


**DIEKETSENG M MOTSEKE**

# **Call Centre Agents and Class Identity:**

## **A Johannesburg Case Study**



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requirements of the degree of Master of Arts in  
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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores the class identity of call centre agents in Johannesburg. My interest in the topic arose from an apparent contradiction. On the one hand, I had read sociological literature that had depicted such people as belonging to a ‘service proletariat’. On the other, my experience as a student working in a call centre was that, to the extent that the agents had a class identity, it was as members of the ‘middle class’.

While there is now a considerable body of literature on call centres, there is relatively little on South Africa, despite that it now has the largest concentration of these workplaces anywhere in the world. Also, research has addressed the question of class, in terms of *class position*, an outsider’s assessment, rather than as *class identity*, the agent’s own understanding of their location within a social hierarchy. Moreover, given that call centres are in the forefront of globalisation, which has made possible the reorganisation of labour processes, is it possible that they herald new class identities that tally with a changed class structure?

In researching these issues three call centres were studied. The first was where I worked as a normal student, but in the other I consciously undertook a participant observation. The second call centre was where most of my scientific research was conducted, with observation being supplemented by semi-structured interviews. The third call centre I went through an arduous recruitment process but was ultimately rejected. The dissertation describes the varied nature of call centre work, and it reveals agents’ thoughts about their jobs.

To my surprise I discerned two kinds of identity among the agents. The first was the one experienced as a student. This was an identity more related to the social position from which the agents had come and to which they aspired, both of which were generally regarded as middle class. Work and class were not, however, an important part of the identity of such people, who tended to be individualistic, interested in ‘having fun’ and in ‘moving on’. But there was a second identity, not encountered as a student. This was undoubtedly a class identity, and some agents even described themselves in terms similar to ‘service proletariat’. Whereas there was little commitment to the particular call centre, there was recognition that call centre employment was a long-term option.

Significantly, whilst the first identity was strongly associated with the agents who were ‘temps’, the second was coupled with those who were ‘permanent’. I argue that these associations were not only linked to the kind of contract that had been signed, but also to length of service, time spent at work and the nature of work undertaken, pay and conditions, age and family responsibilities, and expectations of future employment. So, then, the theory of service proletariat is not rejected, and, indeed, permanent agents had an identity related to this class position. However, a nuanced assessment of the class identity must recognise the significance of an agent’s commitment to working in a call centre, with many agents only employed on a temporary basis.

## OPSOMMING

Hierdie verhandeling ondersoek die klasidentiteit van oproepsentrumagente in Johannesburg. My belangstelling in hierdie onderwerp het uit ‘n sigbare teenstelling voortgespruit. Aan die een kant het ek sosiologiese literatuur gelees wat sulke mense as deel van die ‘diens-proletariaat’ beskryf. Aan die ander kant was dit my ervaring, as ‘n student wat in ‘n oproepsentrum gewerk het, dat agente hulself as lede van die middelklas sien.

Terwyl daar nou ‘n aansienlike hoeveelheid literatuur aangaande oproepsentrums is, is daar relatief min wat spesifiek oor Suid-Afrika handel. Dit is ten spyte van die feit dat Suid-Afrika nou die grootste konsentrasie van hierdie werkerplekke in die wêreld het. Dit is voorts opvallend dat talle navorsing die vraag oor klas in terme van *klasposisie* benader, dit wil sê, ‘n buitestaander-vertretpunt neem, eerder as om *klasidentiteit* te gebruik, verwysend na die agente se eie begrip van hul ligging binne die sosiale hiërargie. Verder, gegee dat oproepsentrums aan die voorpunt van globalisasie staan, wat die herorganisasie van arbeidsprosesse moontlik gemaak het, is dit dalk moontlik dat hulle ‘n nuwe klasposisie inlui wat ooreenstem met ‘n veranderende klasstruktuur?

Drie oproepsentrums is tydens hierdie navorsing bestudeer. Die eerste was toe ek as ‘n normale student gewerk het, maar in die ander het ek bewustelik deelnemende waarnemings gedoen. Die tweede oproepsentrum was waar meeste van my wetenskaplike

navorsing gedoen is. Hierdie navorsing was by wyse van observasies gedoen, wat met semi-gestruktureerde onderhoude aangevul is. By die derde oproepsentrum het ek deur 'n inspannende werwingsproses gegaan, maar was uiteindelik afgekeur. Die verhandeling beskryf die veelvuldige aard van oproepsentrumwerk en dit werp lig op agente se sienings ten opsigte van hul werk.

Tot my verbasing het ek twee tipes identiteite onder die agente geïdentifiseer. Die eerste was dié wat ek as 'n student ervaar het. Dit was 'n identiteit wat meer verband gehou het met die sosiale posisie waarvan die agente afkomstig was en dit waarna hulle gestreef het - beide was gewoonlik geag as middelklas. Werk en klas was egter nie 'n belangrike deel van die identiteit van sulke mense nie. Hulle was geneig om individualisties te wees, geïnteresseerd in 'pret hê' en in 'aanbeweeg'. Daar was egter 'n tweede identiteit, wat ek nie as 'n student teëgekomp het nie. Dit was ongetwyfeld 'n klasidentiteit en sommige van die agente het selfs hulself in terme van 'diensproletariaat' beskryf. Terwyl daar 'n lae mate van verbintenis tot die spesifieke oproepsentrum was, was daar erkenning vir die feit dat oproepsentrumwerk 'n langtermyn-opsie was.

Dit is betekenisvol dat, terwyl die eerste identiteit sterk by die agente wat tydelike werkers was gefigureer het, die tweede gekoppel was aan dié wat permanente werkers was. Ek voer aan dat hierdie assosiasies nie net met die tipe kontrak wat hulle geteken het, verband hou nie, maar ook geassosieer kan word met die dienstydperk, die tyd wat by die werk gespandeer word, die aard van die werk wat onderneem word, betaling en werksomstandighede, ouderdom en gesinsverantwoordelikheid, en verwagting van toekomstige werk. Dus, die teorie van diensproletariaat word nie verwerp nie, in soverre permanente agente inderdaad 'n identiteit wat met dié klasposisie verwant hou, geopenbaar het. 'n Assesering van klasidentiteit moet egter die belangrikheid van 'n agent se verbintenis tot oproepsentrumwerk in ag neem, veral in die lig van die feit dat talle agente slegs op 'n tydelike basis aangestel is.

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I hereby declare that apart from the assistance recognised, this dissertation is my own work submitted for the degree of Master of Arts Industrial Sociology at the University of Johannesburg. It has not been submitted to any other university before for any other degree.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Rationale

The experience of working in the call centre industry for a period of approximately two years evoked in me an interest in the class identity of the call centre agent. Familiarity with the call centre environment gave me the impression that these people do not consider themselves analogous to the ‘service proletariat’ or any other form of working class, which is how they and people in similar occupations are commonly portrayed in the literature.

Studies on class have always constituted an integral part of sociology. This is to be expected because class is an important organising principle of society. Class has an impact on aspects such as where people live, and thus what kind of lifestyle they opt for. This, in turn, influences their cultural activities, what kinds of schools their children attend, their relationship preferences, and important aspects of their identities. This particular study aims to examine the shaping of class in the working environment, particularly in the lower-level, white-collar category.

A study of this nature is especially important in the context of the new global workplace, which is characterised by deeper world economic integration and regulation by market forces. Due to new occupations arising, we have reached a point where there is a need to reinvestigate old categorisations of class and determine whether a new ones would be more fitting. As part of questioning old categorisations, and possibly developing new ones, this study has the primary objective of determining how call centre agents see themselves in class terms. The question, therefore, is: ‘How do call centre agents understand their class identity?’ Of particular interest are the subjective understandings that these call centre agents have of their class position. Secondary interests concern how society shapes the way call centre agents see themselves, and the extent to which age and social background have an impact on perceptions of class and career mobility.

The significance of the topic is supported by the fact that call centres, particularly in South Africa, are fast becoming one of the leading industries in terms of white-collar employment. As a result of their rapid expansion, it is valuable to understand as many aspects of the industry as possible, and this includes the class identity of call centre

agents. Because the industry is relatively new, particularly in South Africa, literature on the subject is rather limited. This study comes on the coat-tail of a larger study, many findings of which have been published in *Globalisation and New Identities: A View from the Middle* (2006). The book looks at new identities that have formed due to globalisation. Hopefully, my study will be regarded as a useful addition to the larger project.

Given that this is an exploratory study about how people grapple with understanding themselves, a qualitative methodology was appropriate. I focused on three Johannesburg call centres with which I am familiar. The call centres are referred to as Call Centres A, B and C. However, most of my data and analysis came from Call Centre B, where my research was conducted on a consciously scientific basis.

## 1.2 Summary of Chapters

The next chapter aims to explain the different dynamics involved in call centre occupations, with emphasis given to the particular notions most relevant to the study. Chapter three discusses the key concepts used in the research: class and identity.

Chapter four discusses the methodology followed in the quest to answer the research question. It also explains the more specific details about how the study was actually conducted, how the participant observation was done, and how and with whom the interviews took place.

In the fifth chapter the empirical findings are presented, analysed and interpreted. This is organised according to themes that make it possible to understand the agents as individuals, complete with their own ideas, different perceptions of their work, and varied experiences of the way their work fits into other facets of their lives.

The sixth and final chapter summarises the main findings, draws conclusions and makes recommendations. It attempts to juxtapose the literature with the real and lived experience of the call centre agent. It also makes suggestions on what subjects need to be looked at in more detail in order to further close the large gap that exists on this topic.

The most prominent finding is that there are large variations amongst call centre employees. Apart from differences resulting from the type of industry the call centre is

located within, which is what the literature mostly touches upon, there are notable divergences between agents within a call centre. The main dissimilarity that this study expands upon is between the permanent staff and the temporary staff. The distinction between the two is what ultimately leads to their different class identities.

The divergent class identities these workers have created rely on many intervening variables, including age, family background and work experience. However, precisely because they are ‘temporary’ or ‘permanent’, these two categories of workers have differing levels of commitment to call-centre work, and this informs the crux of my argument. This is that, whilst the ‘temps’ are unlikely to see themselves as working class, the ‘perms’ do have this identity. So, at least in the case of the call-centre workers who have been studied, commitment to work shapes class identity



## CHAPTER 2: THE CALL CENTRE

### 2.1 Introduction

Noon and Blyton (2002: 34) state that throughout the industrial world, there has been a progressive shift in employment from primary and secondary sectors to the tertiary, service sector. This service sector provides the locale for the main focus of this study, namely, the call centre, which generally places an emphasis on customer service.

The revolution in work has meant a change in skill requirements, as well as the type of occupations that are predominant. At first glance, one would believe that the skill requirements have increased, resulting in an 'upskilling' of work (Grugulis, Warhurst & Keep, 2004: 2). Westwood (2004: 40) looks at the decrease in the number of people employed in manual and manufacturing work and an increase for those employed in managerial, professional and technical jobs, to be precise, in the knowledge and service sectors. This 'upskilling' of work then, involves the shift from manufacturing to service, and the outnumbering of blue-collar by white collar workers (Grugulis, Warhurst & Keep, 2004: 2). Taylor & Bain (1999: 107) speak of how the call centre in particular, has taken the measurement of white collar work to new levels. Fenton and Bradley (2002: 15) touch on how, in modern Britain, changes in class can be attributed to the replacement of traditional forms of proletarian work with new forms of employment. This, it is argued, is how the middle-class, has expanded while the working class is decreasing.

On the other hand, Darr (2004: 44) sees the expansion of the service sector as associated with low skill, low wage and temporary jobs in fast food restaurants, call centres and retail shops. Adler (2004: 244) also brings the thought that many people classified in the category of managers and administrators have very little managerial authority, and can thus be placed with a broader working class. Belt (2003: 3) believes that many of the people employed in this economy are the ones who would formerly have been manual proletarians. Thus the contention that call centres have increased the numbers of employees in skilled occupations and enlarged the middle class becomes highly problematic. With both sides of the debate one wonders whether old categorisations can be stretched enough to cover these workers.

Erez and Eden (2001: 1) take us in a new direction. They propose that, upon entering the new millennium, there are now questions about the meaning of human life and self-identity, the impact of the changing environment, and the role of work in these issues. Since this study is concerned with the identity of call centre agents, it is important to note as a start, that the call centre industry, places a large amount of credence on the people it employs. It emphasises a certain social identity as being more 'fitting' for the nature of work. In the UK, Belt (2003: 12) notes how a certain accent or way of speaking makes one candidate more favourable than another. This can undoubtedly leave the people who do find employment in call centre with a feeling of superiority of some form, at least from some manual occupations.

What we can deduce from the above is that the new occupations have created a need to reflect upon the class identity of those employed in these positions. In the process a comprehension of how the agents understand their world, how they assess their world and how they evaluate their class identity in particular will be met. This will hopefully shed light on the broader debate about the class character of call centre work.

## **2.2 The Call Centre: Definition and Origins**

In view of the fact that the main concern of this study is call centre agents, we look at call centres in more detail below. Taylor and Bain define them as:

A dedicated operation in which computer utilising employees receive inbound, or make outbound telephone calls, with those calls processed and controlled either by an Automatic Call Distribution (ACD), or predictive dialling system. The call centre is thus characterised by the amalgamation of telephone technologies and Visual Display Units (VDU), i.e. computer screen activities. Although technological developments such as the ACD or Interactive Voice Recognition, (ICR) are central to the business of the call centre, the roots of their rapid growth can be located in the adoption by organisations of forceful, direct selling techniques and by perceived dramatic savings in costs and

overheads stemming from the centralisation of back office customer servicing functions (1999: 102).

The call centre can thus be seen as a place where several agents are taking or making calls to customers. They use several technologies to aid the customer/caller/client, or to seek information and to carry out the purpose of the organisation. Call centres are found in many sectors of business, including banking, utilities, manufacturing, security, market research, pharmaceuticals, catalogue sales, order desks, customer service, technical queries (help desk), emergency services, food retail, hotel reservations etc. The level of skill and thus the remuneration varies according to sector, resulting in some agents being more skilled and educated, and thus earning more than others (Watson, Bunzel, Lockyer & Scholarios 2000: 2). The call centre is an example of the occupations found in the modern service industry, which is mostly about dealing with people instead of products, on a daily basis.

The idea behind the formation of call centres was to have a department that would deal with all the telephone-call based queries from customers (Harrington, 2004: 1). To be sure, the senior partner of Resource International and publisher of the Call Centre Managers Forum, Kjellerup (2001: 1), suggests that 'contact centres operate as if their purpose was to keep customer's at arm's length from the organisation's core activities as cheaply as possible'. This brought along with it a number of advantages, mainly that a separate department dealing only with calls would mean more order. Mehrota (2003: 13) expands on this, by showing that early on in the 1980s calls came in and were handled immediately if there was an agent available or, if not, they waited for an agent to be on hand. This, however, was not an adequate system, because accurate forecasting and scheduling as well as cost-effective planning were significant challenges for management owing to uncertainties in call volumes, arrival patterns and handle times, as well as agent breaks, lunches, attendance, and attrition, which of course adversely affected management control on the agents. An attempt to deal with these factors, the 'skill-based call centre' was then introduced, where different agents were trained to handle different call types.

However, Mehrota further explains how this system still proved to be inadequate, because forecasting, agent scheduling and planning were still a problem (2003: 14). To deal with these new issues, during the 1990s the ‘modern call centre’ came about. This modern contact centre, with the new technologies associated with it, is the one that Taylor and Bain define above. This centre meant that apt management of the centre would also mean fewer people taking many calls. This then indicates that from the beginning, call centres as an industry were concerned with measuring factors such as call lengths as the performance standard, meaning shorter and more frequent calls would then be better than longer calls (Harrington: 2006: 1). Today the average call centre agent deals with between 75 and 90 calls per day, depending on the nature of the product or the business (Batt, Doellgast & Kwon 2005; Sorensen & El-Salanti, 2005).

