Invisible Bodies and Disembodied Voices? Identity Work, the Body and Embodiment in Transnational Service Work

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Abstract

This article explores the linkages between identity work, the body and embodiment in transnational call centres. Identity work, defined as the masking of national identity to imply proximity to the western client, provides an opportunity for the analyst to examine workplace embodiment in a global context. Qualitative data from an ethnographic study of two global outsourcing firms in India (2010-2012) explicated these processes. Narrative accounts suggest that call centre workers are routinely made aware of the body as a target of discipline, for instance in training; by working on their own bodies (including posture, dress, voice modulation and other forms of body regulation); by working on the bodies of others (through voice-based interactions) and by using embodied images of Americans to contextualize the service provided. In this way, the western client is visualized by the Indian call worker through corporeal imaginaries that concomitantly construct, subvert and resist the West-Rest dichotomy in service relations. Far from being disembodied, this study demonstrates that the body is central to global service work.

Keywords: body; call centres; embodiment; global capitalism; identity work

Introduction

That global capitalism has ordered labour processes in transnational service work in specific embodied ways is well documented. Call centre work has been described as feminized (Basi, 2009; Patel, 2012) and promoting soft masculinities (Rajan-Rankin, 2016a), racialized (Mirchandani, 2005; Poster, 2002), perpetuating an international division of labour (Taylor et al, 2005; Russell & Thite, 2008) and contributing to the informalization of third world workers (Ghosh, 2002; Mitter et al. 2004). Tensions exist however between the critical need to examine global inequalities in relation to bodies, and the dichotomized West-Rest thinking that can emerge from this analysis. As Murphy (2011:418) notes, the impact of globalization on labour processes in the South have been viewed as "uni-directional and destructive to the developing country's subaltern authentic identity...their citizens held in a permanent situation of subservience within the global economy". While this may serve as an effective counter-point to overt neoliberal arguments; such analysis can overlook possibilities of hybridization and co-mingling of traditional and new forms of modernity and identity constructions. 'Third world narratives' can hence, mask the possibility of agentic futures for workers, or at least the embodied processes by which they negotiate spaces of surveillance, control and agency (see Basi, 2009). While my intent is not to undermine the detrimental effects of global inequalities on workers in the Global South, I do want to highlight, that 'West-Rest' thinking may oversimplify often more complex processes of identity construction and a more nuanced reading may be necessary.

An examination of Indian call centres provides a novel lens for locating workers' and clients' bodies and their embodied practices within a global context. In particular, it challenges some of the assumptions around bodies and intimate relations at work, the topic of the special issue, and considers how these processes play out when workers and clients are not in close proximity. Voice-based call centre work uses automated dialling systems to connect call agents and western clients; as a result, the worker is invisible to the client, except for their voice. Techno-rationalistic descriptions of call centre labour processes have described call agents as 'cybertariats' (Huws, 2003) and in my recent work I have argued that these processes cause the labouring body to disappear from the worker's gaze (Rajan-Rankin, 2016b). However, this apparent invisibility needs further deliberation. While the call worker may be invisible to the western client (and vice versa), conversely, the call worker's body is highly visible as a subject for surveillance and a target of discipline on the shop floor. Thus, assumptions around the apparent invisibility of call centre work (to clients) needs to be disentangled from the idea that call work is disembodied. In part this idea of disembodied has been perpetuated by spatial and temporal distance between the call agent and the western client, and media representations (Mirchandani, 2015). It would be more precise to state, that call centres have been subject to a specific kind of embodied analysis, one that is characterized by surveillance and control.

Indeed, the physical body of call centre workers has been very visible in research, as a subject of fragility, substance misuse, burnout and fatigue (Jeyepal et al, 2015; Noranho & D'Cruz, 2009). Alternately female call workers bodies have come into the limelight in sensational news coverage on sexual assault (BBC, 2014) and as 'risky bodies' in nighshift work (Patel, 2010). Very few studies have engaged in an embodied understanding of call centre work (but see Basi, 2009; Pal & Buzannell, 2008 and Mirchandani, 2015) that goes beyond the physical body and explores the agentic and relational body.

In order to enflesh the fading body in call centre research, this study seeks to examine a specific embodied practice of 'identity work' in which call agents adopt westernized identities to imply proximity to the western client base. While identity work has been mainly analysed as a form of aesthetic labour (Nath, 2011); emotional labour (Mirchandani, 2012) and impression management (Goffman, 1959), few studies have examined this form of work as embodied (but see Mirchandani, 2015). By focussing on the bodily aspects of identity work, especially in relation to work on one's own body, and imagining others bodies, this article extends current thinking on identity work in call centres. Drawing on qualitative data from an ethnographic study of two global outsourcing companies in India, this papers examines the following research aims: (1) the ways in which labour processes in transnational call centres are spatially and temporally structured and its influence on worker's experiences of visibility/ invisibility; (2) exploring how call centre organizations regulate worker's bodies, accents and identities in call centre work and ways in which workers respond, resist and subvert the same (3) considering the processes by which call agents construct corporeal imaginaries about western clients (and their own identities) in this regard.

