within Citibank, workers and their representatives managed to convert claims of *distinctive performance* and competence to status rights and *rights of belonging*, during the struggle around the closure they shifted the significant arena of recognition from the work organisation to the political and institutional field in which they had created a network of support. Currently, with their start-up business they are converting claims of belonging back into claims for distinctive competence and power – shifting their relevant activities to the arena of professionalised campaigning.

¹³ The financing of the company was carried by some 100 ex-Citibank workers investing at least DM 1.500 each.

4. Discussion

So far the case of left-wing students as call centre activists is – hopefully – not just exceptional and anecdotally interesting. Analysed through the perspective of recognition, it draws attention to the salience of differentiation and tension between relations and communities of recognition which in this case indeed starts a dynamic of its own.

First, it is worth noting that even for comparatively low-level service operatives, service quality, service professionalism and success can provide the identity and resistance-building functions of the traditional, production-based pride of workers and occupational communities. This suggests that even in telebanking, the continuously interactive character of the work and the everyday practice of customer orientation are not completely covered and subsumed by the organisational discourse about it and – more generally – that the shift of recognition relations from “belonging” to “performance” is not unidirectional.

Students and other part-time workers in call centres bring multiple social experiences and identities into the job. These shape subjectivities that can – in the case of students especially – be addressed by the rhetoric of empathy, self-development and universalism. On the other hand, diverse experiences both within work and outside sensitise these workforces to the lack of respect inherent in attempts at work reorganisation and standardisation. Finding themselves confronted with material and physical misrecognitions, they may organise around this contradiction.

The struggle against the closure of Citibank call centres has elements which are not really surprising for this kind of struggle. Plant closures present a very basic misrecognition of work. In the protests, the quality of work is proclaimed in the sense of producers’ pride, the ties of the plant to the community around it are politicised, and even customers are mobilised. Such protests have a specific regional tradition in the Ruhr area especially around the steel industry (Krupp at Duisburg-Rheinhausen in 1987/88 is memorable, cf. Jäger 1994).

Traditionally, this producers’ pride is firmly tied to claims of appreciation of the hard, masculine work which legitimises a sense of belonging to a community, of roots.

What distinguishes our case is that the protest has a more fluid and transformative character. It is not an established community that is threatened by and defended against a company’s flexibilisation strategies but explicitly a self-styled network of people with multiple options which turns out to be mobile enough to shift the relevant arenas of recognition. Belonging is thus “put on the move” (Munro 1998) in a resistant sense, and so is success. Communities are continuously opened up and their boundaries reflected and transcended. Not the logic of the

market itself, but the struggle to *unfold* the intersubjective possibilities of customer orientation and service quality is indeed opening up new possibilities of both action and reflection.

5. Conclusion

Both the everyday struggles around performance evaluation as self-improvement or control and the more spectacular events around Citibank show that discourses on professionalism and self-development cannot simply be subjugated to an organisation's definition of it: The perspective on recognition helps to explore how and why they may be reappropriated by service workers: if and because workers draw on multiple relations of recognition, on material and normative resources (cf. Flecker/Hofbauer 1998). Since recognition has different dimensions and disparate focal points, individuals in organising can actualise relations of recognition in multiple ways and creatively recombine them. They have – and in the process collectively create – some space for manoeuvring around the question which “other” partners in interaction and co-operation in what way are the “significant” ones to confer value and appreciation. It is therefore not unlikely that in a globalising service and knowledge economy, ‘new’ workforces will bring ‘new’ symbolic and normative claims and aspirations into the old labour conflicts over control and self-determination.

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Anerkennung, Intersubjektivität und Dienstleistungsarbeit: Arbeitskonflikte in Callcentern

Ursula Holtgrewe

Der Beitrag untersucht, wie Anerkennungsverhältnisse zwischen Unternehmen, Beschäftigten und Kunden die Dienstleistungsarbeit strukturieren. Anerkennung wird dabei als grundlegendes Medium sozialer Integration verstanden. Diese Perspektive ermöglicht es, den vielfältigen Weisen nachzugehen, wie Subjekte in Organisationen adressiert und positioniert werden, wie sie *commitments* mobilisieren, aber auch Widerstand leisten. Der Beitrag skizziert zunächst Anerkennung als theoretisches Konzept, analysiert dann die spezifischen Anerkennungsverhältnisse der Dienstleistungsarbeit im Kundenkontakt und untersucht schließlich Arbeitskonflikte in Callcentern in Begriffen von Kämpfen um Anerkennung. Deutlich wird, an welchen Punkten die spezifisch-widersprüchlichen Anforderungen der Dienstleistungsarbeit zwischen Standardisierung und Interaktion, die vervielfältigten Anerkennungsbeziehungen zwischen Kunden, Unternehmen und Beschäftigten und die vielfältigen sozialen Beziehungen von „nicht-unqualifizierten“ Teilzeit-Belegschaften zum Ausgangspunkt von Anerkennungskämpfen und –ansprüchen werden können.