### **2.3 The nature of Call Centre Work**

Some recent writers have termed the call centre ‘sweatshops in the digital era’ or ‘electronic panopticons’ – meaning that the structures of control are so dominant and prison like that they eliminate the possibility of workers exercising any autonomy, either individually or collectively (Omar 2005: 269, Taylor & Bain 1999: 103). The reason behind such an opinion may be that the distinctive features of interactive service work (face to face or voice to voice interaction), such as the types of management and control strategies, are similar to assembly line manufacturing. The type of standardisation and routinisation used in Taylorism is applied to call centres, and there is a need to manipulate the emotional labour of the workers in order for managers to extend their efforts to control workers (Omar 2005: 272).

When considering the routinisation and standardisation of the work, we find defenders of the systems of control used in call centres maintaining that because these agents are dealing with customers, the situations they are faced with are not predictable, and as a result, management cannot control every aspect of the worker’s reactions (Omar 2005: 273). They also say that quality concerns arise since good service is frequently associated with personal service and customisation, and standardisation is thus likely to undercut quality in interactions between people (Omar 2005: 273). This generalisation is

questionable, because the surveillance technologies used in call centres also ensure that management can see each and every activity that occurs with the call centre agent, without any direct or physical involvement (Omar 2005: 273).

Harrington (2006: 2) affirms how targets are stretched towards agents taking more calls than is standard. He mentions how people often left the job because of burnout due to the ‘pressure cooker atmosphere’. This occurs because each time an agent drops one call another is waiting to come through (Taylor & Bain 1999: 107). Ntuli (2006: 1) shows us an example of this when he speaks of a telecommunications call centre in Cape Town, where the IVR machine cannot cope with the volume of calls coming in, and half of them are about balance enquiries. This is clearly a trivial question that agents have to deal with, but it affects the volume of calls coming in, and thus puts more pressure on the agent.

#### **2.4 Some International Demographic Characteristics of Call Centre Agents**

Although India is the leader in the call centre industry, many other countries are involved. Some reports on the call centre industry and its development in Denmark, France and the United States have proven to be rather insightful in gaining an idea of the characteristics of call-centre work in these countries. Some statistical detail has been taken from each of these countries, in order to show the pattern of call centre work, in terms of, among other factors, who it employs, and some of the activities in which they are involved.

In the Danish call centre industry, for example, it was found that 68% of the call centre workforce was comprised of women (Sorensen & El-Salanti 2005: 16). All in all, a third of the call centres employed more than 75% women. This brings another dimension to the study, that the occupation is gendered. To be sure, in France there was also a predominance of women at 71% (Lanciano-Morandat, Nohara & Tchobanlan 2005: 3), and the United States had 66%. Some of these variations could however be attributed to the different types of sectors that the call centre was in. For example, in the United States, the IT sector comprised of more males than females (Batt, Doellgast & Kwon 2005: 11).

As concerns the educational level of workers, it was found in all the studies that call centre agents generally had post secondary school qualifications, with most managers having post graduate degrees. The technologies and skills used and needed in call centres



generally depend on the type of call centre. Due to this fact there is a need for a certain level of education, and ability to use these technologies. Post matric qualifications are commonly found in call centre agents, which is not the case when one considers the old proletariat, or indeed, other service occupations. This also substantiates what Taylor and Bain (1999) have reiterated, namely that the integration of the technologies used in the call centre is what makes the call centre function a skilled one.

Concerning training and development, it is emphasised that ‘frontline employees confront ongoing changes in product and service offers, pricing and packaging, legal regulations, work methods and technical processes. As a result of this there is a need to regularly upgrade their knowledge and skills in order to be well equipped and help the customers better (Batt, Doellgast, & Kwon, 2003: 3). This further underlines the notion that call centre agents have somewhat different characteristics to other service workers, and may thus deserve to be regarded as belonging to a different class.

The size of the call centre and how many agents are employed generally depends on the type of organisation, as well as the development of the call centre industry in that particular country. In the United States for example, the average call centre employs about 289 people (Batt, Doellgast & Kwon 2004: III), whereas in Denmark it is about 60 people (Sorensen & El-Salanti, 2004: 10).

Pertaining to management, the US study found that call centres are generally flat organisations, with management comprising about 16% of the organisation (Batt, Doellgast & Kwon 2004: 3). The French study yielded an even flatter organisation, with management comprising only five percent (Lanciano-Morandat *et al* 2005: 4). Taylor and Bain (1999: 110) have even attributed turnover rates to these flat structures which offer little possibility of promotion. The average structure of the call centre starts with the agents reporting to a team leader, who in most cases is also a call centre agent, but is there to deal with the more ‘challenging’ calls. The team leader then reports to a line supervisor, who reports to a manager. This manager then reports to the general manager (Batt, Doellgast & Kwon 2004: 5).

The average age of call centre agents in the examples of the countries given above was 30 years (Batt, Doellgast, & Kwon 2003: 12), an age that is significantly older than a student population. The US call centre report did mention, however, that the ages

ranged from 22 to 50 years of age, which may imply that the younger ones were indeed students. The information supplied by these reports is helpful in that it gives us an approximate feel of the call centre situation in other countries. It is necessary, however, to discuss some details of the country best known for its call centre industry, namely India.

## 2.5 Call Centres in India

While conducting the literature search on the call centre industry, a country that kept appearing was India. This is because India is the leader in terms of Business process outsourcing (BPO), which involves the transfer of tasks and responsibilities to a third party through handling and manipulating data – including voice data. The range of these tasks is typically back-office administration, data capture and customer contact (Naidoo & Neville, 2006: 4). This is where the call centre industry comes in. Although the call centre industry in India has not been established for long, specifically during the last half of the 1990s, it is maturing very speedily (Mitchell 2005: 2). Thahoor (2005: 78) speaks of how to many, the call centre has become the symbol of India's rapidly globalising economy. According to Mynott (2003: 1), in 1998 there were just a handful of call centre offices in the country. Presently the industry employs a significantly large portion of the workforce.

The reason behind India's success in the call centre industry is due to UK and US based companies particularly, which prefer to outsource to India as it offers a population of highly skilled, articulate professionals who are seen as the cream of India's educated workforce. Indian call centres apparently only recruit college graduates. The competition for jobs is intense, but agents are relatively cheap to employ (Thahoor, 2005: 78, Mynott, 2003:1). The average Indian call centre offers a salary of Rs 8000 to Rs 12 000 (\$181.116 to \$ 271.675) as a start to 'freshers' (young adults coming from school), compared to the same amount, in dollars and pounds, paid to US and UK agents (Smith 2007).

While other countries such as South Africa, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Mauritius, Kenya and Ghana are entering the outsourcing boom, India will be the leader for many years to come (Mitchell, 2005: 1). According to Mitchell (2005: 3) call-centre and software firms in India are well positioned for continued quality and process improvements because of

their progressive knowledge of the subject areas in which people work. He also speaks of how proficiency and high-level capabilities showed by Indian professionals are a force to be reckoned with, and compete very well with the US and the UK (2005b: 4). It is thus impossible to miss that India indeed has a strong foothold in the industry. It is necessary at this point to return to the local, and assess the situation of the call centre here.

## **2.6 Call Centres in South Africa**

Within South Africa, call centres are reportedly the fastest growing service industry, with an expansion rate of 20% per year, much like India (Omar 2005: 267). The expansion of this sector was spurred on following the transition that took place subsequent to the 1994 elections. Although the first call centre was established in 1976, the 1996 adoption of the Growth, Employment and Redistribution programme (GEAR), with its embrace of foreign direct investment encouraged a boom in the development of the call centre industry (Du Plooy 2006: 14).

The South African president, Thabo Mbeki, considers call centres a national economic priority, indeed, in his 2006 'state of the nation' address to Parliament, he identified the call centre industry as one of the high potential sectors which are targeted in the government's strategy to boost the country's economic growth rate and create employment (SA Info 2006). This above mentioned strategy aims to make South Africa the world's third biggest BPO centre, a place where foreign investors will aim to position behind India and the Philippines by the year 2008. In line with these aims, the South African government has launched a BPO support programme worth millions of rands (Benner, Lewis and Omar 2007: 10). The Department of Trade and Industry ensures that call centres will be a key focus point for major future employment, especially among school leavers (Philp 2006a:5). This expansion is also in line with the national government's Accelerated and Shared Growth Initiative for South Africa (Asgisa), which has singled out the BPO centre as having a huge potential for growth (Gedye 2006: 32). Moreover, the government is committed to creating a call centre workforce through free training and development programmes.

One advantage of building call centres in South Africa is it has the same time zone as Europe, while India is many hours ahead. South Africa also has an abundance of skilled, highly trained young people and boasts a large pool of European language skills. It encompasses world class telecoms and information systems that are affordable and reliable. There is also a high quality solution to deliver the same service as in North America and Europe at 40 to 50% less cost (Financial Times 2004). According to Streeter, founder of a call centre agent recruitment agency, one of the reasons why international companies prefer South African agents is because 'aside from cost savings, agents here are just better – South Africans are still maybe a bit formal, but they're more polite, and they work harder' (Philp 2006b: 5).

Macmillan (2004: 1) speaks of how in 2003 there were already 452 customer call centres registered in South Africa. The Data Monitor Report (2004: 2) breaks this number down into a figure of 38,400 call centre agents in 2003 to an approximated 69,600 in 2008, at an annual growth rate of 13%. Indeed, there are still many more UK, US, and European companies that are interested in investing in South African call centres (Philp 2006a: 5). The South African Contact Centre Community (Saccom) (Mngcungusa, 2005) further reports how SA is steadily improving its positioning as a destination for offshore investments with several cases in particular, spurred along by government initiatives such as the deregulation of the telecom industry. The call centre industry, according to Saccom, contributes nearly 0.92% of the country's gross domestic product (Mngcungusa 2005:1).

## **2.7 Demographics of South African Call Centres**

A similar study to those conducted in the US, France and Denmark was also done in South Africa. It was found that the gender ratio in South Africa was slightly different to those mentioned above. Nevertheless, women still predominated, at 57%, as opposed to about 70% in other countries. Furthermore, 26 % of the call centres looked at said that 75% of their agents comprised of women (Benner, Lewis & Omar 2007: 18). This reinforces that even though in different countries there is a varying degree of divergence; women are still predominant in the call centre industry.

South Africa is known for its divisions by race. For this reason, it is important to mention the race composition of call centre agents in this country. Although 79% of the country is comprised of blacks, it was found that in the call centres under study, only 27% of agents, 18% of team leaders, and 7% of managers were black (Benner, Lewis & Omar 2007: 17). This under representation of blacks in these call centres is shadowed by a predominance of whites and coloureds. Even though the coloured population make up only 9% of the total population, they comprised of 28% agents, 19% team leaders and 11% managers. The white population makes up 10% of the total population, yet they were 26% of agents, 37% of team leaders and 61% of managers - the largest representation of managers and team leaders in the three races (Benner, Lewis & Omar 2007: 17). These figures have an important bearing on the income levels, because they will undoubtedly affect the class status of these workers. They also show that class status still, as of old, is affected by race, and vice-versa.

Pertaining to educational qualifications, it was found that the core employees of the call centres in the survey mostly have a matric qualification, at 84%. This is markedly different from what was found in India, which was that more than 70% of call centre agents had a college degree. In South Africa, only 13% had a post matric qualification- in the form of a certificate, diploma or degree while 3% had less than matric (Benner, Lewis & Omar 2007: 18). These numbers also vary from international ones, with South Africa having the largest number of agents with only a matric qualification.

When considering earnings, it was found that the size of the call centre played a role in determining salary packages. Smaller call centres, with numbers of agents being below 50, paid a larger salary package, of around R80,600 a year. The type of call centre also played a considerable role in determining wages for its workforce, with high-end manufacturing paying R97,250 per annum, while telecommunications only paid R58,800. The average salary package of the call centre agent however, is R76,800 (Benner, Lewis & Omar 2007: 18-20). This is less than what Stats SA found to be the average earnings of employees in formal, non agricultural industries, which was R82,644 per year (Stats SA 2007). This shows that call centre agents earn slightly less than employees in the formal sector.

The attrition rates in South African call centres proved to be generally lower than those found internationally, averaging at 16% per year in the survey conducted (Benner, Lewis & Omar 2007: 20). The reasons given for call centre agents leaving were either that they were retiring, were promoted within the organisation, or had found better packages externally (Benner, Lewis & Omar 2007: 21). Most agents were indeed looking for better offers, as a lot of call centre agents saw the job as an entry-level position, and sought to use it as a stepping stone to gain ‘better’ employment within the same company or in the industry (Benner, Lewis & Omar 2007: 22).

Training and development in the call centre industry has been recognised by the Services SETA, which in recent years has developed standards for certifying skills for call centre agents. However, apart from these skills, most call centre agents obtain their training through formal training on the job. The period for this training varies, depending on the size of the call centre, as well as the type of industry the call centre is in, ranging from 17 to 25 days (Benner, Lewis & Omar 2007: 24).

## 2.8 Conclusion

The call centre has become an important occupation in today’s society. It has gained momentum in recent years all over the world, with some places being more advanced with its development than others. From the literature above, one can ascertain that India is indeed the world’s leading country in terms of a number of people employed in the industry. Simultaneously, however, it is also notable that South Africa is fast becoming a serious contender, as international corporations are also showing a preference for South African call centre agents, as opposed to those in other countries.

The literature above however, shows that there have not been enough inroads made about important sociological issues such as the class identity of call centre agents. Although the general characteristics and demographics found in the call centre industry have been looked at, the subjective understandings of the agents has been overlooked. This study therefore aims to discover the identity of call centre agents. When this is merged with the information that exists, there may be a chance to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the call centre agent in South Africa.

## CHAPTER 3: CLASS UNDERSTANDINGS AND IDENTITY

### 3.1 The Characteristics of the Service Proletariat

There has been a general trend to refer to people working in service occupations such as the call centre agents as the ‘service proletariat’ of this era. An example of authors who use this term are Nickson and Warhust (2003). They cite Korczynsky (2003: 3), who sees the service occupation in two ways: firstly, that the economy is of a ‘servile’ nature, because the customer/client carries the connotation of being served, and the ‘service’ takes on a derogatory note of servitude and even slavery to the person serving the customer. Massey (1995: 176) has identified that in the past two decades, even ‘high status’ professional employees such as doctors, teachers, social workers and administrative workers have been undergoing a process of ‘proletarianisation’, due to changes in their working conditions and social status. Alternatively, there is the positive stance that appreciates that the workers are working within an information society, and thus use their thinking skills, to manipulate symbols and ideas, to identify and solve problems, thus showing highly skilled, creative and increasingly autonomous behaviour. These behaviours are also seen as typical of the dominant class (Nickson & Warhust 2003).

In the service economy, education and knowledge has been emphasised, an example being attempts in Britain to break the low skill/low pay trap by spreading access to training and development opportunities more widely (Felstead, Gallie & Green 2004: 149). This ‘upskilling’ tends towards a move to a knowledge based economy, with the expansion of information-rich, professional, intellectual, technical and scientific occupations arising. However, on the flipside of the coin, this so called ‘upskilling’ is seen by some as ‘deskilling’. ‘Deskilling’ means employees’ skills are fragmented and routinised, while managerial control is emphasised (Grugulis, Warhurst & Keep 2004: 3). Indeed, this is seen as a relevant characteristic of work in the UK and the US, both in the services and manufacturing industries – ICT and knowledge intensive work such as call centres and software development, to be precise (Grugulis, Warhurst & Keep 2004: 4). The occupations cited by Massey above are also influenced by these factors.

