

Researching call centres: gathering results and theories

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Researching Call Centres: Gathering Results and Theories¹

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¹ The paper was originally presented to the 20th Annual International Labour Process Conference, Glasgow, University of Strathclyde, April 2 – 4, 2002. The authors have conducted a DFG-funded research project on „Call centres in between neo-taylorism and customer orientation“ at Gerhard-Mercator-University Duisburg together with Sandra Arzbächer and Hanns-Georg Brose. Beyond our own research this paper draws on the shared results and experiences of two workshops: „Are Regimented Forms of Work Organisation Inevitable? Call Centres and the Chances for an Innovative Organisation of Service Work in Europe“ on 2/3 December 2000, Gerhard-Mercator-Universität (Holtgrewe/Kerst/Shire eds. 2002) and „Dienstleistung am Draht“ (= Service by wire) which took place at Sozialforschungsstelle Dortmund on February 21/22, 2002 and brought together German call centre research. Thanks are due to all colleagues and participants in these two workshops.

Abstract

The paper looks at current British and German call centre research in the light of its contributions to the issues of skill and control which are central in labour process theory. What has indeed been learned or can be learned from empirical research?

After outlining a rough typology of call centre research, we present an overview of results and theories and show how the diverse and controversial perspectives can be combined in a fruitful way resulting in a description of call centres as hybrids of standardisation and flexibilisation. This offers some explanation but may lead to new confusion. We suggest a contextualised and process-oriented perspective for further research and suggest that the current abundance of case studies be used in a comparative way.

Researching Call Centres: Gathering Results and Theories

Call centres have interested researchers from most relevant streams of labour process theory, and not just because they are a fast-growing sector of the service economy. They appear to epitomise a considerable range of issues and tendencies both “old” and “new” in the context of service and knowledge societies:

- a return of Taylorism in an increasingly perfect form vs a shift of control to technologies of the self;
- de-skilling vs re-skilling;
- fragmentation vs reconstruction of employment relations and workforces;
- labour instrumentalism vs subjectivation;
- recurrent vs new issues of labour struggles and politics.
- increased control *by* vs control *of* customers and
- standardisation vs flexibilisation of products and operations.

This contribution is going to look at current call centre research in the light of its contributions to the diverse issues of labour process theory. This expanding empirical field has been claimed as exemplary from both postmodernist and critical-realist perspectives in labour process theory (f. i. Grugulis/Knights 2000, p. 5; Thompson/Smith 2000, p. 58). Focusing on empirical findings then may offer a chance to move the debate beyond the entrenched positions of ‘core’ labour process theory versus postmodernism. The paper is, of course, not intended to declare the discussion closed but rather to take an inventory and from there explore new lines of enquiry. What has indeed been learned or can be learned from empirical research?

After outlining a rough typology of call centre research, we shall present an overview of theories and results concerning the key issues of skill and control. These are the traditional key issues and perspectives of German industrial sociology and labour process theory respectively. Indeed, the diverse and occasionally controversial perspectives can be combined in a complementary and fruitful way, analysing call centres as hybrids of standardisation and flexibilisation. This offers some explanation but may lead to new confusion. We argue in favour of a contextualised and process-oriented perspective for further research and suggest that the current abundance of case studies be used in a comparative way.

1. A rough typology of call centre research

This of course is by no means an objective representation. In empirical research the reflexivity of science works both ways (Giddens 1991, p. 40ff.). We choose our subjects in line with favourite theories and hypotheses and scientific paradigms include nationally

specific frames of reference and of attention. Skill has been a traditional key concept in German industrial sociology, while control and its dialectics have been central to labour process theory. Therefore the following two paragraphs will focus chiefly on these lines of discussion. Yet we are suggesting that call centre research has proved itself to be open to discoveries and able to learn from the field. Vice versa, considering that call centres are an organisational field in the process of construction (Arzbächer/Holtgrewe/Kerst 2002), research may even be able to become politically effective and involve itself in the very construction of the field.

Call centre research in the social sciences may roughly be grouped along the lines of theoretical-empirical, descriptive and intervention-oriented studies. These boundaries are not always clear-cut and they do not imply a hierarchy. Theoretical-empirical in this context means a variety of research designs in which empirical research, mostly in the form of case studies, tests, inspires or transforms theoretical reasoning on the transformation of work, the mode of rationalisation, the workings of control etc.