The article is structured into four main sections. First, I examine the emerging literature on identity management work in call centres and review the few studies conducted on these phenomena. I then consider the ways in which bodies can be illuminated in call centre research by drawing on the sociology of body literature, especially concepts of body work (Wolkowitz,

2006; Gimlin, 2007), body regulation, training and body pedagogics (Shilling & Mellor, 2007; Turner, 1983; Wainwright et al, 2011) and corporeal imaginaries (McDowell et al, 2007). My ethnographic research design and data analysis strategies are outlined in the next section along with a brief review of the two call centre firms. Findings from the qualitative study are presented in the third section and are organized around themes of (in)visibility of workers bodies; body regulation and training, gendered bodies and corporeal imaginaries. Using these vivid narrative accounts the analysis highlights the ways in which call workers bodies are not just passive subjects of discipline, but adopt embodied strategies to assert their sense of self as well. Tentative conclusions are presented in the final section, including new avenues for further research.

Identity Work, the Body and Embodiment

A peculiarity of transnational service work is the spatial and temporal distance between the call worker and western client living in another time-zone. To convince western clients that they are receiving a 'local service', risk-averse outsourcing companies require Indian call agents to mask their cultural identity in order to appear proximal to the western client base. This involves a complex set of embodied practices including *voice and accent training* (removal of mother tongue influence and developing a generic Americanized accent), *locational masking* (to keep up appearances that the service is provided in the same location as the client base), *deceptive mimicry* (ability to hold short conversations that include references to the customers' cultural context) and *visualization techniques* used to imagine the western client and their context. Identity work is not static, but occurs on a continuum from complete westernization, to partial masking, involving adopting an American accent, but maintaining Indian names. A growing sector of IT-enabled services has been dedicated to 'soft skills training' and organizational mandates around 'hard' or 'soft' identity management are mostly dictated by the western outsourcing company.

There are various explanations for identity work and theorization around this and other forms of global work are still nascent. Poster (2007) described 'national identity management' as a process by which employees assume different national identities as part of the job. She argues that racialism is still seen by employers as a legitimate requirement in worker recruitment, and retention in call centres (Poster, 2002). This research was extended by Nath (2011) to highlight ways in which call centre workers themselves use identity management strategies to manage stigma associated with the Indian identity. Nationality, rather than phenotype, is viewed as the basis of racially instigated customer abuse, so identity masking has its origins in colonial hierarchies and their influence on current representation of the relations between the third world worker and the western client.

Raghuram (2011) uses Goffman's (1959) ideas of "impression management" to explain the processes by which call centre workers regulate their identity. While this could be true of all call centre workers, the crucial difference is that for Indian workers privileging 'western identities' is an essential part of impression management. Raghuram argues that these strategies enable workers to be 'self-referencing' (where call agents model their behaviours based on the perceived accents, behaviours and identity representations of western clients)

by using context-appropriate behaviours to provide legitimacy and coherence to the job role. While this form of impression management puts the perceived audience (western clients) in a position of power; the accents, behaviours and identity performances themselves are not viewed by Raghuram to be particularly gendered or racialized.

In contrast, Mirchandani's (2004; 2005; 2012; 2015) research explores identity work in transnational call centres using feminist epistemologies. Mirchandani (2012) identifies simultaneously occurring discourses which underpin global service work. In the first instance, the physical remoteness of ICT work makes the Indian worker into a 'stranger'/'other' representing a threat to western jobs. To counter this, workers are encouraged to behave 'just the same as' their western clients. 'Authenticity work' hence involves a form of emotional labour in which call centre workers project themselves as 'authentic copies' of an idealized western worker. Implicit within this discourse is that presentation of self as an Indian agent could elicit perceived race-related abuse. In her later work Mirchandani (2015) seeks to reframe voice-based call centre work as a form of 'no-touch embodiment' work. Challenging the view that call centre work is disembodied, she suggests that call agents infuse 'flesh in voice' by reading bodies of western clients through the process of interpellation. She observes,

> "Part of the job of a customer service worker is transmission of bodies through voice….making sense of how ideal workers are embodied in callers' eyes and using their voices to emulate these imagined ideal workers" (Mirchandani, 2015:909).

While this vein of research is interesting, the focus is still on reading idealized bodies and incorporating these characteristics into the call agents' performance, rather than work on one's body as a target of discipline. In this sense, the connections between embodiment and identity work have not yet been sharply made. In order to develop these ideas further, I will draw on the sociology of body literature, especially concepts of embodiment, body work, training and body pedagogics and corporeal imaginaries to enflesh the body within call centre work.