Another attribute found in the service economy is that of the ‘emotional proletariat’. Taylor and Bain (1999: 103) refer to it as emotional labour, where one has to suppress their own feelings in order to accommodate the customer or client’s. They use examples of call centre agents having to ‘smile down the phone’ all the time. The fact that surveillance technology is so deeply embedded into the call centre’s environment makes emotional labour all the more stressful for the agent (Taylor & Bain 1999: 104). Even during training, the agents are trained on emotional and aesthetic skills. In this way organisations attempt to manage the way their employees look and feel (Grugulis, Warhurst & Keep 2004: 7). This shows how the measures of control are expanding due to the growing world of technology.

To expand on aesthetic skills, an interesting phenomenon that Nickson and Warhurst present, which has similarities with notions of call centre agents and class found in this report, is that there are service occupations that are referred to as ‘style’, ‘high end services’ or aesthetic labour (Nickson & Warhurst 2003: 4). Employees are expected to have a stylish appearance; a certain manner of speaking and other such traits which are generally linked with an upper class. The workforce in this category is also more enhanced from the traditional, non styled service labour. These aesthetic capacities are mobilised, developed and commodified during the process of training, recruitment and selection and are then turned into competencies and skills (Nickson & Warhurst 2003: 11). These skills and competencies are seen as appealing to the customer, either visually or orally. A simplified example can be ‘looking good’, or ‘sounding right’. Indeed, job advertisements for such positions consist of key phrases such as ‘smart appearance’ or ‘well spoken’. Due to this, there is a suggestion that those employed in these circumstances would be middle class, young and have a naturally cultural and corporeal capital (Nickson & Warhurst 2004: 2).

Indeed, students are popular candidates for service occupations (Nickson & Warhurst 2004: 10). This is because they are considered to be good quality labour since they are perceived by employers as having good customer care characteristics, are highly flexible and also low cost. In addition to this is the real possibility that most students are often middle class, and thus possess the cultural capital preferred by employers (Nickson



& Warhurst 2003: 10). The impression made is then that the source of labour is coming from the middle class, rather than the working class segment.

Nickson and Warhurst are of the opinion that some service occupations need new categorization in class terms, since the old ones do not adequately represent them. They stress the need to reinvestigate and re-conceptualise these worker's notions of class (2003: 4). Nickson and Warhurst also accordingly identify the fact that the changing nature of the service-based economy increases the difficulty of locating particular occupations in class terms (2003: 4). They make mention of the considerable disagreement among sociologists about the class situation of retail and clerical workers. This mixed experience, which may be referred to as 'class hybridity', leads to further confusion about identity and belonging.

Now that there has been a background explanation of the service proletariat, it is necessary to look at further explanations on identity and class identity, which has shown to be a challenging ground.

### **3.2 Class Explanations in Brief**

According to Marx's class interpretations we know that we have the working class, which is at the lower end of the class structure, and is always exploited. This exploited class is the one that harbours the proletariat, and in modern times, the service proletariat. Then we have the bourgeoisie, who are the ones who exploit these working class people. In between we have the middle class, which is the one in which some white collar employees are assigned. Croft (1993: 15) sees the 'white collar' label as playing an ideological role in dividing low-paid office workers from what she sees as their counterparts in the factories. Instead they are lumped together with those who are directly managing operations for the capitalist class. The latter then, would be middle class, whilst the former would be working class. Esland and Salaman (1980: 20) also support this contention by stating, for the purposes of their book, that 'the term middle class does not include such non-manual workers such as shop assistants, secretaries, clerks... and all the many other 'white collar jobs' that have developed as a result of the automation and enlargement of the bureaucratic office...neither is the term middle class used to include

workers in service occupations' This explanation they give immediately takes call centre agents out of the middle class segment.

On a slightly different plane however, is what Game and Pringle (1983: 82) pointed out, namely that even though work can become routinised and bureaucratised, this does not automatically give the workers a proletarian consciousness or place them in the ranks of the working class. This implies then that even though call centre agents share a lot with manual workers in terms of pay, working conditions, management styles and job design, and for this reason can actually be referred to as the 'new proletariat', they do not necessarily take on that role. An opposing comparison is made by Watson, Bunzel, Lockyer & Scholarios, who see the declining differentials of average manual wages with the deskilling and routinising impact of technological changes in the office as a reason for the service proletariat to identify with manual proletarians (2000: 5). Belt (2003: 3) also believes that many of the people employed in the service economy are the ones who would formerly have been manual proletarians.

The above indicates that although structurally the call centre agent may be working class, there is still the question of whether they will accept that identity, i.e. there is still the question of whether they will have a consciousness of that class. A way in which to further attempt to understand these workers would be observing how identity depends on other societal factors to create class consciousness.

### **3.3 Identity and Shared Experience**

As Castells (1997: 6) has noted 'Identity is people's source of meaning and experience'. This does not change when looking at identity in terms of class composition. He also acknowledges that, sociologically speaking, all identities are constructed - the question then being 'how, from what, by whom, and for what' (Castells 1997: 7). The answer to this he poses as arising from history, geography, biology, productive and reproductive institutions, collective memory and personal fantasies, power apparatuses and religious revelations (Castells 1997: 7). Woodward (2004: 6) sees identity as requisite of some awareness on the part of the person. She states that people choose to identify with a certain identity or group. Gervais-Lambony (2006) then asks the question: does an

identity refer to an individual identification of who one is or to the feeling of belonging to a group with whom one shares this identity? This presents us with a two-fold representation of identity: Identity to the self and a collective identity. Since a collective identity is shared amongst the collective group members, it means that each of those members who share this identity is aware of this fact – in other words, they should be conscious of this identity. This consciousness of an identity is what we are attempting to find in this study.

Woodward (2004: 6) emphasises the importance of structures which are beyond human control, but shape identity, as well as agency, the degree of control that humans themselves can exert over who they are. Linking to this, one can see how the experiences that people encounter in their work context can ultimately affect their identity in the social context, and needles to mention, their self identity. Callinicos (1989) speaks of how agents have shared interests due to the structural abilities that they derive from their position in the relations of production. It is these shared interests that result in class stratification and identification.

To present a foundation to the work identity, Jenkins (2004: 23) elaborates that organisations are structured and task-oriented collectivities. They therefore consist of different members who each have their own individual identities. However, their experience of the same work presents them with a shared identity. Within this he gives us an idea of social identity formation in the workplace. For this identity to be more complete however, one has to include other aspects of life. There are also other contexts where identity is manifested, and these also affect the identity formation at work. The underlying assumption that one can ascertain from this is that identity is formulated from many different contexts, and each of these contexts affect the other, thus resulting in an identity that is individual to a particular person, but also allows this person to be part of collectives with similar identities. In the same breath, Puttergill and Lielde (2006: 12) point out that individuals draw meaning from belonging to more than one group, and construct and maintain multiple identities that emerge under different circumstances and groups in their daily lives. This shows us just where society is incorporated in the identity, and it is thus notable to realise that identity encompasses the owning of a specific identity, i.e. a consciousness.

McDonald (2006: 198) asserts that identities do not only exist within themselves, they are affected by other features, and she mentions here the impact of the past on identity. Ichharam (2006: 112) looks at the shared experience of garment workers and how they identify themselves as workers, and Van Rooyen (2006: 87-110) that of flower producers, and how they share the experience of a desperate work situation. In both of these studies the focus is on women and their experiences of life and work. Therefore in this sense, the members of both groups share an identity in that regard. This relates to the study at hand because it looks at a group of people, with varying characteristics, and attempts to define shared experience of their class status, based on the work that they do, their incomes and the relationship they have with that work.

Devine *et al* (2005: 145) also note that people's lives outside work shapes their view of society and politics. This also implies that call centre agents, or any other type of worker for that matter, may find reasons to identify with a class which they may not structurally be correct in identifying with. Jenkins (2004: 83) also speaks of how a category of people can be evasive about which class they belong to, because members are not always aware of their collective identification. In order for class consciousness to occur, Marx has said that the working class has to 'emerge as a collective historical agent'. Callinicos (1989: 135) reiterates the same philosophy when he speaks of how people form collectivities in order to pursue their objectives. Collective action, therefore, is an attempt by agents to coordinate their actions so that they can achieve some goal or goals. When one considers the strike action that has taken place in South Africa in recent years, one can identify these contentions. It is also apparent that identifying with a class is imperative for one to gain a class consciousness strong enough to help future generations of that same class.

Much in line with the obscurity that this study attempts to decipher, Beck asks the imperative question: are advanced societies class societies? (1989: 91) Indeed, this question is valuable to answer because it defines whether technological advancement and change has affected society's structure. He speaks of how, particularly in Germany, the inequalities existent in major labour groups have not changed significantly, save for a few shifts and reallocations. And all of this is in the midst of all the technological and economic transformations occurring in the world (Beck 1989: 91). This then means the

answer to the question is ‘yes’ – the need to assess the class situation ever more vigorously is made more apparent.

Deducing from E. P. Thompson’s definition of class incorporating consciousness, viz. ‘when we speak of class we are thinking of a very loosely defined body of people who share the same categories of interests, social experience, traditions and value systems. These people have a disposition to behave as a class, to define themselves in their own actions and in relation to other groups of people in class ways’ (1963: 9). For a class to be conscious, it first has to recognise itself as a class. Devine and Savage (2005: 143) speak of how researchers have seen consciousness as the intermediary between class structure and action. Marx has said that ‘it is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness’. From this, one can take note that there are strong links, not only between identity and consciousness, but also between experiences in society and their impact on identity as well as consciousness. Wallerstein (1979: 287) also tells us of how arguments were made that the only meaningful constructs are the ‘subjective’ ones; meaning that members are only members of such classes that they consider themselves to be in.

### **3.4 Class Identity and the Worker**

Devine *et al* (2005: 144), analyse Halle’s study of blue collar workers in the US. These workers held three different positions. Firstly they did not identify themselves as working class, even though their workplace experiences generated a strong sense of being ‘working men’. Secondly, when they were out of work, they identified themselves as being ‘lower middle-class’ or ‘middle-class’, this is due to the fact that they saw themselves as a group of people who earned a certain income, and thus had a certain standard of living- which was shared by blue as well as white collar workers. Lastly, as far as politics was concerned, they lived according to an all-inclusive identity of being ‘American and living in the United States.’ These blue collar workers, therefore, had multiple identities that were context specific and their middle class identity came from their everyday lives and preoccupations outside of work (Devine, *et al*, 2005: 144).

Woodward (2004: 80) also examines the relation of income as a source of identity in an individual as well as collective basis. The patterns in which one is employed, e.g., the recruitment process and prerequisites for a job; as well as the way their income is distributed, e.g. daily, weekly or monthly wages, and the methods of payment, are important structures that help shape identity, just as is the way that it shapes their lifestyle.

Carter (1985: 10), has maintained that the 'orthodox Marxists' saw white collar workers as either objectively proletarian or in the process of becoming so. This is based on the fact that like the proletarian, they also have to sell their labour power. On this basis, therefore, the fact that they are non-manual workers does not necessarily mean that they are denied the proletarian status. Thus, all those waged groups who are regarded as middle class are in actuality a different segment of the working class. Frankell (cited in Carter 1985: 14) further stated that 'as non-manual labour increases in proportion to manual, the likeness between the lower strata of the former and manual labour will increase, both economically and status-wise, and class consciousness and trade unionism will increase'. The first part of this statement one can agree with, especially since there is an upsurge of new non-manual occupations that are very similar to manual labour, particularly pertaining to the way people identify with their work roles and wages. The public servants in South Africa (teachers, government employees and nurses) who have been involved in strike action over May and June of 2007 are an example of this. The latter part of Frankell's assertion however, is part of what this study aims to grapple with. This is due to the uncertainty that the call centre agent in particular, is class conscious.

According to Savage, research in the 1970s demonstrated that many people simply did not have consistent or clear class images (2000: 27). Researchers struggled to find workers who were consistently proletarian, deferential or instrumental. There was a feeling that no clear patterns of class consciousness existed and different kinds of views where 'wheeled on' in different situations, i.e. people adopted the kind of class that best suited any given situation. Even though this was a situation more than thirty years ago, some of the conditions mentioned still exist, thus the need for this study.

### 3.5 Status and its Relation to Class and Identity

Mills (1953: 71) spoke of how occupations, since they are sources of incomes, are connected with class positions, and how since these normally carry an expected quota of prestige both on and off the job, are also relevant to status positions. This involves certain degrees of power over other people, not only in terms of the job, but also in other social arenas. Occupations, therefore, are tied to class, status and power, as well as to skill and function. This is perhaps another reason why white-collar workers may not identify themselves with manual workers, who are in the working class. They see the skills of the job that they perform as more advanced than the skills required for manual work. Indeed, Belt, Nickson and Warhurst have mentioned aesthetic skills- looking good and sounding right. This joined with the use of technologies undoubtedly makes these workers not able to identify themselves with manual labourers.

Whitehill and Takezawa (1986: 191) took another interesting angle at the differences within the actual work context. They stated how tasks are grouped into jobs in an organisation, where others may be defined as superior and subordinate. It is clear that white collar workers are found in both subordinate and superior positions. Indeed, in a call centre, the agents are subordinate to supervisors, team leaders and managers – yet they are all white collar. This shows the complexity in identifying the class of call centre agents even further, because it is apparent that they cannot be classed solely according to their white collar label, since this is very versatile.

Prestige is also recognisable in the differentiation of the types of clothes workers wear to work. Mills (1953: 74) spoke of the stylisation of the white collar worker's appearance, because most white collar jobs had permitted wearing street clothes on the job. This has remained the case today. A simple example that can be used here is how the people who work for a cleaning company have to wear a particular uniform to work, whereas their managers or owners of the organisation can wear their own clothes. Even though these people work for a single organisation, rank gives them more freedom, and to an extent, this can be used as an example of how the white collar worker has more status, even in terms of the fact that they have choice in what they can wear to the workplace. This links to another interesting factor that Woodward identifies; namely that the way in which people feel about their jobs and their incomes depends on what others have and

how others see them (Woodward 2004: 80). This alludes to the fact that people want to identify with an occupation and an income that others see as 'better'.

Robertson and Ntuli (2005: 3) speak of how rising income means a larger number of status purchases, such as cars. This gives us further reasons why white collar workers are unlikely to form a working class identity; it serves their purposes of seeking the status quo and having a little more prestige than someone else in society. By being members of the middle class, even if it is the lower middle class, they are guaranteed a spot above the working class, which means they escape the possibility of belonging to the lower echelons of society. This in turn gives them a higher status, not only to the members of the working class, but also amongst themselves and also among the upper classes. Mitigating that status and prestige have a large role to play in why lower level white-collar workers are unlikely to form a working class identity.

### **3.6 Conclusion**

It is apparent from the literature that class is still a contested terrain. Indeed, after perusal of the literature on class, one is left with the feeling that it seems quite a mammoth task to attempt to classify any group of people! Important factors that the literature has brought to the fore are that there are many dimensions to class, such as income, the status ascribed to one's job etc, which are in turn affected by class position. The same applies to identity, where individual and collective identities influence each other and present a social identity. Joining these two phenomena ultimately means dealing with an ever more complex concept. However, it has been clarified that class can be a facet of identity, be it individual or collective, and vice-versa.