Descriptive studies focus on the labour market. They take stock of the industry, the number and composition of its workforces, and possibly their experiences and attitudes without aspiring to a larger theoretical argument. There are studies of regional labour markets (f. i. Taylor/Bain 1999; Richardson/Belt 2001; Baumeister 2001), of possible developments for particular groups (Belt et al. 1998; Bittner et al. 2002), and recently, there are interesting attempts to sort the diversity of call centres into a typology according to their organisational functions, technology, labour force etc. (Brasse et al. 2002).

Intervention-oriented studies (which we are not too familiar with in the British context) may focus on the technical/social design of workplaces which is supposed to be worker-oriented, stress-minimising, empowering and even participatory (Hammel 2001; Theissing 2001). It is possible that these are more of a German speciality in the Scandinavian and German tradition of participatory workplace design. Or they may develop modules and standards for qualification, or – bordering on action-research – advise and support collective actors in the field (Bibby 2000; Bain/Taylor 2001), identify ‘best practices’ etc.

While our line of argument predominantly draws on the theoretical-empirical line of work, the other kinds should not be underrated. Descriptive studies are essential in a new industry in which reliable figures are hardly available and even basic research finds itself depending on more or less vague extrapolations by consulting companies. And intervention-oriented studies address the question Wray-Bliss (2001) has asked: what ‘service’ do researchers offer to those they research?

2. German and British call centres

While there are no directly matched comparative studies of German and British call centres and comprehensive figures on the labour market are still lacking, some research results have been brought together (Holtgrewe/Kerst/Shire eds. 2002) and both similarities and differences can be pointed out (Shire/Holtgrewe/Kerst 2002). The two countries are interesting to compare since the UK presents a liberal-capitalist economy and system of industrial relations and has been at the forefront of a shift to a service economy in Europe. Germany's economy is socially embedded with co-operative industrial relations, a traditional focus on industrial production (cf. Castells 1996, p. 229), and a correspondingly limited service expansion. Consequently, the development and diffusion of British call centres has started earlier and been more expansive: in between an estimated one in 43 (Bain/Taylor 2002, p. 42) and one in 71 (TeleTalk 6/2000, p. 40ff.) of the UK's working population hold down a call centre job, with German figures ranging from one in 417 in the West to one in 666 in the Eastern *Länder* (ibid.).

There are differences in the employment structure as well (cf. Shire/Holtgrewe/Kerst 2002): Workforces in both countries are young and predominantly female, but in Germany both the overall skill level and the share of part-timers are higher: More than half of German call centre agents have formal vocational training in service or clerical occupations; and between 40 and 50% of German call centre agents, mostly women but also university students, work part-time (Bittner et al. 2002) while the share in the UK is estimated at 27% (Belt/Richardson/Webster 2000). There are fewer outsourced call centres with a decided cost-cutting strategy, pressurised, tightly regimented and de-skilled working conditions to be found in Germany (Shire/Holtgrewe/Kerst 2002, p. 8f., cf. Bain/Taylor 2002), and they concentrate in the Eastern *Länder*. We shall further explore differences in the issues of skill and control in the following paragraphs. They lead us to the conclusion that institutional differences continue to matter even though call centres in both countries represent a logic of flexibilisation of work and employment relations – but flexibilisation turns out to be path-dependent on previous institutional and organisational structures (cf. Arzbächer/Holtgrewe/Kerst 2002).

3. Losing and regaining faith in skill?

Skill has been a traditional focus of German industrial and work sociology. In this tradition – not just concerning industrial labour but also white collar work – skill is modelled on full-time salaried employees in manufacturing, banking and insurance industries who have had a three year apprenticeship. Through the 1980s and 1990s, the demands on skilled white-collar

employees (“Sachbearbeiter”) in large organisations have been found to be increasing while their career perspectives were becoming insecure (Baethge/Oberbeck 1986; Littek/Heisig 1995). With this focus on skilled work, call centre work has appeared as marginal for a long time. Other clerical work and deskilled areas of work have been the domain of women’s studies – and both subdisciplines of sociology continue to lead a fairly separate existence in Germany.