A rich scholarship exists on the sociology of the body (Leder, 1990; Shilling, 2012; Williams & Bendelow, 1998; Wolkowitz, 2006), although it has had a somewhat late arrival in organizational studies (Gimlin, 2007). To bring the bodies of call centre workers and clients into our analyses we need to connect up different levels of analyses. The concept of 'body work' is helpful in understanding how bodies, embodiment and corporeality are involved in identity work at the micro-level. Although Wolkowitz (2006) defines body work as work on other people's bodies through physical contact, other definitions also exist. McDowell (2009) usefully distinguishes between 'high-touch' and 'low-touch' work based on variations in the proximity between workers' and client's bodies. Gimlin (2007) also offers a useful categorization of three additional different types of body work, which again provides more scope for identifying the body work undertaken by call centre workers. These are (1) work performed on one's own body, (2) management of emotional display and (3) production and modification of bodies through work. In this sense, identity work in call centres can be seen as a form of body work involving the first two categories identified in Gimlin's taxonomy; as regulation of one's own body through dress, posture, gestures, voice and accent and even the body's diurnal rhythms (Nath 2011; Mirchandani, 2012; Raghuram, 2011;); and also through suppressing and manipulating emotional display by 'smiling down the phone' (Jaarsveld et al, 2013; Hochschild, 1983).

Training plays a key role in this form of body work performed by call centre workers. Call agents undergo rigorous training, especially on voice and accent modulation, learning to flatten their vowels and adopt Americanized accents, and learn about American culture (Poster, 2007). The notion of 'body regulation' can help to explain this process. Turner (1983) extends Foucault's work by exploring the role of institutions in exerting social control and power over individual desires and passions. Thus, identity management work involves Indian call workers bending to organizational preference for westernized identities. Training can also be a transformative space. Wainwright et al's (2011:221) research on body training among mothers performing body work in beauty, health and social care sectors describes training spaces "as transitional and liminal- conceptual and physical spaces of 'in-betweenness'- in which body work is taught and learnt". In the context of call centre work, call agents occupy a transitional and liminal space, shifting between Indian non-work roles and westernized work roles, interpreting and projecting specific embodied identities and receiving feedback from western clients through body in a recursive loop.

Bodily training in call centres also occurs within a technology-mediated environment. Shilling & Mellor's (2007:533) describe 'body pedagogics' as "central *means* through which a culture seeks to transmit its main corporeal techniques, skills, dispositions and beliefs, the *experiences* typically associated with acquiring these attributes, and the actual *embodied changes* resulting from this process". Like Wainwright et al, (2011), these authors view body training to result in embodied changes. However, key to their conception of body pedagogics is the concept of body practice as 'culture', that is, normative and acceptable forms of corporeal and body expression that is transmitted across generations. In this sense, identity work can be conceptualized not only as body training, but also a pedagogical form of cultural assimilation, of consuming what is meant to be 'western', reproducing it through specific corporeal techniques, and experiencing the embodied changes of adopting and living that westernized pseudo-identity.

These embodied changes involve specific techniques called 'visualization practices' where call agents watch training videos of American people and lifestyles to try and 'imagine' the western client. While visualization techniques have been identified in many studies (Nath, 2011; Raghuram, 2011) it has not been analysed as an embodied strategy. Mirchandani (2015) comes close in her description of Indian call workers 'reading bodies' of the idealized westernized worker, but does not go far enough in considering this to be a bodily practice. I use the term 'corporeal imaginaries' to describe the embodied processes by which call centre workers visualize and enflesh the western client (and themselves) through the dual process of 'enchantment' and 'othering'. At one level, idealization and fantasy about specific corporeal characteristics (and by extension bodies which embody them) are used as part of the 'enchantment' of the service (McDowell et al, 2007). For example, much like the call centre workers, telephone sex workers need to perform an 'authentic role' of creating a comforting and inviting space to perform the (phone) sex interaction (Wolkowitz et al, 2013). Both bring the bodily, and involve some level of denial of personal/ cultural identity. However, the stigma of working with a client under an assumed pseudonym also brings with it the process of othering and potential for rejection if the assumed identity performance falters.

Beyond individual practices of body disciplining and training, identity work can also be understood as an embodied practice of self-presentation in the global context. Indian call workers actively engage in cosmopolitan culture, frequent malls and are conscious of fashion and designer labels (Murphy, 2011). Women actively participate as agents in the construction of new feminized identities. For instance, Freeman's (2000) study of Caribbean call centre women workers emphasized the ways in which dress, hair and high heels are embodied practices used to portray a professional image, in otherwise low-paid, low-status professions. Basi's (2009) similarly describes a sub-culture in call centres where women can modernize their identities (*Bhenji Turned Mod* or 'sister becomes a modern woman'). Sexual freedoms and increased mobility are also part of the call centre sub-culture, where young men and women are able to work in mixed company in night-time hours (Pal & Buzzanell, 2008), although night-time working has also been linked with risk of sexual violence and vulnerability (Patel, 2012).