Another important issue to note is that shared experienced is easier to observe, and thus is ultimately easier to understand. This is important to a study of this nature in particular, since it is concerned with the subjective understanding and identities of the individual within a collective. However, the collective is given a larger credence than the individual, in this case, since it the arena in which the query is constructed within.

When addressing the issues of class and identity in the changing world, we can see that the questions are more compounded by the actual, tangible and recognisable



changes brought about by globalisation. By this I mean technological advancement and the emphasis on knowledge and education. This has had varying impacts the world over, and has put a magnifying glass on occupations such as those in the services sector. However, these investigations have only gone so far as to determine the extent of global change on occupations as a totality. This automatically means then, that an occupation such as the call centre is still relatively little understood in terms of how its class identity may be structured. Indeed, the literature found has begun to look at issues of class and identity in the service occupation, but nothing has been done in the way of stipulating this further for call centre agents specifically.

What has been clarified by the literature, however, is that there are many similarities with the occupations of the past and those of today – particularly the ambiguity surrounded by white collar workers. Today's occupations may be of a vastly different nature to those of the past, but this can also be mainly in terms of functionality, or new technologies, and knowledge created by advance and progression in society. This puts a question mark on whether the identities have also evolved with the changes, or whether these changes are merely 'aesthetic'. Indeed, in order to discover something of such a subjective nature, it was necessary to follow a certain prescribed methodology in conducting this research – one that would ensure a better subjective understanding of call centre agents. The next chapter outlines how this was done.

## CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH DESIGN

### 4.1 Research Methodology

The qualitative research approach was deemed appropriate for this study. According to Henning, Van Rensburg and Smit, (2004: 5) when we speak of qualitative research, we are looking into an inquiry that places emphasis on the qualities, characteristics and properties of a phenomena being studied in order to get a fuller understanding and explanation. In the qualitative approach the interpretative theory of knowledge occurs when 'phenomena and events are understood through mental processes of interpretation which are influenced by and interact with social context' Henning *et al* (2004: 20). This means that a qualitative researcher will primarily engage in observations, tools and conversations, interactions, patterns of activity as well as interviews as methods of data collection (Henning *et al* 2004: 5). This is an exploratory study about how people grapple with understanding themselves in relation to a complex concept, in this case, class.

### 4.2 Rationale behind the Choice of Participant Observation and Interviews

The intentions of this study were to discover how call centre agents comprehend their class identity. The appropriate way of realising the above intention was to apply the participant observation approach. In participant observation the researcher observes people in their natural environment, and the researcher is a part of, and participates in the activities of the people or the group that is being studied (Sullivan 2001: 324). This approach is also, as seen by Neuman (2003: 143) a research choice being taken based on something that happens to a person or someone he/she knows i.e. personal experience. Another reason for this choice is that in this particular case, an emphasis is placed on the human factor, as well as intimate, first hand knowledge of the research setting (Neuman, 2003: 141). Furthermore, still in line with what Neuman says, the study was also posed in such a way as to take advantage of personal insight, feelings and human perspectives to understand social life more fully.

Burawoy (1991: 2) denotes some of the advantages of participant observation; which are that it studies people in their own time and space in their own everyday lives.

This means that we do not only have the direct observation of those people's acts, but we also see how they understand and experience those acts. It also allows the researcher to juxtapose what people say against what they actually do (Burawoy 1991: 3). He also speaks of how understanding is achieved by virtual or actual participation in social situations, through a real or constructed dialogue between participant and observer (hermeneutic social science). Chapman (2001: 23) sees it as important to supplement participant observation with interviews, in order to gain a depth to the explanation. Indeed, these are the methods that my study was incorporated within.

The research was approached in an interpretivist fashion, meaning that emphasis was placed on interpretation of the experience of those being researched (Henning *et al* 2004: 21). This also means openness to different sources of discovery and methods of analysis. The knowledge obtained therefore, was constructed by more than just observable phenomena, but also by describing people's intentions, beliefs, values, reasons, meaning making and understanding. Indeed, this ties rather well with the objective of this particular research, since it is interested in the subjective understanding of the call centre agent's class identity. As Henning *et al* (2004: 20) puts it, an interpretive theory of knowledge occurs when 'phenomena and events are understood through mental processes of interpretation which are influenced by and interact with social context'. For this to occur there has to be a level of comfort and rapport between the researcher and those being researched (Sullivan, 2001: 325). Consequently, I was participating in a small scale social setting as one of the call centre agents, with close relationships with them.

The methodology used in my endeavour to approach the actual implementation of this study had a significant bearing in the research question, as well as what had been discovered by the literature. In line with one of the themes of the study, experience proved to be an immovable factor in constructing this study. Hence the decision to embark on participant observation, which magnified the experience of the researcher as well, and used that as an important tool to use in coming closer to answering the research question.

### 4.3 Research Settings

The research was conducted in three main settings. The first call centre I worked in part time, as a student two years before the study commenced; this call centre I will address as Call Centre A. This call centre was involved with assisting retailers with items in their shops. Most of my data and analysis came from the second call centre, namely Call Centre B, which was a telecommunications company. The research here was conducted on a consciously scientific basis. The remainder of this study generally refers to incidents that occurred in Call Centre B, unless otherwise specified, as this is where the bulk of the study actually took place. Other settings include the agencies that one had to register with before being labeled a worthy candidate to be a call centre agent. Several tests such as IT competency tests (computer literacy), personality tests, role plays and interviews were conducted before I was accepted at the agencies. I went to three such agencies, but have not given them too much mention in the study as they chiefly served as an opening for me to access the call centres. There is mention made however, in a conjoined fashion, of an agency that led me to the third call centre, Call Centre C.

### 4.4 Participant Observation in Practice

Being a participant observer within the workplace meant that I was overt, as well as an intimate friend to the people being studied (Neuman, 2003: 372). I also had what Adler (cited in Neuman, 2003: 372) terms as ‘complete membership’, meaning that I converted into this lifestyle of being a call centre agent, and was thus more able to experience the feelings that the workers themselves experience. Holy (cited in Neuman, 2003: 372) present this same notion in this way:

The researcher does not participate in the lives of subjects in order to observe them, but observes while participating fully in their lives...through living with the people being studied...She comes to share the same meanings, with them in the process of active participation in their social life...Research, means, in this sense, socialisation to the culture being studied

This meant then, in order to get a clearer understanding of these workers, I had to become acquainted with them on a more personal level, so that I could have an idea of their activities away from work, their lifestyles, their education, their views on social matters, what their future hopes and aspirations were, etc, some of which would undoubtedly yield some light in defining their class identity. I even lived with two call centre agents from Call Centre B for four months. Additionally, an average day at work implied many other things, apart from the work itself that undoubtedly brought some realisations to the fore, such as how the workers dress, where they go for their lunch breaks as well as who they associate with, amongst others. All these factors were a start in the complex task of finding the class identity and the meaning thereof, of these individuals. I agree with Burawoy's contention that participant observation 'best exemplifies what is distinctive about the practice of all social science' (1991: 3).

In order to adequately represent the experience of working in a call centre as it occurred, I had to keep a notebook, which I wrote into regularly after work. Each entry was dated, so that I could also be able to monitor or analyse how much time impacted on my feelings and thoughts of the experience. I also had a smaller book which resembled a diary, which I took to work and used as one. In here I often jotted down some incidents, feelings and thoughts that came to me during the course of the work day so that I could remember to include them later. This proved very helpful because I was able to capture most if not all of the significant events that occurred while I was at work.

I used the participant observation process in order to identify who would be the most relevant people to interview. Furthermore, the participant situation also allowed me to understand the agents at a more personal level than I would have been able to if I had used only interviews. It also proved to assist greatly during the interview situation, because I could understand some of the terms and situations that the agents took for granted that could have proven to be complex for anyone else to understand. I could also identify which questions would be most appropriate to ask, and which the agents would find easy to understand and answer in an honest manner. Additionally, my personal experience of their situation further supported my understanding.

The participant situation facilitated the chance to have several casual conversations with many of the call centre agents. In cases such as this I would have a natural conversation with them, but make a mental note of something significant they would say and also insert that into one of my notebooks. Like Whyte (2001: 163) says, 'any able fieldworker will supplement what has been learned from observing and participating with some interviewing'. There was often plenty of opportunity for this to occur, both within the workplace as well as away from it. This is because I had managed to establish social relationships with some of the agents, and during the study we had three informal, purely social gatherings away from the workplace. Another factor that compounded the ability for casual conversation was the fact that I lived in a complex that was a walking distance away from the call centre, and hence had numerous call centre agents from the same company also living there. Often I would walk or drive to work with them. This made it exceedingly easy to become part of them, to be included in their lifestyles as well as their conversations.

#### 4.5 Interviews



The in-depth interviews that I conducted with a few of my colleagues were necessary because I needed some clarification on various issues that arose during participant observation. The interviews were conducted a few weeks after I had terminated my employment at Call Centre B. By this stage I had built rapport with the agents, and also identified who would be most able to contribute to the study. These interviews served as an irreplaceable supplement to the participant observation. The people who I chose to have more formal interviews with were selected on a primarily representative basis, but also because I had come to know them quite well through the participant observations. This knowledge of a more personal nature helped the agents to open up to me.

The formal interviews were structured in a flexible manner. There was a list of primarily open ended questions which were asked of each respondent. These interviews were recorded, and later transcribed in order to be incorporated into the study. The formal interviews proved to be relatively easy to conduct because agents were not difficult to contact, even though they were conducted after I had ceased to work for the company.

The interviewees still seemed to give frank and honest opinions, even though at this point I may have seemed like an outsider. This could be because their answers were not likely to be affected by my presence because they knew me rather well, and had no reason to feel that I was a threat to them in any way. They also knew that, like most others who are young and have just began call centre work, particularly as temporary staff, I was not likely to stay in the organisation for long. In my case this situation was further emphasised by the fact that they knew I had an honours degree and had begun an MA degree. This meant I was in a better position to market myself, and meant I was in a position to leave at any point.

Pseudonyms have been used for all the participants, both those quoted during participant observation, as well as those from the formal interviews. Although I stressed that confidentiality was a precondition, I also envisaged this as a constructive way to make the agents feel more comfortable with what they had to say, in case they had any fears of being exposed or of a negative opinion being formed of them based on what they had to say.



#### **4.5 Subject Themes**

The interpretation of the data was done with the use of themes that undertake to best address the research question, taking into consideration the order and expression of the literature, as well as that of the activities that took place on the ground. The ordering of these themes therefore also plays a role in how the explanation of these worker identities unfolded. It follows a chronological pattern which starts with the seeking of employment and the journey to discovering agent perceptions, investigated either through interviews or participant observation. The interviews were essentially the last stage of the process as it occurred on the ground. However, they are still used concurrently with the observations made during participant observation in order to best represent the themes.

## 4.6 Ethical Considerations

A matter of debate was whether I should inform my future employer and colleagues about my research study before I became employed. The key factor however, was that if I had told my employer that I needed the job for research purposes, I would probably not have been employed in the first place, and in a small way Science would have been poorer, for the study would not have been able to be conducted in a participant fashion. Chapman (2001: 29) speaks of how information gained through participation is much richer than that gained through a questionnaire. Indeed, the fact that the study has been conducted with the researcher as a covert participant observer has undoubtedly given a large amount of credence to the study. This is in line with what Whyte (2001: 163) has envisaged, namely that in some situations covert entry into the field may be the only way to gain access to the data. Indeed, he further reiterates how some of the richest data ever gathered in research was through covert observations, and he makes the example of fieldworkers such as Orvis Collin, Melville Dalton and Donald Roy, who conducted participant observations on factory workers.

Another factor to consider is that working part-time for call centres had been my method of gaining an extra income for almost two years. The only reason why this was not the case in the year the study was conducted was because I had permanent employment elsewhere before I decided to continue with the master's degree. Therefore I could still have been employed in a call centre, and thus decided to conduct this research while I was employed there.

Since this study was not concerned with exposing any company or persons, it did not harm the participants in any way. I have not mentioned any real names, either of the companies that I became involved with or the people I interviewed. In addition, since I am not going to be making any policy changes or any other such endeavours with this research, it is not intended to have any lasting impacts on the lives of any of the participants. I also informed the interviewees about my research and the reasons thereof before each discussion.



#### **4.7 Limitations**

One of the limitations of this study is to be found in the choice of methodology. The main concern is that being too close to the participants can lead to loss of objectivity or may contaminate the situation (Burawoy *et al* 1991: 2). In this study, however, this was avoided because the situation was not of such a sensitive nature that I as the researcher could not become emotionally entangled in it. Furthermore I also had real, personal experience of being a call centre agent myself, in Call Centre A, before the participant observation, and this meant that there were views/opinions that I already had from this experience, which could either be proved or disputed through the research in Call Centre B. Burawoy *et al* (1991: 2) also notes how validity may be compromised, due to the fact that intense research cannot always be generalised – ‘sociology’s ‘uncertainty principle’, the closer one gets to measurement on some dimensions; intensity and depth, the further one recedes on others; objectivity and validity’. This study is being undertaken due to the increase of call centres world wide, and as in all studies, it seeks to add to a body of knowledge that may lead to a greater understanding of the industry on the whole.

#### **4.8 Conclusion**

The research methodology used in this study was one of the study’s main strengths. It provided a footing where as many dimensions of the phenomena of interest could be covered, in that it included both the social, informal occurrences resulting from relations I had formed, as well as those in the workplace. The fact that participant observation has been used to research a relatively new topic in South Africa, also adds importance to the study.



## CHAPTER 5: EXPERIENCES IN A SOUTH AFRICAN CALL CENTRE

### 5.1 Introduction

This chapter concentrates mostly on themes structured in a way that best attempts to answer the research question: How do call centre agents understand their class identity? The latter sections of this chapter will require the perusal of the appendix, which examines the interviewees in detail. The beginning focuses on how I was employed in Call Centre A, and then B. It also describes the experience of the recruitment process of Call Centre C, which is important for comparative purposes. The next section will then go on to explain the call centre environment, specifically in term of what the visual presentation is like. The section after that will look at the process of training, which will be followed by the actual experience of being on the call centre floor taking calls and interacting with customers and colleagues.

The hierarchy of the positions in the call centre have important demographics that will allow for valuable comparisons with the literature and also aid us in gaining a sense of how the people in the call centre are structured. This, along with the racial characteristics of the call centre is explained. The way the agents identify with the work that they do will also help in determining their experience of their jobs and ultimately how this impacts on their identity. A brief look at the life cycle of the agents will aim to give some reasons behind why call centre agents are where they are, and where they want to be. The nature of the work they do as well as their own understandings of their identities will be closing sections which will give us an answer to the research questions.

### 5.2 Entering the Industry

#### 5.2.1 *The Recruitment Process*

In Call Centre A, I had gained the employment in a very simple fashion. The call centre was near to the university I was attending and was in need of mainly English speaking students to work as casuals for flexible shifts. They simply placed an advertisement on

one of the campus notice boards and I came across one of these and applied. I was called for an interview, and got the job.

My practice as a call centre agent in Call Centre A made it relatively easy to gain employment in Call Centre B. However, the process of becoming employed in a call centre had become much more tedious, because there were now agencies all over the place which one had to go through before becoming employed in a call centre. These agencies had numerous assessments on aspects such as computer literacy, voice recognition, hearing and role plays, which one had to pass before being considered for a call centre position. Impressive command of the English language had also become considerably more important. I went to be interviewed at three of these agencies. All of them took about four hours and in this time assessments were conducted. The actual interviews rarely lasted longer than seven minutes. During these few minutes a strict review of my CV was done. After a few months one of these agencies called me back for a position at one of South Africa's leading telecommunications company's call centre divisions, Call Centre B.