In the “white-collar-view”, the emergence of call centres has first been considered symptomatic of a possible departure from the “high road” of service reorganisation, which used to present a working *Leitbild* of German large organisations (Keltner 1995, cf. Batt 2000). It is based on skilled work, high-quality customer contact, loyalty management and qualified quasi-professional service relationships (d’Alessio/Oberbeck 1998, Baethge 2001). For German white-collar sociology then the emergence of call centres brought some disillusionment. Only when banks and telecommunications companies began to outsource call centre operations did it become obvious that deskilling was an option. Companies’ interest in a departure from the collective agreements, established career paths, and stable mutual expectations of the employment relationship was apparently greater than the benefits from the skilled German white-collar model. Consequently, the same authors (d’Alessio/Oberbeck 2002) have come to interpret call centres as a return to Taylorism and deskilling service work.

However, while we are not disagreeing that deskilling has taken place, the notion of deskilling depends on the observer’s standpoint and notion of skill. While the British discussion in the labour process tradition has been much less sanguine concerning the development of skill previously, now there is a wide agreement in both countries that call centre agents are not an unskilled workforce. Also, the demands of call centre work require considerable skill along the lines of diverse types of knowledge (Frenkel et al. 1999), cognitive and communicative flexibility, emotional labour (Sturdy/Fineman 2001; Tyler/Taylor 2001) and also endurance (Thompson/Callaghan 2002; Callaghan/Thompson 2002). These skills can be replaced by standardisation to a limited extent only. Indeed, they are required to complement standardisation.

Yet, skill in call centres is no longer understood in the traditional sense of formal qualification. The elaborate recruitment and coaching procedures in call centres show that skill is mostly reconstructed with little recourse to institutionalised qualifications. In measuring and assessing the specific competencies, they are mostly ascribed to “personalities” with the appropriate cognitive and social abilities, commitments and *habitus*.

This points to a different – but not unfamiliar – mechanism of skill utilisation which has been an almost traditional feature of women’s service work. We find a repeated pattern of rationalisation and differentiation of supposedly routine work with such jobs as typing, data entry etc. (Game/Pringle 1984; Webster 1990; Gottschall 1990; Callaghan 2002). This is taken over by frequently female workers whose skills are acquired (or perceived to have been acquired) outside the occupational system and may be ascribed to natural femininity (Tyler/Taylor 2001; Belt 2002). Through recruitment problems then it becomes obvious that devalued office work is not totally unskilled, and frequently technology is used to re-integrate these jobs into skilled ones. This pattern may explain the combination of skilled part-time workers in (West) German call centres. Here it is women with vocational training returning to part-time work after raising children.

Yet with call centres, the pattern of the utilisation of “extrafunctional” skills has subtly changed and it is no longer restricted to gendered divisions of labour. It appears to be flexibilised itself. Beyond rounding up the usual suspects (women with unspecific office skills), call centres recruit diverse groups of employees which are flexible in different ways.² To do this, they draw on specific national and regional labour markets. In the UK, older women returning to work are considered as supervisors as well (Belt 2002), and university students are a considerable part of the workforce in German banks (Arzbächer/Kerst/Holtgrewe 2002). They bring cognitive, social and communicative skills to their work as well – and they can afford limited aspirations in their actual job and are willing to strike flexibility bargains and to define their work as a learning opportunity.

The skills of workers and the skill demands of jobs then are two different questions. If skill is utilised which does not have to be paid for, the bargain for employers may be even more irresistible than the application of the old Babbage and Taylorist principles of dividing and deskilling labour. Indeed a combination of skill upgrading and a decline in working conditions and pay may be characteristic of post-Fordist economies (cf. Castells 1996, p. 274).

These findings point to the limits of a perspective on qualification only. In Germany (and recently also on the European level, see www.eurocallcentre.com), qualification for call centre work has been one of the key concerns around which the field has come to institutionalise itself. The certification of training institutions has been a key element of regional policies (Arzbächer/Kerst/Holtgrewe 2002; Bittner et al. 2002), and there has been

² This is a result of processes of de-institutionalisation in other social fields: gender contracts especially around male breadwinner-economies are losing their reliability, and higher education and work tend to be pursued simultaneously rather than sequentially (Arzbächer/Holtgrewe/Kerst 2002).

some debate over the ways in which training for call centre work can be made to fit in with the German system of occupational training. Modules on telephone work are incorporated into curricula for clerical training, but more importantly such vocational and advanced training in clerical occupations may be made accessible for experienced call centre agents.