Habitus and embodied self-styling may be one aspect of call centre worker's experience, but we must also locate their work role within the context of wider global inequalities. Thus, in order to understand the disciplining of body work in Indian call centres and how workers develop forms of embodied agency we also have to pay particular attention to the global relations within which these employees are located. Call centres still operate as a pattern of transnational service work which is predicated on North-South asymmetry in trade relations. The uni-directional flow of global outsourcing processes from the North to the South indicates specific power imbalances in trade, and these are mirrored in racialized encounters between western clients and Indian call workers (Poster, 2002). As McDowell et al (2007) observes, corporeal characteristics are often used to determine recruitment and job allocation within organizational hierarchies on gender, race and class lines. In Indian call centres, good quality English is a pre-requisite for recruitment into global call centres, which by extension includes mainly middle-class workers who could afford a private school education where English is taught as a second language (Murphy, 2011). While call centre workers are paid relatively well in relation to the national wage, in international comparison with customer service representatives in the west, their wages are relatively low. There is a dumping of low end service work to outsourced companies and even if Indian workers are able to adopt creative techniques to deal with the confines of their identity work role, they still operate within these frames of global inequality. These global connections are further explored in my ethnographic study.

Research Design and Data Analysis

This study draws on a two-year ethnographic study of two global call centres in India, one in the National Capital Region (NCR) and one in Hyderabad, in south India. Both firms are ranked in the top 20 global business process outsourcing companies in India and provided customer service to US markets. Firm-level differences added a comparative dimension to the study. The firm in NCR is a large global outsourcing firm dealing with financial data and debt collection. It has a long history of outsourcing and most client packages require only partial masking of workers' Indian identity. In contrast, the firm in Hyderabad is relatively new at global outsourcing, and has a domestic call centre arm (though we did not recruit informants from this part of the service). The global outsourcing process deals mainly with sales and beauty and fitness products. Full cultural immersion is often requested from the outsourcing firms with

complete masking of cultural identities. The global process in both call centres involved working night shifts, which generally ran from 8pm to 4am (Indian Standard Time).

Qualitative interviews were conducted with 38 people across both sites, including 22 customer service representatives (CSRs) (57%), 8 process trainers (22%), 7 HR managers (19%) and 1 policy expert (2%). Thirteen out of the 38 respondents were female, while 25 were men, a gender ratio that is consistent with the global business process management (BPM) sector (NASSCOM, 2015). The average age of customer service representatives was 24.9 years, while process trainers and managers were older (averaging 34 years). The average length of employment for CSRs was 19 months, while managers (4.5 years) and trainers (5 years) had longer job durations.

The research team included the author, who was responsible for gaining access to the call centre firms through industry contacts and obtaining ethical approval from Brunel University London. She worked with Indian PhD students who collected data at the two sites between 2010 and 2012 using ethnographic approaches. The author's and the students' data collection included participant observation on the shop floor; informal meetings with CSRs in *chai khanas* (tea shacks) before their shifts; and formal interviews with team leads, managers and accent trainers within the office environment. In addition, the author and research assistants kept field diaries which attempted to capture the flavour of 'being there' in the call centre environment. Managers, trainers and CSR's were recruited using snowballing techniques. The interviews covered a range of topics, including CSR's journeys into call centre work, their experiences of training and their impressions of the western clients they served. Interview questions often used 'feeling words' such as "what does it feel like to deal with an irate customer?" or 'being words' such as "how did your body feel when you were working through the night shift"? All the qualitative interviews lasted about one hour and were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. Colloquial terms in 'Hinglish' (a hybrid of Hindi and English) were maintained and annotated explanations provided within the written transcripts.

 A specific analytical challenge in this study was finding ways to "enflesh" or bring into focus the lived body in context, without co-opting 'bodily experience' within linguistic interpretation (Brown et al, 2011). Analysis of the qualitative interviews helped to unpack ways in which call agents bring 'bodilyness' into voice in relation to the way they visualized their own bodies and the bodies of western clients'. Informants' accounts of national identity, 'Indian-ness', 'western-ness' as well as imaginaries about the invisible worker/client were also unpacked. Given the range of qualitative methods used, thematic analysis approaches were considered appropriate (Attride-Stirling, 2001). Thematic analysis involves the reduction or distilling of textual data into codes and generating basic, organizing and global themes in increasing layers of abstraction. The interview transcripts, reflective diaries and field notes were anonymized to protect confidentiality and read and re-read to allow the author to immerse herself in the data. Line by line reading of the text helped to generate a coding frame from which themes were extracted. Four main themes are explored for this article, including (1) visible and invisible bodies, (2) gendered bodies, (3) body regulation and training and (3) corporeal imaginaries.