A few weeks into my employment in Call Centre B, I was invited by another one of the agencies mentioned above to assessments at a call centre operating for a medical company of considerable international standing (Call Centre C). The fact that the company had international links is a case in point that illustrates the outstretching arm of globalisation; it also suggests a global recognition amongst call centre agents. This call centre also stressed the importance of English command as it was global. The remuneration set at this call centre was set at three times the amount I was receiving at Call Centre B. This was affected by the fact that this was a less casual and flexible position, it would mean working everyday from eight to four, even though it also paid per hour. The payment per hour was almost twice the amount paid in Call Centre B.

When my agent called, she stressed that I must not be late, because it would reflect very poorly. I went to the assessment, and found I was one of about sixteen people. Unlike in Call Centres A and B, there were quite a few men present. There were two young black men, four Indian men, and the rest were young black women. The fact that there were more men found in this particular call centre, which paid more and was more 'up-market' has some connotations on the gender situation in the call centre

occupation, i.e. that men are likely to be larger in numbers in call centres that are better paying.

The atmosphere there was rather refined. The furniture and décor looked quite expensive. Almost all the people who were walking up and down the corridors were impeccably dressed. The somewhat casual air that I had found at both Call Centre A and B was not present here at all. One could deduce that this organisation was of a much higher standard. Indeed, the recruiter from the agency would often say: ‘Watch how you speak and what you say, how you carry yourself, because these guys want people of a very high calibre, and will never compromise’. When the assessor came I was made immediately aware of how toffee-nosed she was. She made no moves to be friendly or welcoming, and spoke through the nose<sup>1</sup>, a manner that was to me, rather inaudible, because her accent was so well polished to be as ‘impeccable’ as possible. She also spoke very fast. She was well dressed, and manicured. This can be compared with what has been said in the literature, because of the type of person they want to employ and the ‘high-end’ image they give to their prospective employees.

The assessments were conducted by a process of elimination, where after the assessment she would call out the names of the people who didn’t make it. These assessments were mainly testing personality, presumably in order to identify which people were truly suited for the job. After three assessments were completed, nine people remained. I was one of them.

After another two weeks or so the recruiter called me again, to say that I had made to the ‘next round’. I was literally five minutes late for this assessment and the evaluator was not impressed. She alleged that next time they would refuse to see me. This time I was called on to perform a ‘role-play’ with an irate customer. My recruiter had given me guidelines on how to solve the problem, saying that I should use the ‘BAR’ system – Background, Action then Result. Background meant I had to use my previous knowledge on the subject, which involved my experience with dealing with irate customers in my former job, as well as some information they had given to read up on a few minutes before the role play began. Action was what I did to resolve the situation with the most positive outcome, and result would be making sure that the customer was happy and got

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<sup>1</sup> In a clipped, monotonous tone (Often used in black languages to emphasise that a person knows English very well)

what he/she wanted, as well as ensuring that they do not have any ideas of changing service providers. A week later the agent called me, rather excited. ‘You’re exactly what they’re looking for, but you have another assessment!’ This time it was an interview. By this stage I was feeling confident that I had the job.

The interviewee was a coloured woman of around 30 years of age, who was well dressed, and had a superior air about her. During the interview she asked questions like ‘Is there any policy or new method of doing things that you implemented at your former call centre job?’ I was taken aback at some of the questions asked, because I was quite certain that I had the job. I was young, black, female and overqualified for the position. This however, did not end up counting for anything. The next level would have been a panel interview with some of the supervisors and team leaders, and apparently the last one before I was employed. However I was not called back, nor did I get any feedback. I later realised that although I was probably exactly what they were looking for, my qualifications and the observable fact that I was just looking for a way into the organisation was probably not favoured. Even though they needed more help for their customer base, I did not manage to hide my determination to become much more than a call centre agent.

### ***5.2.3 First Few Days at Call Centre B***

During the first few days at Call Centre B, the telecommunications company, the observations made were that the majority of the newly employed people (trainees) who had come from the agencies were well dressed. About three of them had their own cars, two of whom were brothers. Most of them ate from the cafeteria, which was inexpensive as they could buy a hotdog for R8. The most costly meal was about R30, which would have been expensive if they spent that amount every day. A lot of the trainees also had rather expensive cell phones. When considering that for the first two weeks we were not being paid, one can deduce that most of these expenses, including transportation costs, were supported by the parents, since the majority of trainees were still living at home. Many of the people were coming from areas which were very far away from this place of work, spending an average amount of R30 a day on transport. They saw being there as better than where they came from- which ranged from being shop assistants, to clerks,

secretaries, admin assistants, sales people and the like. Some were also students, and a number of them had not been working for a while. These people, however, constituted a different segment of the workforce, in that they were temps, who had just been employed, and not permanent staff, and this is where the basis of my argument lies.

#### ***5.2.4 What the Call Centre Looks Like***

The main function of all call centres, as portrayed in the literature, is for agents to take customers' calls and attempt to assist them with the issues they are calling about. The physical structure is therefore constructed in a way that enables this objective to be met in an effective and efficient way. Most of the detail in this section comes from Call Centre B, since this is where the study was mostly conducted. Call Centre A will however, be mentioned in certain cases for comparative purposes, to show different call centre structures.

The workplace of Call Centre B was made of three main structures. The first was the shop where the customers could purchase the products; the direct customer interface of the company. The second was called Corporate Park and it was where the offices of the managers, managing directors, executive managers and all the people who could be considered the true 'middle class', and even perhaps the upper class, were found. This part of the organisation housed the top management, which made strategic decisions. It also consisted of the financial sector of the organisation, i.e. the accountants, book keepers, and the like. This building was the best looking of the three. It was beautifully designed in a modern style, both inside and out. Diagonally opposite to this building was the third building, Service Park where all the telephonic service functions of the organisation were based. All the people who dealt with the different queries of the customers were based in this building. Although it was also a modern, professional, nice-looking building, if compared with the other there was an obvious difference, right down to the types of chairs used in the two buildings.

Service Park was where we found the call centre. This building was much more operational than Corporate Park. Service Park consisted of two floors. Both floors were used for call centre agents. The second floor is where I received training and thereafter also worked on. The actual call centre consisted of about a hundred workstations, which consisted of a cubicle for each agent, each equipped with a computer, headphones and an

ACD<sup>2</sup> system. Each cubicle was made of hardboard and was about two metres high. For the agents, the cubicles were only partitioned in the front and the side that would also be a partition for another agent. Four agents would sit at each of these spaces. An aspect of significance is that, similar to Call Centre A, there was no 'ownership' pertaining to workstations. One could find oneself sitting at a different place everyday of the week. The team leaders and supervisors of Call Centre B had exactly the same workstations as the agents, except that they had a conventional landline as well, in order to have an 'office number'. Because of this, their workstations belonged to them. The top-most supervisors also had more partitioning, three sides instead of two – one in front and one for each side, to separate their 'offices' and set them out from the rest of the agents. The people who were responsible for the direct management of the call centre operations were also situated in the same building. However, they had sealed offices of their own, a slight distance away from the call centre agents.

This kind of structure was similar to that of Call Centre A, except Call Centre A was relatively smaller, and used a few floors of a larger building. The call centre operations were placed on one floor, and two other floors housed management and IT. In both call centres, the colours used for the wall were bright and warm. Both also had areas that they referred to as 'break rooms' where the call centre agents could have their tea and short breaks away from the phones and computers. Although in Call Centre B these were open plan, they still provided an environment that was different to the factories of old, where we found the proletarians. In the cases of factory workers, these rooms were the kitchen. In the call centres, they had tables and chairs and a coffee machine as well. They presented a sense of autonomy, a break away from the work, to give them the impression that, even if be it for a few minutes, they have control over their time, and they are in an environment where they are allowed to relax. Call Centre B even had another room with a pool table. It also had television sets spaced over the call centre, in five separate spots, where the agents would often actually stand upright in order to watch television while taking calls. This presented an illusion of relaxation and comfort, which would belie the literature and what has been said of 'electronic panopticons'. However, this was not necessarily the case because most times the agents completely forgot about the soapies

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<sup>2</sup> Automatic Call Distribution



and news on the television because there was such an upsurge of incoming calls that demanded their full attention. There was still the added pressure of having to adhere to the standardised ways of dealing with these calls.

### **5.3 Training**

#### ***5.3.1 Demographics and Characteristics of the Training Group***

The first contact made in the actual call centre was through training. Although the trainees were taken around the call centre in order to meet the agents on the floor, and see how the work was done, we only began with the work six weeks to two months after a long training period. When we arrived for training, we were partitioned into groups, and my group consisted of 21 people. Out of these people, all were black. 14 were women, all of whom, with the exception of me and three others, were between the ages of 18 and 21. Out of the seven men, three were younger than 21 and the rest were in their early to mid-twenties. These numbers are similar to those given in the literature, particularly the gendering of the occupation, as well as the implication of call centre agents being of a student age (See Batt, Doelgast &Kwon 2005; Sorensen & Salanti 2005; Lanciano Morandat, Nohara, & Tchobanlon 2005; Nickson & Warhurst 2003). They are also however, markedly different from those given by Borman and Reisman (1986:5) as the preferred characteristics of manual proletarian, which was a family man of around thirty.

After getting to know quite a few of the trainees better, I discovered that most of them were still living with their parents. This explains to some extent why they even considered this position, that aside from the fact that a few of them were still studying and wanted to make an extra income. These sentiments arose from the fact that the position, during the course of training only paid R250 per week. After that, payment would be R22 per hour, five hours a day, and five days a week. This is because we had been employed as temporary agents (temps) to fill in the periods when there is an influx of calls. This is very similar to casual labourers, who are meant to work 24 hours a week, without benefits or job security (Kenny, 2005:234). Also similar to casual workers, the hours varied since we were scheduled to work according to demand, any time between six and 12. This meant a reduction in labour costs, covering overtime hours and

extraordinary shift hours, and allowing for relatively easy deployment of labour (Kenny, 2005:234). Our rates were also affected by the fact that we were coming from an agency, which took an undisclosed percentage off the hourly pay. The facts above show the main differences in the working conditions of temporary workers and the permanent workers- which turned out to be quite influential in determining their work identities.

The people in my training group had taken this position because they needed work. However, since many of them were living at home, they did not have concerns such as how to pay the rent. This is perhaps why they were not overly concerned about the meagreness of the pay. This could imply that delayed marriage allows youth the luxury of lower pay. Conversely, meagre wages can also be the reason behind delayed marriage. In any event, the fact that most of these people did not have their own, nuclear families to care for and worry about also facilitated for a certain lackadaisical attitude towards the job. There were those who were disgruntled however, and they claimed that they would hold on to the position until something better came along. Others believed it to be a move in the right direction, they saw working for this company as a springboard to something more financially rewarding at a later stage, within the company, or the industry, similar to what Naidoo, Lewis and Omar found. This is also identical to the ideas I had about Call Centre C. They also saw it as an opportunity to gain expertise in a field that continues to grow in demand, because they will never be short of employment once they have call centre experience. This is the reason a number of of them gave for leaving jobs that were apparently slightly better paying. Indeed, one of the team members the oldest woman in the group an Indian woman aged 31 used to be a teacher.

### ***5.3.2 The Training Experience***

The training itself was broke into four main parts. The first part of the training I will refer to as ‘content training’. It consisted of a lecture type situation, where we were given manuals which contained information about the organisation’s products. We were then instructed to study and wrote tests on the products. Trainers were there with us on a daily basis for these first two weeks in order to clarify and emphasise some of the concepts found in the manuals. The working hours at this time were from eight to five every day. After the content training there was ‘desk tool training’, where we were taught to use the computer based systems, as well the ACD technologies of the organisation. A lot of the

content found in the manuals was also on the computer system, and part of the desk tool training involved knowing where to find the information so that we could assist the customer. This part of the training took another two weeks, and also took eight hours of the day. The third part of the training lasted the longest, partly because the hours were reduced to five hours, and also due to it being the most practical. At this point the agency had begun to pay us the hourly rate. This part of training is referred to as ‘coaching’. This is similar to a mentoring process, where the agents who are ‘good at the job’ are paired with one or two trainees. They then take calls as usual, but with the line being connected in a three way fashion, so that the trainees can plug in headsets and listen to the conversation, that is, the customer’s problem, and how the agent solves it. They also take the time to explain some calls which are a bit more convoluted for the trainees to understand. This part of training also lasted two weeks.

The fourth and final stage of training was the most stressful. At this stage, all the stages learned before were tested through ‘orals’. This ‘oral’ process was conducted by some of the trainers and coaches that we had been working with. A few of them had mixed feelings about it however. Indeed, the team leader I interviewed, Superman, said: ‘I don’t see the point of orals, because they test something totally different from what happens on the floor. It’s all highly impractical. I really don’t get it. I actually wish that they would scrap it’. All of the trainees were worried about the orals. On 3 December 2005 I entered the following in my notes:

Writing of orals proving to be stressful. Especially when considering that I feel more than capable to do the job. But protocol has to be followed and they have to be written – shows lack of initiative or innovation from people who don’t approve of them because they are not doing anything about it. They are just letting it continue, and too much is riding on the orals. Tricky, even I failed, along with a third of the others. Thoroughly frustrating. Feel annoyed at the whole system. Everyone knows I do extremely well on the floor, yet I’m being rated on something highly dissimilar to the actual job. Not nice at all!

There is little doubt that a lot of the anger I was feeling stemmed from the fact that the prerequisites for the job were too demanding and unrealistic. The pass mark for the oral was 75%. Of course, there was also the fact that I felt insulted and my pride was also a little hurt!

Most of the other trainees passed the orals. A few of those who failed were given a second chance, mainly because the number of temps that the company needed had not been met by the agency initially, and trainees failing the orals also considerably diminished the number. I was one of the trainees who was given a second chance. Some of those who failed however, were sent home. One of them was a former soccer player, who was so upset by failing the oral that he went straight home after hearing the news, and left the people who were in his lift club behind. When she heard about this, one of the coaches said:

You people must understand his situation; he has a house, a wife and child. This was a chance for him to provide for them. Phela<sup>3</sup> we are not all in the same situation. All the skills he needed before this was in his legs, he needed no English, pronunciation, spelling or whatever. It must be too much for him to think that he can't make even this work

This comment was made because it was known amongst everyone that the soccer player did not speak English very well. This is the main reason he had failed the oral. So in this call centre English was a prerequisite for the job. This differs with the situation in Call Centre A, where people's shifts were set up according to groups, in terms of what language they spoke. Since it was a retail organisation, many black languages were of equal importance, and some agents did not even need to know how to speak English to be employed.

The training process delineates how much hype is put into the position. A reason why the training was so intensive could be that there was not any real qualification prerequisite for it. Therefore all the training for the position took place on the job. Nevertheless, getting through it left agents feeling qualified, competent and able.

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<sup>3</sup> Phela – a black slang word used in place of 'just think' or 'you must consider'

This is different from training in the manufacturing domain, where young workers receive little rudimentary training and supervision, and even less close mentoring from experienced workers (Whyte, 1998:4). Such scenarios show that there are some differences, among the different sectors of the workforce (management and workers), about the technicality of the job, as well as how well the new employee must know the job. Furthermore, call centre agents are typically seen as the ‘face and voice of the company’ because they deal with the customer first hand. This in some ways implies that there is more of a sense of importance ascribed to the call centre job.