While training and certification institutionally recognise the demands of call centre work and allow agents increased mobility on external labour markets, they do not necessarily correspond with the remuneration of skill. They may even act as a substitute. While developing curricula, standards for certification etc. is commendable and necessary, it may be institutionally “too easy” in terms of available funding, existing institutions etc. Here, a similar point can be made as it has been argued for the discourses on stress (Newton 1995) or on quality (McCabe et al. 1998): The rhetoric of training also carries the message that problems of the quality of work are best addressed in terms of individual skill levels. Piling training courses on an already skilled workforce only makes sense if it enables agents to raise their claims to skilled and interesting work as well. Then it may enhance a dynamic strategy of professionalisation which addresses both symbolic and material recognition of skill.

4. Control: Losing and regaining faith in agency

Control and its dialectics are the key issue in the line of the labour process debate. Indeed, it has been criticised by political economists for its nearly exclusive focus on control at the expense of economic efficiency (f. i. Rowlinson/Hassard 2000) – which is a point to keep in mind for call centre research as well. The current controversy of “core” labour process theory and critical management appears to be one of the power of agency vs the power of discourse (Thompson/Ackroyd 1995; O’Doherty/Willmott 2000; Thompson/Smith 2000). Call centres first have looked like an almost ideal-typical illustration of a Foucauldian panopticon (Ferne/Metcalf 1997) in which omnipresent observation leads to workers’ internalisation of discipline. This view has been much criticised for its somewhat naive view of the possibilities of electronic monitoring and surveillance technology. Advertising brochures of software specialists were mistaken for the actual practice of control (Bain/Taylor 2000).

Soon other modes of control beside the use of technology were discovered. The managerial discourses of corporate culture, quality and customer orientation appear to actively involve workers and their subjectivity in the reproduction of their very domination (duGay/Salaman 1992; Willmott 1994). Frenkel et al. (1999) and Kinnie et al. (2000) regard precisely the combination of informed work and corporate culture as typical for call centres under the heading of “info-normative control”: This combines IT-generated data and an inculcation of cultural and informal norms. It fits with the ambiguity of call centre work which is both

informed and communicative, doing the standardising of customer interactions rather than being standardised itself (Kerst/Holtgrewe 2001; Rieder/Matuschek/Anderson 2002).

Frenkel et al. have chiefly been criticised (by Taylor/Bain 2001) for their optimistic assumption that performance data are chiefly employed in a manner which agents experience as 'facilitative' (Frenkel et al. 1999, p. 139ff.). Elsewhere, such measures have been found to be complemented by high pressure and plain management bullying. Exactly this provided agents and unions with obvious starting points for collective action (Bibby 2000; Taylor/Bain 2001).

Control then is another issue where German and British call centres differ. The legal and institutional framework of German employment relations give works councils considerable co-determination rights over performance measures and targets, and apparently they make use of these rights. While control is certainly an issue, performance measures and targets in Germany are frequently employed on the level of teams instead of individuals. Individual controls and 'hard' targets are concentrated in outsourced sales call centres.

For both technical and normative controls then, "implementation is never straightforward", as Sturdy (2001, p. 7) succinctly puts it. There is evidence (f. i. Lankshear et al. 2001) that supervisors and middle management even avoid the wide-ranging possibilities of call monitoring both for the sake of time-saving and the informal relations with their teams. The cost of control then remains an issue for management – and with call monitoring it may present another limit on rationalisation as neither call-handling times nor listening in can be compressed below the duration of real-time conversation.

On the normative and cultural side, the use of coaching, stress management and other self-management techniques may be seen to implement 'technologies of the self' (McKinlay/Starkey 1998) which shape, employ or even constitute subjectivity (Willmott 1994). As has been argued for service work generally (Hochschild 1983; Macdonald/Sirianni 1996; Nickson et al. 2001), control becomes invasive and intimate, moving close to the bodies, voices and emotions of workers and commodifying them when trying to establish service quality as a market advantage.