Visible and Invisible Bodies

The spatial and temporal organization of voice-based call centre work indicated visible control over invisible workers (Bain & Taylor, 2000; Valsecchi, 2006). Participant observation of the shop floor of the call centre sites was a study of contrasts: high levels of surveillance over workers' bodies on the one hand and invisible callers on the other. The author's reflective diary gives a flavour of the shop floor.

> *As I enter company X, my bag is thoroughly searched and I am denuded of my cell phone, computer and other electronic items by security. Here surveillance seems heaviest.. Once I enter it is like looking inside an inverted fish bowl. Bright lights are everywhere, with colourful offices, belying the late hour: here there is nowhere to hide. Row upon row of open plan cubicles face me with endless anonymous faces, adorning headsets, staring at computer screens, speaking to voices from far away.*

These 'outsider' impressions seem to accord with the description of call centres as 'electronic panopticans' characterized by heavy body surveillance (Bain & Taylor, 2000). However, firm-level differences reveal a less consistent picture. Interviews with managers and team leads in call centre firms in the two firms suggest different rationales underpinning surveillance cultures on the call centre shop floor.

> We deal with …credit card information you know? …We take the security of this information very seriously. That is why we have open plan offices and heavy security. Computers are fitted without CD or USB connections so no information can go out (Firm 1, NCR).

> These girls and boys ….they can find the work repetitive and boring. By making the company bright and colourful, open plan so everyone can be together, we are helping the workers be alert, and stay up in the night shifts (Firm 2, Hyderabad)

These narratives suggest that the 'electronic panopticon' imagery needs a more nuanced reading. In the first narrative, managers explain surveillance in terms of agents' bodies as potential conduits of sensitive information, while in the second narrative, call agents are viewed as fragile, prone to boredom and fatigue from the vagaries of temporal dystopia.

Self-regulation is also important. For instance, a customer service representative tells us about the ways in which he attempts to 'teach his body' to adapt to night shift work.

> My family all know, I work through the night and come in very early in the morning. You have to stay organized and teach your body "look its night time" even if the sun is blazing outside. I draw the curtains and the whole house has to be in darkness, even the *Bai* (cleaning lady) knows not to disturb.

His self-regulation is part of an embodied performance of projecting himself as a rested, alert and responsive customer service worker (Mirchandani, 2015). When day becomes night, and

night becomes day for the call centre worker, the body becomes a central tool in performing this temporal labour. This is consistent with Turner's (1983) model of bodily order, where somatic bodies are subject to internal regulation and control based on the organization of jobs. Moreover this bodily performance requires more than just self-regulation; he also required the co-operation of his family. 'Teaching your body' is a collective experience, and the whole household, including the housekeeper, is involved in maintaining this performance.

Indeed, CSRs' bodies were very much in management's mind during the extensive training process provided to new CSRs. In the following excerpt a voice and accent (V&A) trainer talks about the importance of sounding professional. The way in which the CSR sits and holds his body is viewed as an extension of his attitude to his work.

> Communication in call handling is not just about voice and accents…its utmost about attitude. I remember this one guy in my batch, he would always slouch in his seat, never make eye contact, look really relaxed. I would tell him this is not the proper way…it's not professional. He would tell me "how does it matter, the client has my ears, how I sit is not important". I would tell him point blank, "of course it is, what you do with your body, your posture, your attitude will come through in your voice".

This account indicates the significance of whole body deportment in training for call workers. Call handling is viewed as an embodied performance where body posture, gestures and general deportment are viewed as key to projecting a professional attitude (flesh in voice) (Mirchandani, 2015).

Gendered Body Performances

Front-line service work performances also require gender-linked bodily discipline. Wainwright et al, (2011) for instance noted that mothers who engaged in body training in beauty work often drew on skills associated with their gendered social identities to perform their roles. In this study both male and female CSRs reported ways in which they used their physical bodies as anchors in the voice-based call encounter. This female CSR describes her 'relational' body disappearing when it is not gazed upon and read by the customer, just as she is unable to see, gauge, read and interpret the customer's body, gesture and emotion.

> It's like my body doesn't exist, everything I do is on the phone. The customer cannot see me, they don't know what I look like, I don't know what they look like. Through my voice, I have to let them know who I am, how genuine I am in trying to help them.

While her voice remains an embodied part of her work, the lack of visibility to the client, makes the female call agent feel invisible. In order to counter this corporeal disappearance, she takes pains to dress and paint her nails in aesthetically pleasing ways to make her 'absent-present' body resurface in her own gaze.