## **5.4 Inside the Call Centre**

### ***5.4.1 Some Characteristics of the Call Centre Staff***

After training we were introduced to the actual call centre floor, where even more exciting new revelations were to be made. The people ‘on the floor’, were those agents who were taking calls. This consisted of both temporary and permanent staff. Some of the temporary employees were those who had been employed within the preceding six months. They were fewer than the permanent staff, mainly due to the fact that the company was new in recruiting temporary workers on a large scale. Their generally younger looking appearance also distinguished them from the permanent staff. There was also an air of nonchalance about them, because they generally conducted themselves in a fashion that suggested that they did not need to be there, and had other options. This could be due to the fact that many of them were ‘taking a break’ from studying, or were not yet sure where they wanted to be in terms of a career path.

Most of the permanent staff that I spoke to had cars. Both men and women were driving, and some of them drove rather expensive looking cars. This was very different to Call Centre A, where only a couple of the call centre agents had cars. Apart from language, the grouping of agents’ shifts in Call Centre A was also done according to where agents lived, since the organisation offered transport services to the permanent agents. This was due to the hours of work being up to 11 o’ clock at night. A lot of the call centre agents at Call Centre B however, were residing nearby, in the northern suburbs of Johannesburg. This also proved to be a huge contrast, because again, only a couple of

the workers in Call Centre A lived in a suburban area. Most of them lived in black and coloured townships. These factors imply that there could even be a class shift among the two call centres on their own, in that Call Centre A was likely of a lower income category than that of B. Indeed, some of the agents from Call Centre A expressed their desire to work at Call Centre B. This was obviously due to their perception that the agents there were better paid, which appeared to be true.

The dress code also differed among the temporary staff and the permanent staff. The permanent staff was mostly well dressed, with a lot of the men wearing expensive, designer shoes and clothing. Although there were specifications in place concerning how the agents should dress, these were generally disregarded, and a lot of the agents, both men and women, wore jeans most of the time. This was not due to their not being able to afford to wear anything different, it was mainly because they felt more comfortable thus, and felt no need to dress up because “Hawu,<sup>4</sup> what’s the point? Mos<sup>5</sup> nobody sees us anyway”. Some of the temporary staff wore notably cheaper clothes; especially those who seemed to have a thinner support system from other parties. The fact that call centre agents do not have to wear a ‘uniform’ to work, may give the impression that they are of a higher level than other types of workers and may warrant them a higher status. This illustrates what Mills (1953:74) has said about the stylisation of workers<sup>6</sup>. The fact that the clothing that the permanent staff wore was seen as expensive, also suggests that they were reasonably well off, which could have implications for their class status within the rest of society.

#### ***5.4.2 Preliminary Experiences ‘On the Floor’***

In Call Centre B I found the work interesting for the first couple of days. This was probably due to the fact that it was a new experience and I still had to learn how to use the systems, i.e., the customer enabled device, the special telephone technology, the standard greeting, and other such factors. After about a week however, it was beginning to become boring, predictable and monotonous. The job here was actually notably easier than it had been at Call Centre A, where I took a bit longer to grow jaded with the work.

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<sup>4</sup> Hawu = ‘But really’

<sup>5</sup> Mos = ‘in any case’

<sup>6</sup> see chapter 2

There were two different segments in Call Centre B, and the one that the temps were employed to work with was the one which the larger portion of the customer base made use of, but it was also more dreary. In fact, a lot of the agents when asked said that they would much rather work for the other department, because ‘at least it’s more challenging’, ‘there’s more variety’, ‘at least it’s not full of repetition and routine’. They often said that the customers that called into this segment were ‘stupid’ ‘ridiculous’ ‘fooling around’ or ‘had too much time on their hands’. Indeed, at certain points of my employment there I shared the same sentiments! Perhaps this feeling was further driven by knowing something as well as a recitation, and having to explain it to people over and over and over again in one hour, let alone in an eight hour day. Below is a comment I wrote down in my notes on 10 November 2005 about the nature of the work:

Very repetitive, very very routine. Surprising that such a large portion of SA’s population call and their enquiries are so similar. Can predict the customer’s query in almost 30 seconds flat, and be able to solve it 30 seconds later, depending on the customer’s level of understanding or knowledge on the subject.

I expressed these emotions after working there for less than a month. I can only imagine how the people who had been working there for a few years must have felt. Indeed, it became even more frustrating when the customer did not understand or know anything at all about the technology, and one had to patiently explain in depth, sometimes repeatedly, for the customer to understand. This aligns very closely with the emotional labour often mentioned in literature about service occupation.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, it can be rather emotionally taxing to keep their resolve when they really want to split at the seams, and a lot of pressure is placed on their reaction, since they are monitored. They therefore have to remain cool and calm and never lose patience, because this will ensure that they keep their job for longer.

With Call Centre A the work was not as routine and mind-numbing as in B. There were some instances where I would find myself puzzled enough to ask for assistance

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<sup>7</sup> Literature review, p. 15

from a supervisor or team leader<sup>8</sup>. This is probably due to the fact that in this call centre, we dealt with machines, and even though we received training on them, there were incidents where a solution to a customer's problem was not as mandatory, and even required some insight and initiative.

Another factor that worried me at some stage was the earphone being too loud. At this point I was still being coached by another permanent employee - a 'buddying' process that was practiced after theoretical training, where a trainee sat with an experienced staff member, who showed you how to take calls, and allowed you to take some. We would listen to their calls by plugging in another earphone into the agent's telephone. When I complained about the earphone being too loud she said 'no, don't adjust it, because you might not hear the customer properly'. I was left with the impression that this woman would rather have an ear ache at the end of the day because she did not want to risk causing any discomfort for the customer.

Such reserve could have been as a result of the fact that the calls were closely monitored. Everything that transpired between agent and customer was recorded and supervisors and team leaders could refer back to them at a later stage if the need arose. The computer screen was also monitored, and if an agent was surfing the net while speaking to a customer, they were penalised. The agent could also not make any personal calls from the VDU, obviously because they were recorded, and also because they were strictly for business use. There was also an average number of calls expected to be handled per day – at least 75, depending on the nature of the call. Because of all this monitoring, most agents followed the rules and regulations posed by management. This demonstrates the management control and surveillance procedures described by Taylor and Bain.

I remember when buddying with another trainee, the coach kept getting impatient with him because when taking calls, he had a habit of saying 'kay right', after every few sentences he said to the customer. This aggravated the coach no end, and she threatened to pinch him every time he said it! It was rather comical to watch, because the guy was so nervous at taking calls that he quite likely said it much more often than he was accustomed to in his everyday speech. It must also have been frustrating for the trainee.

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<sup>8</sup> called escalating a call

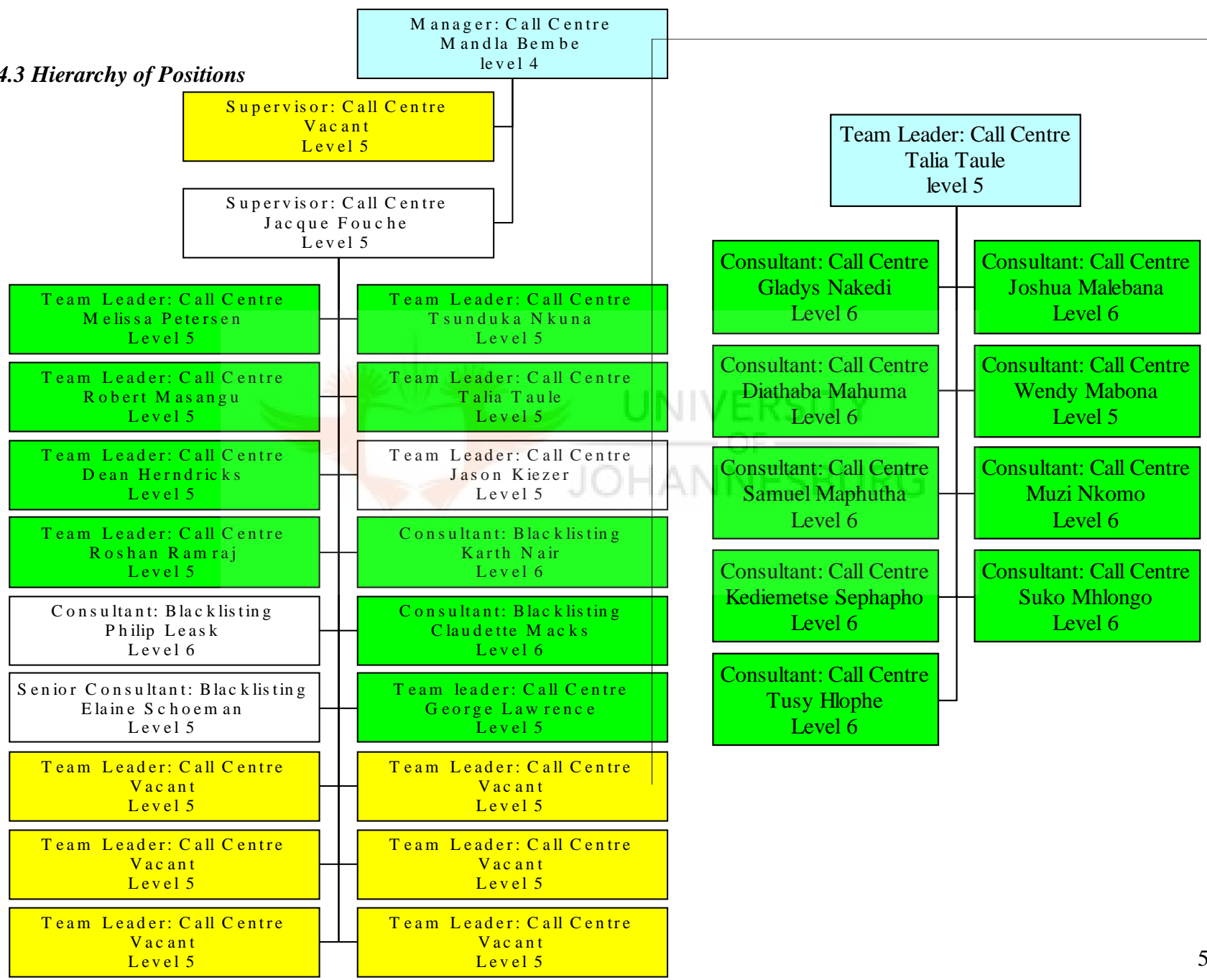


This incident goes to show just how far the control went, so far as to try to impose on people's speech patterns. It was not a prerequisite of the job to 'personalise' your conversation with the customer. You had to sound as standard as possible. Indeed, when I consider the woman who was taking assessments with us at Call Centre C, and how strange she sounded, almost sing song, I would also find it difficult if I was expected to speak in the same funny way.

Concerning the work, there was a standard greeting that had to be used, as well as standard procedures to follow when the customer had a particular problem. It became rather frustrating when one had to follow management's orders in how to solve a problem when there were ways more particular to a customer that would yield better and faster results. Words and phrases such as electronic panopticon and standardised assembly line come to mind in this case, because they are refused the autonomy to apply their own intellect when carrying out the work. They are expected to follow strict instructions in order to follow procedure and produce only the expected results.



**5.4.3 Hierarchy of Positions**



The above organogram has been specially selected from a larger one of the entire organisation, just to represent the structure of call centre agents and their immediate team leaders, supervisors and manager. Please note that the names have been changed. The call centre agents here are referred to as consultants. There are four managers who manage the call centre and its support functions. Level 4 is the highest level of remuneration, and is given to managers, as is shown here. Level 5 is given to team leaders and Level 6 to call centre agents.

As found in the literature, the actual situation demonstrated that call centres are generally flat organisations. The largest numbers within the organisation is comprised of the call centre agents. This situation was slightly more compounded in Call Centre B than A, and this was not only attributable to the fact that it was a much larger call centre, but also due to the fact that there was another building all together which dealt with the more 'corporate and executive issues'. This meant that Service Park on its own was an entity consisting mainly of the call centre agents and the people who managed and overlooked the call centre process, i.e., the operational planners and implementers of the strategic plans made at the higher levels.

Within Service Park the Executive Head of Customer Care, was at the uppermost position, and he is meant to have five middle managers who report to him. During my tenure there however, there were only two managers present. These managers each had between two and four people reporting directly to them, who were responsible for lower level management. To be precise, this lower level management area consisted of a supervisor, a specialist, a coordinator and a consultant. The supervisor is responsible for overseeing the senior quality assessors who check on elements such as the quality of the calls to customers. They are also responsible for the team leaders, whilst the specialist in call centre training is responsible for overseeing the training officers who train new employees, as well as current employees on new products and services. The team leaders each have approximately nine to fourteen call centre agents who report to them, the number varies according to the availability of team leaders, as well as the nature of the particular call centre function the team is involved in. There are about 25 team leaders, meaning that there are about 225 to 350 call centre agents on the floor.

This rendition is useful in giving us a clear picture about how management is structured. It is also notable to mention that a lot of the positions, particularly middle and lower level management ones, also tended to be vacant, which may suggest a shortage of staff on some level. This pattern however did not continue into the call centre agent level.

#### ***5.4.4 Racial Composition of the Call Centre***

As regards racial ratios, most of the agents in the call centres were black. There were concerns however, such as that black people were being exploited. Superman was of the opinion that black people were probably more favoured by call centre employers because 'black people are more tolerant, patient'. He felt nonetheless that there ought to be some regulation in the industry. Even though it was generally a good thing, since it employed a considerable portion the black population, multinational cooperations were exploiting South Africa as a whole, because of its unemployment trends, and the fact that South Africans are willing to work for much less; so naturally, black people experienced the brunt of this predicament. His statement is not far removed from the literature in so far as the outsourcing trends in South Africa. Lebo and Tiger also felt that 99% of the call centre was made up of blacks, and saw this as owing to the fact that:

Blacks are struggling to get jobs because of their disadvantaged backgrounds. We are desperate, we are exploited. White people know and practice their rights because they have other options. We don't have other options. Some intelligent people have to be here because they don't have enough funds to study. Then they find themselves here

This sentiment of black people being exploited was general among the interviewees. Katie felt that black people had to work harder. She felt that the black people were concentrated at the lowest levels of call centres:

That's what I see where I'm working now. Only a few get to be at higher levels, e.g. Say team leader or supervisor, yet only through very hard work. But other

racers get promoted quickly. The few black people in high positions earned it. Other races got there much easier

There were a few white people working as call centre agents, but there were possibly less than five. In fact, one of them was directly referred to as ‘Lekgowa’<sup>9</sup> by the rest of the agents, as if it was her name! Although this was a joke, it does show that white people were rare as call centre agents, so much so that when they were it became something to talk about. Indeed, in Call Centre A, there were no whites at all, none as agents, team leaders or as managers.

All of the permanent agents nonetheless maintained that call centres were a great help for the black population. Superman was of the opinion that it assisted with group development. That it was a ‘good thing’ the ‘biggest employer’. He also felt that it was buoying black people because they were forced to come and live in expensive suburbs, and could thus see how other people live and become inspired. He also felt that call centres helped expand black people’s opportunities. Ben was of the same opinion, saying that most black people were forced into work like call centre work due to a lack of funds, and lack of opportunities to pursue what they wanted. At least once employed in the call centre they could study further – as Lebo and Tiger had mentioned earlier. Even Lucy, a temp, felt that call centres were a good thing for black people. She felt that black people in Gauteng were ‘making it’, as opposed to back at home in Kwazulu Natal. She said she was proud of the black people of Gauteng, and even said the same of Superman, when she saw his townhouse. She felt that he had made a good life for himself.

It is evident that race also had a notable impact on the identity of call centre agents. Black people comprised the majority in both call centres I had worked in. The ratio of white people as opposed to the black in management positions in the call centre also tallied with what was found in the literature.