Knights and McCabe (1998; 1999) correctly emphasise that subjectivity certainly cannot be determined by particular discourses and control mechanisms. The implementation of such process innovations as BPR, TQM etc. has certainly not closed down spaces of resistance but in fact opened up new ones for workers' manoeuvring. However, while workers' agency is recognised in these studies, their chances to succeed seem slim in the face of ever-new management techniques, and their strategies look mostly self-defeating. These authors mostly

emphasise workers' involvement in the reproduction of stress and pressure through vicious cycles between acts of resistance and management agency. One of the reasons for that view may be generated by these authors' perspective on agency and subjectivity. They focus on localised, individual acts of resistance, and on agents individually articulating their strategies and ambiguities (Bain/Taylor 2000).

Recently, however, Knights and Alferoff (2002) acknowledge the results of collective action as well: When struggles around quality led to a strike in one call centre case, and the strike resulted in agreements over quality management, workers had collectively gained some definition power over these issues. Quality remained a contested terrain, but agents were able to articulate their own claims to the quality of work. Notably, this had a strong emphasis on aesthetic satisfaction.

While this notion of resistance focuses on the symbolic and discursive, Taylor and Bain consistently insist on the importance of collective action which addresses material interests and bread-and-butter issues as well as symbolic spaces. They recognise that such mobilisation has its moral side (cf. Holtgrewe 2001) and it requires a 'cognitive liberation' from the status quo. Not least, it requires leadership, individuals who take the initiative, actually reframe collective issues and challenge management.

We take this discussion of control to suggest that the empirical evidence of collective action has come to validate the point of the "critical realist" labour process authors: Agency and struggle matter – even and especially in the field of communication and service work which used to look so amenable to its shaping by management discourses. Yet resistance is played out in the discursive field as well, and trade unions will do well to address the 'new' issues of service quality, discretion and recognition. Here, the materialist and discursive positions of labour process theory come close to complementing one another and correcting each others' specific blindnesses.

From early on it has been pointed out that struggles around service quality do not just take place between workers and management (McCabe/Knights 1998; Frenkel et al. 1999; Korczynski et al. 2000; Taylor/Bain 2002). Typically for interactive service work in general (Leidner 1993; Macdonald/Sirianni eds. 1996; Sturdy/Grugulis/Willmott eds. 2001), customers are involved in the relations and negotiations of control. In the management literature on TQM and excellence the customer is introduced as a new instance of control and domination to whose wishes organisations and workers are required to adapt. On the other hand, organisations try to strategically shape customers' expectations and actions (Knights/Morgan 1993). Frontline workers find themselves in a triangle: They are confronted

with customers, required to actually get them to co-operate and articulate their needs with the services of the organisation.

One of the most wide-spread findings of call centre research then is that agents pursue their own symbolic and material claims by drawing on the quality of the interaction, the norms and values of 'helping people', of solving problems and empathising. They tend to privilege the actual customer interaction over the potential market (Korczynski et al. 2000). In much the same way as, from Luddism onwards, workers' resistance has been motivated by a producer's or craftsperson's pride in their work and their product, service workers seem to translate that sense of pride to the use-values of service work. Due to the properties of service labour processes, these use-values are embedded with a specific intersubjectivity. Through agents' appropriation of the values of interaction and quality, issues outside an instrumental logic come into play: morality (Wray-Bliss 2001) and the ethics of care and justice (Tyler/Taylor 2001), recognition (Holtgrewe 2001) and aesthetics (Alferoff/Knights 2002).

On the other hand, among all the contested terrains of quality, customer orientation, flexibility and so on there is also evidence of consent being manufactured. We also find quality and flexibility *bargains* in call centres (Kerst/Holtgrewe 2001; Arzbächer/Kerst/Holtgrewe 2002; cf. Frenkel et al. 1999) which do not necessarily preclude but structure conflicts. Bargains may be struck if and when both technical and normative controls are employed in ways compatible with agents' aspirations to quality and with their orientations towards self-improvement. Facilitative coaching and transparent controls then may be considered as Foucauldian technologies of the self which involve agents' active co-operation and agreement. Yet again, technologies of the self do not work automatically either. Most importantly, agents remain able to negotiate and struggle over the conditions of that agreement in both a material and a symbolic way.