> Sometimes, it can be really boring you know, just sitting there in the office all day, talking on the phone, no one to see or for them to see you…They can't see me on the phone, but I can look smart. I bring my western clothes in a bag and put them on when I come to the office in the morning. I like to paint my nails and have my *mehendi*, just so I can feel that I look nice….I look at my nails a lot when I am on the phone! (laughs).

This narrative provides insights into the intricate bodily performance of the female CSR who changes from Indian dress into to western dress to immerse herself into the landscape of global call work. The emphasis on her nails and mehendi (henna art work) on her hands are revealing as these are the part of her body she is most likely to look at during her call. The physical adornment of her body to prepare for the call also provides an insight into the feminized performance by which the call worker is working on her own body (Gimlin, 2007), because it also includes her attempt to combine 'western' and local features of feminine embodiment. The importance of dress and aesthetic presentation once again alludes to the embodied aspects of self-presentation in call centre work (Freeman, 2000).

Seeing the body in the voice applies not just to the self, but also to visualising the caller. In the following quotations, two male CSR's in different call centre firms describe very similar experiences of visualizing the American female caller as a 'mother-figure' to provide a more personalized service and offset possible customer abuse.

> When I am on a call, I try to imagine who I am speaking to. It is a nice American female voice. I think to myself, she must be a mom with young children. I try to see her as a person with a family who is having a problem with her credit card. I try to help her, not just as a voice on the phone, but as a *person to person.* (Firm 1, NCR)

> Sometimes we have a *gori mem* [white madam] calling and they get upset and start abusing. To keep myself cool…have to be cool at all times, to be professional, I think to myself "she is like my mother, my better", its ok… I tell myself I am there to help. (Firm 2, Hyderabad)

Both male Indian CSR's imagine the western client to be a mother figure and embed them within an organization-as-family context to provide a personalized service. In the second quotation, gender and race intermingle as the male CSR tries to offset abuse from a female customer and 'keep himself cool' by evoking Indian cultural norms around respect for parents and elders. This normative referencing is consistent with findings around paternalistic work cultures in some global offshore call centres in India, and specific ways in which call centre organizations reinforce familial values to ensure organizational loyalty (Rajan-Rankin, 2016). Extending this analogy, the male CSR's are engaging in a gendered performance where feminized attributes of empathy and compassion enable them to be professional and provide high-quality service. Indeed, professionalism is often used as an all-encompassing discourse to absorb many complex gendered and racialized narratives in call centre work (Noranho & D'Cruz, 2009).

Body Regulation

Turner (1983) describes regulation as a key aspect of social theory which involves regulation of bodies to maintain the fine balance between interpersonal intimacy and social anonymity. In this study, body regulation (both organizationally driven and self-regulation) is witnessed in the skilled practice of voice and accent training (V&A) whereby Indian call workers attempt to project a westernized identity, that is at once, intimate and familiar to the western client, but also different enough to assure anonymity. The creative process of selecting western pseudonyms suggests an element of agency in constructing the alternate self-identity (and thus resisting and possibly subverting organizational regulation of their bodies). The notion of 'body training' provides a useful lens for understanding "*how* the bodily is learned and enforced" (Wainwright et al, 2011). Finally, the implications of such assumed bodily constructions in relation to management of customer abuse is considered, through various mechanisms including humour and irony as tools of conciliation, subversion and resistance.

Corporealizing aurality: V&A training

Voice and accent training is a key aspect of cultural masking and involves a corporealizing of aurality and the infusing of a westernized (American) identity through the manipulation of one's accent. Considerable variability was seen in the firms in NCR and Hyderabad in relation to full or partial masking of the Indian accent, and/or the removal of mother-tongue influence to make the accent more understandable. This IT-Enabled Services policy expert explains logic of accent neutralization.

> Back in the 1990s when call centres first came to India…companies were very risk averse. They preferred low risk strategies such as complete cultural immersion and pseudonymity. Now there is less of a push to change names, but more emphasis on removing the mother tongue influence, just accent neutralization, not trying to sound like a *gora* [white foreigner] just enough so you can be understood.

The IT expert was making links between perceptions of 'risk' and revealing Indian identity, which are in line with existing research around managing stigma associated with national identity (Nath, 2011). However, the implications around partial cultural masking still need to be unpacked. Organizational discourses around 'accentless English' and 'being understood' are not always meant to totally obscure the agent's socio-cultural identity. The call agent must negotiate the subtleties of adopting a 'neutral accent', while being careful not to imitate the client or appear disingenuous.

> Customers can understand a neutral accent, but you have to be careful not to try to imitate the customer. What will they think, *arre* (hey!) "these fellows are trying to imitate us, they are taking the piss. The customer can tell you "sorry, I cannot understand your English, can you transfer my call to somehow who can talk properly". So you need to be good enough with your English, but not too perfect.