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<sup>9</sup> white person

## 5.5 Identity

### *5.5.1 Trainee's and Temps' Satisfaction and Identification with the Call Centre Agent Position*

My training group was very dissatisfied with the job. Without a doubt, this discontent was well placed, chiefly because remuneration was so ridiculous. A lot of the temps were hoping for permanent positions, because the permanent staff seemed to be getting much more money, benefits included. They also had rights, while the temps had none. The temporary staff had no real say in anything; they had no union representative or membership, and were basically there to take whatever was dished to them. The permanent staff was also directly employed by the organisation, and not linked to any agencies, so they made all the money for themselves, and none of it was cut for the agencies. For obvious reasons then, the temps were very displeased with the agency. The unhappiness therefore, particularly for the case of the temps, was mainly because of being tied to an agency, which reduced the money, and also their temporary worker status, more than just the nature of the job. A lot of the temps had similar service occupation jobs preceding the current one. So perhaps for them the nature of the job was not too frustrating.

There were also a few students. One left varsity because he was involved in a car accident and missed some of the syllabus, and also needed to 'stay at home recuperating for a least a year'. One of his legs was badly broken. The varsity he attended was a very expensive one. His accent was very polished, almost snooty. He had his own car, and claimed to hang out in places like Rosebank<sup>10</sup> he had the following to say about his fellow varsity students:

Every little brat in that school has a driver. You'll see the nanny all dressed up in her pink nanny gear dropping them off or picking them up.

This shows that he clearly did not identify with them. Although he was also decently but not expensively dressed, and lived in a more suburb like area, he did not consider himself

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<sup>10</sup> See Nkuna's study on Rosebank mall entitled 'Fitting-In' to a 'Classy Place': The Zone and Youth Identity, in *Globalisation and New Identities*

as 'rich'. He was 21 and his older brother who was training for the same position was 26. The younger brother said he was working there 'in the meantime' because he was bored with staying at home. He therefore implied that he did not need the job. His older brother said that he was staying, until 'something better came along'. These two standpoints came to represent a large portion of the temporary workforce.

During the first weeks of training, when we were being paid R250 a week some of the temps did not even tell their parents that they were getting paid. 'Haai<sup>11</sup>, phela this is nothing! If they stop giving me money I'll be really broke'. This was expressed by a girl of 21, the only girl that age who had a car, and another part-time job. Lucy, who was not from Johannesburg, said 'I came here so I could send money ekhaya<sup>12</sup>. But now if my mom calls me to say she needs this much I'll be like 'I can't'. Then what's the point of coming eJozi<sup>13</sup>?'

The young man who kept saying 'kay right' to customers, was in his late twenties said he was put out of his parent's house. When I suggested to him that he could at least eat supper at home. He said 'ba ka se dumele'<sup>14</sup>. He was living a few blocks away from there, renting a back room in the township for R400 a month. He had also just bought an old, wreck of a car for R6000. I once took a lift from him at lunchtime (we were working the late shift, and had a break then, which was also referred to as a lunch break) at 18:00, and we passed the News café, a posh restaurant/bar, he said 'Ya ne,<sup>15</sup> some people ba ithaba<sup>16</sup>, they can come to a bar and de-stress after work'. He said this in a way that made me feel a bit sad for him, because he clearly envied that kind of lifestyle but could not afford it. I was left with the impression that he really needed the job even if it paid so little, it made a valuable difference to him.

When some of the younger temps saw the other group of temps, which consisted of people who were a little older, they were very surprised and said things like 'Hao<sup>17</sup> what are they doing here, at that age? They should be doing something much better than this. Phela for us this is just a stepping stone'. Most young temps felt that this job was

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<sup>11</sup> No ways!

<sup>12</sup> Home (Kwazulu Natal)

<sup>13</sup> Johannesburg

<sup>14</sup> they wont agree

<sup>15</sup> an expression of agreement

<sup>16</sup> are fortunate

<sup>17</sup> slang used for exclamation like 'Good heavens'

acceptable because they were young and were supported by their parents. For a lot of them this was also their first job. They did not see it fitting for someone older to be in a similar position. On the other hand, a lot of the younger trainees still remained in the job when it was evident that they really did not want to. This shows there was still a general need for the job. After a few condescending incidents with the coaches, the trainees were very angry. 'They're treating us like shit "cause they know we need these jobs. I feel like a school kid. Ooh, I'm so leaving this place! What do they expect us to do for R22 an hour? I just wanna gather my experience and I'll be outta here so fast!'

It is clear that the permanent staff was essentially, where the temps wanted to be. The perms even seemed to have more hope for further advance within the company. Many of the temps seemed to be living for the moment. Indeed, another one that I spoke to, Thuli, a girl of 22, admitted that she just wanted a means to make extra cash while she was taking a break from varsity. 'I just wanna be able to buy myself pretty shoes, you know'. This reveals that she either chose to ignore the rest of the politics of being a temporary employee, or she was just not concerned enough about it, because it was not truly her livelihood, it was just some extra cash for her. Katie said that she was gathering experience, because she also did not 'really need the job'. She wanted to end up working in marketing background, and thought customer care was a clever place to start gathering experience. Lucy said that she wanted to study, but the course cost R32,000 a year, and her parents could not afford it. When she opted for something that they could afford, she got bored and dropped out after one year – 'and this is the only job I could get'.

So it is discernable that, in as much as there were dynamic differences between the temps and the permanent staff, there were also considerable differences within the temps themselves, and these were created by the varying situations from which each of them came. Some of the temps came because they wanted an actual job and needed real money because they had valid expenses to deal with, and doubtless these ones had the most reason to complain. Others still, were well supported by their parents, and were not as desperate.



### ***5.5.2 Agent Mobility and Identification with the Work for Permanent Staff***

Many of the permanent staff was looking for other call centre posts. It was clear that they considered themselves to have a skill that was in demand, and felt in a position to negotiate better terms elsewhere. I would sometimes hear them on their cell-phones speaking to other agencies, or potential employees. Indeed, the turnover rate at this call centre was rather high, with an average of two to three people leaving every month. When I asked another who was filling in a post on the internet she told me: ‘once you have call centre experience, the sky is the limit, you’re almost guaranteed that you’ll always have work, and you can pick and choose what suits you’. I found that a lot of the permanent staff was also not satisfied with the pay. Quite a few of them were also not satisfied with the nature of the job. Most would say ‘Haai, Mfwethu,<sup>18</sup> how long will it be ‘Good day you’re speaking to ...,’? Aai, this is not for me Jo<sup>19</sup>’. This person was basically saying that he was not willing to spend more time saying the same thing each and everyday. These comments came from two men who had been working permanently for about a year. They had given me a lift after a late shift, and I caught their conversation in the car.

Most of the permanent staff that I interviewed said that they worked at a call centre because ‘it pays the bills’ or because ‘it was the easiest job to get into after school’, ‘the only job available for me’. Superman said he had to ‘start at the bottom, and work my way up’. Lebo said that she ran out of money to carry on with her studies at Wits Technikon, so she had to look for a job.

All of the permanent agents I spoke to had spent some time in varsity or post matric institutions, but a lot of them had not completed. Ben however, was still studying for his LLB through Unisa<sup>20</sup>. The other permanents I spoke to expressed the desire to study further, or the plan to do so. The call centre offered to pay for studies in exchange for a year of employment. If the agent still chose to leave they would have to repay the company the bursary amount. This was a clever way of maintaining the educated workforce within the organisation. It also served to discourage some form studying further because they felt that they would then be trapped there. Superman had a

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<sup>18</sup> dude, pal

<sup>19</sup> another term for dude, or pal

<sup>20</sup> University of South Africa

marketing diploma. He was very adamant that he would never stay in the same position for more than three years, for him, and generally, most of the other interviewees I spoke to, being a call centre agent was an entry level position. People stopped there on their way elsewhere. It was an ‘in the meantime thing’. Lebo thought that:

The call centre is a good place to work if you are studying further, because the shifts allow you to go to classes and the library and stuff, I’m actually going to study something else. The opportunity is there. I actually don’t understand why some agents are just complaining about the work but they are not taking advantage of the offer to study further”

This implies that even the permanents did not have a stable identity with the call centre agent position. They, like the temps, also saw it as a stepping stone. They did not identify it as a position that they would stick to. Many had other aspirations. However, a lot of them also saw the profession as one to stick to, and looked for posts in other companies. Most of those looking elsewhere were looking for positions higher than the call centre agent level, e.g. as trainers, supervisors, team leaders etc. This shows that with the perms there was more identification with the profession – perhaps because of the compounded responsibilities that being older and more independent (from parents) comes with.

### ***5.5.3 Feelings about the Nature of the Work***

When asked how they felt about the actual work that they did in the call centre, the permanents that I had formal interviews with had a similar answer. Lebo, Superman and Tiger all said ‘we are working in the sweatshops of the digital era’; Ben said ‘I feel like I’m working in a Chinese factory’ which was very akin to the literature. This was quite fascinating because I had never mentioned these notions to any of them. This showed that they spoke of these issues amongst each other. Indeed, they all lived in the same complex and shared a social life after hours. They were clearly familiar with these expressions because they had come across some form of literature expressing these statements, and they obviously also discussed these phenomena when they talked about work issues. Superman in particular said he has come across it while reading a newspaper, and he felt

that no words could be more appropriate to express how he felt about the job. He also said it was frustrating, there was lack of challenge, and they did the same thing all day long. These words were also expressed by all of the respondents, to a larger or lesser degree.

One thing that was different about Superman was that he was a team leader, meaning that he was no longer taking calls, but handling the difficult ones, where a customer was usually very frustrated, angry or upset. The agents would ‘escalate’ these calls to him after they had tried their best to handle them but failed and he would have to solve the query. He felt that his position was not much different though, except that it was ‘a step above the food chain. The pay is better, even though the hours are still the same – at least I don’t have to take calls non-stop all day long like the agents’. He felt particularly sorry for the temps, because they were ‘exploited and underpaid’. Relating to the shifts and working hours, he also had the following concern:

We were actually discussing this at a management meeting yesterday. Some temps are sleeping at work because of the awkwardness of the hours. If they have to leave at 12 am, and they don’t have transport, they sleep in the building

Ben also felt that ‘the work is repetitive and non-challenging’. He said that he felt like he was working in a Chinese factory because the way the working hours were structured was physically taxing. Lebo and Tiger also complained about the hours. ‘Ba re ropa,<sup>21</sup>, making us work nine hours instead of eight, so that they don’t have to pay us for our lunch hour’. Lebo particularly felt that the hours were too long, and even though she thought the shifts were convenient for study purposes, she also felt that they were physically draining. Ben also felt that the hours should be shortened. Tiger mostly complained about having to be at work until eleven or twelve on a Friday or Saturday night. They all felt it was unnecessary for them to be working in the late hours because there is a pre-recorded device that can help customers with the more straightforward queries. This is similar to what was found in the literature about queuing of calls in a

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<sup>21</sup> They are cheating us

telecommunications call centre. They felt that some queries could only be followed up during working hours anyway, (8-5), so being there after that was not entirely necessary.

A predominantly interesting statement that Lebo and Tiger agreed on was ‘no, no, this is not work at all. It is far too boring and repetitive’. They were rather strong in this opinion, and this could be due to the fact that they had both worked in what they felt were much more technical positions before they joined the call centre. They even tended to deviate a bit from the discussion because they enjoyed talking about their former jobs:

Eish,<sup>22</sup> working there was nice. We actually *worked*. We *did* something that involved *action*, strategising, using your brain! We used initiation and dealt with fewer people, and managed it well. Even though we still took calls, it was more like about five calls a day, and you did real work until the person was thoroughly helped by you. You got to do many different things on just one call

It is important to note that even though their former position sounded to me like another call centre, they certainly did not see it as such:

It was similar to a call centre but *ne re sebetsa*<sup>23</sup>. We did something other than just ‘talk’ to customers all day long. We were given the responsibility to do something concerning the call.

They saw it as ‘real work’, a ‘real job’. Lebo even went as far as to say about her current position:

Its fine as part-time work for students, I don’t see it as a career, unless you’re dyslexic or have some sort of deformity. One day’s training and you’re ready. Even though they grill you so much to get there. When you get there (to the floor) it’s like ‘Hawu, what was that all about?’ there’s nothing. Communication is the same as the one that you use while growing up. Even when customer ha a kwatile (angry), you’re gonna give him what he wants. It’s not like you’re gonna

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<sup>22</sup> Another term for ‘good heavens!’

<sup>23</sup> we worked

need training to say to a customer to calm him down ‘I understand your frustration....’ even if you don’t mean it.

Tiger added to this by saying ‘But nna (me) 99% of the time I don’t mean it. Sometimes I don’t even say it. I just wanna get to the point. It’s a pity I’ve been here forever (2 years) but it’s boring, stagnant, and too repetitive, do the same thing everyday’. Lebo also said that she did not think that anyone who worked for customer care in that company’s call centre actually enjoyed it.

Concerning management, the permanents felt that the relationship was ‘non-existent’. When I asked Ben about feeling like a worker he said:

I don’t see myself as a worker. I see myself as a slave. You don’t have a say. Even when you know better than management. They only see the bottom line. Get on with it. You talk you’re seen as the trouble maker. You strike they still don’t pay you a decent salary and at the end of the day you still have to pay your bills.’

The temps’ feelings about the work were not as intense as those of the permanents. They said that the work was ‘fine, boring, but hey, at least it’s not hectic’. Katie, however, felt that she did not want to work there for longer than a year. She was particularly wary of customer service as an industry on the whole. ‘Honestly, it sucks. My sister resigned from work because an angry customer hit her with a bottle’. Although her sister was working in a face-to-face customer care situation, she felt that even call centre agents experienced comparable abuse over the phone:

I think it’s better to take calls than to be face-to-face with the customer. At least you don’t get to see the customer. It’s still terrible, everyone blames you for everything. It’s always your fault. They blame the company, but mostly they blame and abuse you for a thing that you don’t even know

She did feel, however, that the job was stressful, like any other job. Apart from the customers, she felt that everything else was easy. ‘Anyone can work in a call centre. You

know what to do; you know how to help customers'. In January 2006, she also stated that:

I'm not cut out for it though. This 'Good day, my name is....' is boring and irritating. I want to do different stuff everyday. I only liked it for the first month. Hopefully I'll be outta there by June.

Lucy had the following to say about the nature of the work:

I won't lie. Sometimes I give the crappiest customer service ever. I just don't deliver what I'm supposed to deliver. I'll be like 'good day' in this non-committal voice. You know, it's that routine. Sometimes I just get tired of it.

She then proceeded to give an example of someone she knew being angry that a teller at a shop did not smile and greet her:

I was like shit Mfweto, give the teller a break. She probably has to say 'hi how are you' to every customer. She doesn't have to smile every single day'. It's just that people expect us to be perfect at what we do, but we're not perfect.

This shows that she felt some solidarity with the teller. She felt that they had the same challenges in their jobs. This is illustrative of the emotional labour that we have come across in the literature. She mentioned however, that she liked call centre work as compared to other service occupations 'Ooh not sales. I'm not good at that at all. I hate selling things to people. You have to beg! I hate that with a passion.' All the same, after only three months of work, she felt like she'd been there for too long already. She was also the only one who said she wouldn't mind working in another call centre when she left that one. 'As long as there's more life there, it's' more happening'. Lucy clearly did not have any strong aversions to working in a call centre. One can also identify that she had a noncommittal attitude, she was, after all, only 20 years old, and she did not have any real pressures. Even though she had come to Johannesburg to find a job, she had also

come to start a life, and she had only herself to worry about. As long as she was making enough money to sustain herself she did not have a need for any more concern. Lucy here epitomises the general attitude of the temps that I spoke to. They were not overtly worried about the job as such, they were clearly still feeling their way around their lives, and they had the luxury of time and no obligations to family members or partners.