Control strategies and practices within call centres then have been explored from a variety of complementary perspectives. However, these findings mostly remain limited to the call centre case in question. They are rarely contextualised with the strategies and contingencies of the organisations and industries establishing or using call centres. How call centres' patterns of both skill utilisation and control fit into strategies of organisations to enter or establish new markets, to retain or segment customers (f. i. Batt 2000), to rationalise and flexibilise workflows and processes, can hardly be explored with a focus on the call centre cases only. Here the suggestions of political economists (Rowlinson/Hassard 2000; Jaros 2000) to address questions of economic efficiency within the framework of organisational and institutional opportunities and constraints could be applied in a promising way.

4. Post/Taylorist Hybrids

While a significant group of authors consider call centres as signals for a far-reaching return of Taylorism in the service sector (Baldry/Bain/Taylor 1998; Taylor/Bain 1998; Bain et al. 2001; d'Alessio/Oberbeck 2002), other analyses have pointed to differentiations: Distinctions of high-road and low-road rationalisation paths are traditional for service work, and both well-meaning consultants and sociologists have frequently presented the merits of high-quality service by satisfied and empowered employees for retaining and expanding the customer base (d'Alessio/Oberbeck 1998; Baethge 2001, sceptically Korczynski 2001). It is, however, possible that these paths are not mutually exclusive. Batt (2000) points out that organisations are quite capable of internally differentiating both roads with respect to different groups of customers. The question is whether Chris Smith's point that quality mass production and deskilling can be combined (2001) holds for service work as well. There is some evidence that high-quality call centres come to introduce standardisation measures for reasons of cost (Taylor et al. 2002), control (Bienzeisler 2001) or to cope with high labour turnover (Kleemann/Matuschek 2001). Human resource practices may be aimed at commitment even while control remains rigid (Kinnie et al. 2000; Holtgrewe/Kerst 2002). Yet, quality-oriented approaches have been found in unexpected places such as small marketing and service call centres as well (Holtgrewe 2001a).

It is therefore not surprising that recently a couple of authors (ourselves included) emphasise the ambiguity of call centres as an organisational form in hybrid expressions:

- the “customer-oriented bureaucracy” (Korczynski 2001),
- the flexible bureaucracy (Dose 2002)
- or our own perspective on call centres as organisational boundary-spanning units working on organisations' structural dilemma of standardisation and flexibility (Kerst/Holtgrewe 2001).

This structural ambiguity of call centres explains why rationalisation strategies are employed in tentative and contradictory ways, constantly renegotiating the emphasis on efficiency and quality respectively. It also explains why call centre workers' skills and subjective dispositions play such an important part in the balancing of these contradictory demands. Indeed, combining standardised and computerised processes with the flexibility of communication in call centres necessarily implies that workers are assigned the task of balancing efficiency and quality.

This is also why different control measures and personnel selection procedures are applied in redundant ways: informative and normative control, “fun and surveillance” (Kinnie et al.

2000) and their flexible combination aim at standardisation and flexibility respectively, and they are complemented by recruitment procedures aimed at finding the 'right' workforce which promises to be responsive to both sides.

While the hybrid and dilemma-oriented analyses of call centre work have considerable explanatory power, they are in danger of becoming imprecise. Since they focus on a structural dilemma of all organisations, any kind of rationalisation and control exercise fits into the hybrid world of customer-oriented bureaucracies somehow. On the other hand, looking at high and low roads and good practices may be normatively satisfying and useful in a context of intervention, but not always sensitive to the empirical ambiguities and interrelations of flexibilisation and standardisation. Consequently, a process-oriented perspective should be useful. Call centres are likely to move *through* the dilemmata of flexibilisation and standardisation. They may pursue paths or employ measures of rationalisation or HRM to compensate the effects of previous measures. They may be driven by unintended consequences or may reflexively build up competencies in these processes. Whether high or low roads are established or elements of both combined, whether patterns or strategies emerge, whether possibilities and necessities of reflection are developed and under what conditions, then are empirical questions which should be addressed over time.