Adopting a generic westernized (American) accent is hence a tricky business, and can involve treading the fine line between 'mimicry' and 'mockery' (Bhabha, 1994). The imitation of the American accent needs to be pleasing in its authenticity as a true copy (Mirchandani, 2012), but any slip in the aural performance can cause the entire identity masking to be called into question (Raghuram, 2011).

Adopting Western Pseudonyms

The adoption of western pseudonyms provides another layer in identity work. Call agents described the logic of pseydonumization as complex, ranging from negative perceptions about outsourcing to managing anxieties about 'risk' and being 'too different'.

> We are Indians, our names are very hard to understand and spell. See, changing the name is most important thing, because Americans they won't happy nowadays with outsourcing. They won't be happy. Just right now 8:30 I took a call. That lady was… very politely she was asking, where are you from? I told. They cannot recognize that you are from India. Because our slang will be different, our pronunciation will be different.

There is however, also evidence of agency and creativity in the selection of pseudonyms. This CSR describes how he chooses his name and the image he creates using it.

> We do have a fair bit of choice in how we choose our (western) names. For me, well I like Jamie Foxx a lot. So I asked if I could get Jamie Foxx as a pseudonym. My trainer said no, because it wasn't believable as it was a Hollywood actor's name and the callers might think we are making crank calls. So I thought about it and said… Damien Foxx. He's everybody's friend. He's really cool, but trustworthy and all the girls want to be with him.

This CSR draws inspiration from a Hollywood actor to infuse his work identity with an alter-ego image of a masculinized image, a 'man's man', 'everyone's friend', 'a girl magnet'. He humanizes his work identity, enfleshes it with corporeal attributes that he wants to emulate, to perform his service role. The bodily is clearly present in the creative process of selecting pseudonyms and the call agent's own agency is involved in his crafting his own work identity, within the remit of the social regulation of his identity. Micro-level processes provide insights into the spaces created by call agents, to subvert, resist and shape their own modernized identities within the call process (Basi, 2009).

Managing Customer Abuse

Front-line service workers frequently encounter irate and abusive customers (McDowell, 2009) and call centre work is no exception (Mirchandani, 2012; Nath, 2011, Raghuram, 2011). Calls are frequently recorded and scripted call work requires agents who encounter abusive callers to give a verbal warning and hand over the call to a team leader. In this narrative, the manager

recounts an incident where a call agent compliments the American client for her use of swear words, using humour and irony to subtly challenge and destabilize the abusive call. Humour in this situation can be viewed as an example of subversion and conciliation, working on the bodily (swearing, cursing American client) to humanize the service encounter, and receive more humane treatment in return.

> I can give you an example, there is one of my guys…(he) was talking to an American lady. She was using the F letter word, a number of times, before she starts a sentence, after she ends a sentence, she was using it. Usually when a customer starts using profanity we tell them "So sorry ma'am, we will not be able to handle the call". This guy, my rep, he was a very nice guy, and he just told her "I really like the way you use the F word ma'am" (laughs). Then she realized and said "I have five guys under me and I have to kick their butts all the time". She became very polite, very friendly.

While the narrative above illustrates the creative use of humour to diffuse tension, customer abuse remains a painful and constant part of everyday call centre interactions. Backlash particularly in the form of anger over outsourcing and loss of jobs characterizes many of these encounters.

> Abuse? Happens almost daily. It does happen maybe one or two times in a day. During some point in the call, some people say "You Indians!!!' etc. I try not to talk to them about it, to evade, to change the topic. But it always comes back to that, that we are Indian. That's why changing our names and accents helps, so we can get on with the job, with the purpose of the call, it is less distracting.

In this quotation, the customer has 'caught the call agent out' as an Indian worker and vents their frustration. The call agent is unable to re-engage the masked cultural performance, despite attempts to evade and change the topic. There is an implicit assumption here that the Indian identity is problematic ('distracting') and obfuscates the purpose of the service encounter. Two levels of racial imaginaries are at play. The western client challenges the performance through a negative portrayal of the Indian worker. The Indian worker receives this is as race-related abuse, but subsumes it within the professional discourse of the neutral worker. Professionalism then becomes a functional barrier to stem customer abuse, even though it also distorts the call agents' ability to combat unfair assumptions about national identity.

Imagining the 'Other': Corporeal Imaginaries

Corporeal characteristics of imagined western clients were often used in training to enable call agents to visualize and construct the 'other' through corporeal imaginaries. As McDowell et al (2007) note, the embodiment of corporeal attributes linked to job roles provides an imagined discourse about the customer/client that is relationally defined. Raghuram (2011) describes ways in which call agents use images of snow and Christmas to situate clients in cold weather

climes. Mirchandani (2015) talks about images of men in tuxedos used in call agent recruitment campaigns to construct the idealized western male client. These images represent caricatures of the west, and enable the Indian agent who has likely never visited America to imagine their context. Poster (2007:272) articulates the training given to Indian call agents.