#### *5.5.4 Understandings of Identity*

The above section shows us the predominant opinions concerning the job. A notable factor is that most of the agents had notions of belonging somewhere else, or using the job as a ‘stepping stone’. This section narrows in on the purposes of the study. When considering class identity, the views between the temps and the permanents were vastly different. All the permanents that I spoke to did not see themselves as middle class. Superman felt that he was working class. He said ‘my survival depends entirely on my going to work and earning a salary’. He had the impression that if he were middle class, he should be able to go on holiday in the middle of the month or the year, and it would not affect his cash flow. He felt that he had to work for his livelihood. He said that it was a state he wanted move out of, and move into the middle class category.

When I asked Ben about his class status, he said lower class, because he was living from paycheque to paycheque. He felt that even the salary he received as a permanent employee was not much, because of all the so called ‘benefits’ and tax reductions. His short-term goal was to become at least working class and then middle class in the longer term. Lebo and Tiger also complained about the validity of these benefits. They were paying for their own medical aid schemes and other such expenses because they were employed at cost to company. They felt that the main concern was cost-effectiveness to the company, and that even the temps were being exploited. Lebo and Tiger identified themselves jokingly as ‘the lowest class there is, because we earn a salary, and then two days later it’s done’. They felt that they had to work to survive. ‘We are surviving, not living. Most of us are struggling to get jobs. Employers know we’d do anything to get jobs phela’.

Tiger and Lebo were two of a group of agents who had been hired as permanents immediately, without having to work as temps for about six months prior to that. As

soon as they arrived, they expressed dissatisfaction with the pay. According to Lebo, who was head-hunted by an agency which conveniently disappeared after she was employed at the company, the pay was thirty percent less than what was promised. Such factors contributed to them feeling underpaid. In fact, they said that they made more money at their old jobs, where they were actually temps. 'As a temp at that place you worked for your money, and you made it. Even though there were no benefits, you could easily make around R8000 a month.' They also felt that if it were not for the agencies at the current call centre, the temps there would also be making more money than the permanents. Lebo spoke of being offered a position at Call Centre C (that had rejected me) and declining because she had already signed the contract for the current one, Call Centre B. She said that she now regretted that terribly. 'Obviously that could have been much better than this'. Tiger said the only good thing that came out of them working at this call centre was that they met, and were now expecting a baby.

Conversely, the temps identified their class in terms of their parent's class, because they were not really on their own financially. Katie felt that she was middle class, because her mother was a teacher. She also said that the only reason why she was working was because she needed experience. She felt that she did not need to work for the money, because of financial support from her mother. She spent a lot of her time at her boyfriend's place, who also worked at the call centre. When I asked her what she thought about the class status of that household, she said 'well, I think it's more of a higher class than mine. "Cos, when I'm here I feel like this is where I wanna be, you know, on my own. It's definitely better than at home'. By this she meant that her boyfriend resembled the class that she wanted to find herself in. He also lived in the complex I have mentioned. Her home was in Soweto. The fact that he lived in the northern suburbs obviously made an impression on her, and she saw his lifestyle to be that of a higher class. However, her understanding of her middle class status was that she could not do everything that she wanted to. She couldn't achieve all the things that she wanted financially:



I know I'm definitely not upper class, and certainly not lower class, its just that, I want to be able to afford more, right now its like, I cant buy those shoes cos I have to get something else fixed.

Lucy's situation was decidedly different from Katie's because she was living away from home. When describing her class identity at home, she said:

Well, we're not poor, and we're not rich. We make ends meet. I mean when we wanted diesel jeans and stuff like that, my mom would be like, get that for yourself! So since high school we were sort of responsible for that type of thing. We're just a normal middle class family.

The feeling that both Lucy and Katie had of being from a 'middle class' family, could be said to be misplaced, particularly in lieu of the literature. In fact, the way they both speak of their families, one would expect them to say that they are a working class family. Another factor to consider here though is that some of the temps were not really familiar with the notions of class, and I even had to explain to Lucy in particular, what I meant, by lower, working, middle and upper class. She actually tended to confuse working class with middle class, and this shows in her next statement. When asked on her own class identity, away from home, she said:

I don't have any real qualifications, so I'm just making ends meet. No actually, I'm in the lower class. I'm not middle, I think middle would be a bit higher than where I'm at. I don't feel like I have a real job, so I don't even think I'm working class. Eish, I don't know Keke. I just know that I try to make a living on what I have that's all. I think I'm actually poor. Phela I get nothing from home. Since I got here, my mom hasn't even sent R20.

The temps show a categorically different identity to that of the permanents. When considering class, their understanding seems to even be a little confused. This may be attributable to their youth, as well as their dependence on other support systems.

## 5.6 Conclusion

This chapter has shown how interaction with the agents helped to bring their experiences to the fore. The understandings that they have about their work have given a lot of detail to the questions that motivated this study. Although the literature provided a lot of input on the emerging changes brought about by globalisation, and also began to look at identity in South Africa in the midst of all these changes, the above chapter has attempted to bring all of these to the level of the individual, which is in totality, the aim of the research study.

The core findings of the chapter are centred on the actual experience of the researcher, as well as of the other call centre agents. In amongst these experiences is where we find the true dynamics involved in the actual job of the call centre agent, and ultimately how this affects the agent's life, and even future aspirations.

A noteworthy observation is that the bulk of the respondents did not identify themselves as call centre agent 'material' in a manner of speaking. The way they related to the job and the type of life they pictured for themselves was rather far removed from the one they were living as call centre agent. This became ever more surprising when even the permanents expressed similar notions. It was partly to be expected of the temps, since, because of the unreliability and impracticality of their job, they could not truly find an identity within it. Another factor that has been discovered is that there are vast differences of opinion, and understandings amongst the temps and the permanents, particularly pertaining to class. These opposing ideas are obviously heavily dependant on the vast divergence between their terms of employment.

## CHAPTER 6: CONCLUDING REMARKS

### 6.1 Summary of Research

The study began with an assumption, on my behalf, that the call centre agent had very little, if any, similarities with the service proletariat or with the working class in general. However, the actual experience of my research presented a far more complex picture. The investigation revealed a dearth of information about how call centre agents understand their class position. Even though some aspects of the occupation had begun to be explored, there has not been nearly enough done to scrutinize call centre agents' identity. The general trend of the literature is to describe the call centre agent in conjunction with other service occupations, thus grouping them with other occupations that may not share their prime characteristics.

The process of participant observation meant getting involved in the job, and I had the same starting point as the other call centre agents. I had the opportunity to share their experiences from the beginning to the end. The observations therefore, were able to be conducted in a fashion that actually began at the foundation, so to speak.

The interviews assisted greatly in describing the more subjective and personal ideas and feelings that call centre agents have. They supplemented my observations rather well, helping me to identify notions or feelings about call centre work that were different to my own. They also served to clarify aspects of class identity, as well as their motivations behind their ideas.

One of the first observations that came to the fore was the level of perfection, or excellence, that the organisations demanded for the job. This relates to what the literature has said about there being certain parameters being set for people who work at the call centre. The training experience highlighted this, with activities such as oral tests.

The way that the call centre looks and the way that it is structured to function illustrated a form of alienation about the work. Especially in the way that the workstations did not belong to any particular agent, but depended on factors such as which shift an agent was coming to work. This prevented the agent from identifying with even the tools of the job, meaning it ultimately added to their disjuncture with their

position. This was the case in both call centres A and B. In call centre B, the differences between the more executive staff's building and that of the agents also showed that even in architectural terms, the latter were at a lower level. The way the organisation is hierarchically structured proved the literature to be on par with the situation on the ground, because, indeed, there were few management positions that the average call centre agent could work towards. However, there was still an attempt to disguise the work area as much as possible, to create the illusion of comfort, which went a long way in concealing the nature of the job.

An unexpected but very prominent finding made by the research is the difference between temporary call centre agents and permanent ones. It has been shown that there are a number of highly significant differences related to these people which are associated with their jobs, remuneration, social status, identity, and thus ultimately their class consciousness. Indeed, one can safely say that the permanents, perhaps due to their maturity in age, job experience and knowledge on the subject of their class identity, do in fact identify with the service proletariat. The way in which they talk about their work, and feel stifled by their work environment shows their dislike and lack of identification with it. They correctly identify themselves as working class, and some even go as far as to say that they are lower class. The temporary staff, on the other hand, does not have a clear identification of what class category they fall into. This could be influenced by the fact that they feel that their careers are moving along, and have not settled yet. Even though the permanent staff also shares this same sentiment, it is more magnified with the temporary staff, since for many of them this is their first job experience. They are also quite young, and have completed only one year of varsity or even less when they come to the call centre. Since a lot of them in this study were still living with their parents, they considered themselves to be of the class of their parents – which makes sense. If they were to analyse their class status on the merits of their job alone, it would be a very different story to tell.

The above shows that the temps in particular, have a class status that is in transition. This is because they are moving from an identity that is related to their education and their parents' social position towards one limited to the experience of work. While it is evident that the perms might change their identity as they move through

life, their class identity is more stable in their positions as call centre agents, especially since they see a future within the call centre industry.

## **6.2 Recommendations for Further Research**

As a consequence of this research, I have identified other significant gaps in the literature. There are a number of different issues that come into an analysis of the call centre as an occupation. Although this particular study was concerned with assessing the subjective class identity of call centre agents, there were many other factors that came into play concerning this class identity.

One of these factors is what type of a call centre agent one is, and this can vary from what category of business a call centre agent works for, and what kind of qualifications are specifically needed. An example that can be given here is one of the interviews I had with the agents who felt that although they had been employed in another call centre previously, it was ‘different’ because they felt that they ‘really worked’. They felt like they were using their intellect because they were left with a problem and had to solve it in their own way, using their own ideas and being responsible for the solution from start to finish – without any interference, unless they requested it.

Another aspect for consideration is the role of agencies in the recruitment and employment process of the call centre agent. It has been made clear in the study that the agencies also had a significant impact on factors such as remuneration, which affects the class identity of workers.

## **6.3 Originality of Contribution**

This study has succeeded in gaining firsthand experience of an actual call centre. It has presented a participant study in a field that is under researched, especially in South Africa, namely the life of call centre agents. It has provided information on class identity that is particularly important to Sociology, specifically because of the changing workplace that has been brought about by Globalisation. It has served to substantiate

much of what has been said in the literature about identity formation, but it has highlighted the importance of the work context.

Grappling with complex issues such as class, identity and consciousness has been no easy feat. Discovering that temporary call centre agents had some rather obscure notions of class identity made it all the more difficult to pin down a common but subjective understanding amongst them. Furthermore, intervening variables such as age, maturity, future aspirations and using the occupation as a stepping stone presented the fact that the identity of certain call centre agents is often one that is under transition. This can be held to be true at face value amongst temporary call centre agents specifically, but is embedded with a lot more complexity when looking at permanent call centre agent. They are older, have more responsibilities, and are more likely to seek other posts within the call centre profession as a method of bettering themselves and reaching their goals. The class identity that came to the fore, particularly with the permanent agents, is akin to the service proletariat. However, the temps are relatively unfamiliar with such notions, and feel more aligned to the 'middle class' of their parents.

Although the literature available had been fruitful in defining some aspects of call centre work, and had placed the agents in the domain of the service proletariat, it had failed to sufficiently observe, and thus demarcate, the different dimensions involved in the identity of the call centre agent, which is what this study has done. Whilst the class identity of call centre workers is a complex matter, it is clear that it is defined, to a considerable degree, by whether one is temporary or permanent. That is, identification with being working class was determined, in some measure, by the length of time spent in the industry and the extent of one's commitment to a future as a 'service proletarian'.

## APPENDIX 1: Profiles of Interviews

In addition to numerous random interviews conducted informally throughout the participant observation, there were six formal, semi-structured interviews. These were conducted between late January and early March. Most of the interviews were conducted in the agents' homes, save for those with the temporary agents, of which one was conducted at a boyfriend's place, and the other at a friend's place. In the case of the temps, the interviews were done in such a way as to ensure the easiest access for both myself and the respondents, and were thus conducted just before working hours, so that they would be on their way to work and thus not have to go out of their way to meet me. Below is a brief profile of each of the interviewees.

The first interview was with a team leader, aged 26, who used the pseudonym Superman. He had bought the townhouse in which he was staying, and had just had a baby girl with his fiancé, who was also a call centre agent, though at another agency. Superman could not however, afford a car, because he was paying a bond of R4400 per month for his house. His father was a mechanic, and his mother a receptionist. He had left home, a township in Johannesburg, at the age of eight and attended a predominantly Indian boarding school in the south of Johannesburg till matric. He had a diploma in marketing as was researching the options of studying further.

The second man 'Ben', who was interviewed was from a small location in the north of Pretoria. His mother was a housewife and his father a bus driver, and was one of seven children. Ben was living in the same townhouse complex, as Superman, but was renting, sharing with another call centre agent from the same company. Sharing in a two-bed roomed townhouse, he and the co-worker each paid rent of R1500, per month, which meant he could afford a decent car. Aged 27, Ben had attended township schools in the area where he grew up. He was still studying for an LLB degree.

The woman from the couple I was staying with was Lebo, aged 26, was also staying in the same townhouse complex. From Soweto, she had never known her father, and did not know what work her mother had done, though she had worked for a large organisation. Lebo was an only child, and her mother died when she was sixteen. She went to model C schools, throughout. I had the opportunity to see some of her school

photographs, and she was generally one of about three black girls in her class; the rest were white. She had attended tertiary for one year, but dropped out for financial reasons.

Lebo's partner, 'Tiger', 31, was from Atteridgeville, one of the townships in Pretoria. His mother was a matron, and his father was a merchandiser. He also attended model C schools throughout his childhood, except for his standard eight year, when he went to a school in the township. Tiger studied briefly after school but did not complete. Lebo and Tiger were also renting, and had a small but reliable car. They had however, purchased a house in a nearby section of the suburb and were moving to it at the end of February, 2006.

Of the two temporary workers, 'Katie', aged 20, was from Soweto. She lives there with her mother, a teacher, and an older sister. She had also attended model C schools, and had an accent and confidence that portrayed she was comfortable with speaking English regularly and had done so for some time. Katie had studied one year of marketing and had dropped out while she decided whether she wanted to continue. Her 27-year old boyfriend, who did not want to be interviewed, was living in the same complex me and the other four agents. Katie spent a lot of her time with her boyfriend and other agents, and this is important to mention because it reflected a lot on her class understanding.

The other temp was 'Lucy', 21, from Umlazi, a township in KwaZulu Natal. She was staying with Katie at the time of her interview. She dropped out of varsity after her first year. She ended up completing 'just a little certificate in public relations'. But she did not feel like this was worth much. She had a twin sister, two older sisters and one older brother. Her mother was an age researcher<sup>24</sup>, and taught home-based care. Her father, who was retired, used to work in a law firm, but was not a lawyer. Her parent's occupations her parents were in suggest a more working class identity, but they could also be regarded as middle class and perhaps, lower professionals, by sociologists.

Another interview was conducted with Iemraan Kara, then Project Manager for Tactical Software Solutions, a company responsible for the training of call centre agents on the different software used, on May 26. Mr Kara was also a former Financial Call Centre executive director, and the purpose of the interview was to get top management's viewpoint on some of the dynamics under study.

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<sup>24</sup> researched the illnesses and discomforts that occurred to people who grew old



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