5 Discussion and conclusion: Learning from the field? A tentative research agenda

This meta-analysis has attempted to arrange research findings and theories into a narrative of ongoing insight and learning from the field. It has tried to synthesise controversial positions. Doing this, the narrative goes as follows: Perspectives have been opened to more complex views of work and organisation. The developments and limitations of Taylorism have been explored. The shifts and movements between standardisation and flexibilisation have been described as well as their (more or less uncomfortable) integration. Strategies of recruitment drawing on particular (and diverse) labour forces have been found to shape work organisation as well as vice versa. Workers' instrumental perspectives and subjective involvements in their communicative work have been reconstructed. They may even be combined through a temporary involvement with transitory labour markets. Individual and informal acts of recalcitrance have been pointed out and collective struggles analysed. Such struggles have been found to be focused around service quality especially. "The" customer and "the" service have emerged as contested terrains in which symbolic interests of recognition and morality are critical. Not least, social science has turned out to move back into the fields of practice and struggle in both intended and unintended ways.

However, this flattering and admittedly self-congratulatory summary needs to be taken with a grain of salt. We might as well contrast a narrative of disorientation and arbitrariness in which every theoretical perspective and political outlook finds in call centres something to support their pre-ordained theories.³ The research we have reviewed has indeed been mostly characterised by case studies, using a few well-documented cases to illustrate sophisticated theoretical lines of argument.

In order to make use of the results gathered so far and to move beyond its current limitations we would like to suggest the following points of a possible research agenda:

- a comparative perspective of cases and theories;
- contextualisation;
- process-orientation.

What is mostly missing is a sort of comparative methodology which could lead to a reflection on the specific conditions and consequences of the use and implementation of modes of control, utilisation of skill, logics of rationalisation, mobilisation etc. in the cases studied. In which industries, customer segments, company cultures, economic situations and labour markets do we find clusters of high- or low road examples, facilitative or repressive practices of control and coaching, or specific types of hybrids? Some of the results of such a comparative effort using “most similar” and “most different” cases (cf. Frenkel et al. 1999; p. 40) may be predictable but others less so.

We have also seen that in our field of enquiry, a combination of perspectives beyond the materialist ‘core’ of labour process theory has been fruitful rather than unproductive as Thompson and Smith (2000) suggest. The discussion of skill has been able to benefit from gender studies; the discussion of control from a combination of critical-realist and discursive perspectives. It may be worthwhile to take up Stephen Jaros’s suggestion (2000, p. 36) and explicitly compare multiple theoretical explanations for specific cases or configurations. The issues of both skill and control have use for a look beyond individual cases at organisational and institutional contexts and frameworks. They are shaped by labour markets, gender relations, systems of vocational training and further education, and of industrial relations – and in turn these are influenced and flexibilised by the development of call centres. Such explorations could be inspired by neo-institutionalism (f. i. Arzbächer/HoltgreweKerst 2002), labour market and policy studies, and also by a cultural view of consumption and service (Nickson et al. 2001; Korczynski 2002).

³ This holds true for this analysis as well. Ours certainly holds a bias towards dilemmata, reflexivity and the possibilities of learning which is to be found in neo-pragmatist and systemic organisation theory as well as the symbolic-interactionist sociology of work.

A process-oriented and longer-term view is necessary to address movements and patterns of flexibilisation and standardisation, but also quite simply to take business and economic cycles into account. It has become quite clear in the last year that in Germany at least, the expansion of call centres is slowing down, cost pressures increase and the conditions for quality-oriented work design are worsening. Considering the dynamics of the field, following up on the current findings then should present a more comprehensive and balanced picture.

To conclude, one self-reflexive remark: It looks to us as if this lack of longer-term and comparative data interpretation has something to do with the organisation and current re-organisation of sociological work. The pressures of mode 2 research (Nowotny et al. 1994; Jacob 2001), tied funding and ‘publish or perish’ academic evaluation may lead researchers to a specifically short-term view. While reasonably experienced researchers are able to build up and develop theories and knowledge from a sequence of projects, the actual comparing of cases and grounding of theories is at risk. It may be the first part of research into work and organisations to end up crushed between the logic of a sequence of projects on the one hand and the logic of academic reputation and controversy on the other. The very dynamics of the field in our view need to be balanced by spaces for empirical and theoretical reflection. It is probably not just call centre agents but also researchers who are faced with the challenge of defending and opening up spaces and times autonomously to define quality.

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