> Anil…has learned the local lingo, and knows Americans shop at Walgreens, eat at McDonalds....drive Ford Fiestas…In order to get a sense of how to put the whole package of American-ness together, he has been watching *Friends* and *Baywatch* in training sessions.

In our study, a female CSR describes training videos she was given to sell a fitness product called *Beach Body.*

> When I first joined as a CSR the main process we were catering to was *Beach Body*, selling fitness products. They sell DVD's so any person can work out at home without having to go to the gym. The trainers gave us videos to watch about California and people's craze for fitness there. We had to know the culture… not just that we were selling fitness videos.

In both these extracts, corporeal imaginaries play a central role in training, by producing stereotypical images of (white) physically fit and attractive, wealthy, successful Americans. By extension the coloured Indian call agent has to 'sell' this image of whiteness to consumers and also embody his/her own difference from this normative ideal. Bodies and embodiment hence are inherent in the training through exposure to consumption culture. These imaginaries were not only restricted to western clients. Moreover, according to the call agents, they are also 'imagined' in stereotypical ways by western clients.

> Most of the people in the US know something about India. Most times they talk about the Taj Mahal…and they talk about food, Indian food, spicy food…They like to know more about India…how many languages you speak in India. Where are you from? Southern part of India- some of them say I have been recently there and some of them have seen Slumdog Millionnaire and they ask, is that how it is, in India? Then we say that is not how it is! That's' *not* (emphasis) India. Slumdog millionaire is not India!!!

Just as Indian call agents use corporeal imaginaries to construct western clients, narratives from call centre workers and managers suggest that Americans too, draw on popular images of Bollywood, people dancing on the street, images of the Taj Mahal to construct an exotic, colourful and poverty ridden India. Neither image is necessarily true. Certainly, all Americans do not resemble the cast of *Baywatch*, nor do all Indians live in slums. These fantasies about the other (client/worker) are part of the enchantment (McDowell et al, 2007) of the distant global service. Corporeal imaginaries however can become destabilized during 'real-world' service encounters, when agent and caller 'meet', even though this takes place by telephone or online. This Indian CSR describes his experience of debt collection and realizing for the first time that Americans could be poor.

> I used to always imagine all Americans to be rich, you know, living in a nice house with lots of money. I remember I called up a lady once in my role as debt collector. She owed $250 and when I called her to pay up. She told me she was a widow and wasn't earning, that she lived on 'food stamps' and did not even have $10 to put food on the table. At first I did not believe her. I mean, come on, right? This is America! I thought she was lying because as she was sounding very low and fumbling on the call. Then she started crying …and told me she was a single parent... At the end of the call... I realize there are …even poor people in America.

This call agent encounters the diversity in American clientele and is forced to re-imagine his idea of the generic western client as a wealthy consumer. The idealized notion of the white, wealthy, successful suburban family is put to the test when he encounters a single mother on food stamps, contesting the way the body of the western client is imagined and experienced. These experiences become even more profoundly unsettling when the Indian call agent encounters a fellow Indian client settled in the US in a service encounter.

> Man, yes you get a lot of abuse. I remember during one call, I called up an Indian guy in the States and his name was Mr. Anil Sharma. I gave my opening line "Can I talk to Mr. Sharma, my name is Lou Forstrom" and ask how we would like to resolve his credit issue. He literally started abusing me straight off. He started using *desi* abuse like '*ben chut kisko pata raha hai*?' [what are you trying to pull over me, sister fucker?] and he abused like anything. I remember feeling really upset and wanting to abuse him back in Hindi. You would think that being Indian he would have been more understanding, but he was taking out his anger like an American.

When the call agent used his pseudonym 'Lou Forstrom', he unwittingly engaged with a fellow Indian, who challenged his identity performance. Drawing on the cultural capital of being Indian and speaking Hindi, the customer destabilized the service encounter at two levels, by challenging the agent's masking of cultural identity and his linguistic performance. Cursing in Hindi draws on intimacy of familiar cultural context to devastating effect. The call agent experiences customer abuse and alienation of his identity performance at several levels, as an Indian who is trying to be an American, but has failed to be American enough for an Indian living in America. These cracks in identity performance characterize leakages through which inequalities, differences and similarities embedded within global capitalism emerge and confront idealized corporeal imaginaries.

Discussion

This article examines identity work in call centres as form of bodily discipline and embodied identity construction within the context of global capitalism. The few existing studies on identity work or national identity management have overwhelmingly used emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983) or impression management (Goffman, 1959) as an analytic frame. While these are valuable frameworks, they nonetheless project identity work to be a performative work constructed *outside the body*. Indeed Mirchandani's (2015) work comes closest to an

embodied analysis of identity work, but even here, bodies only matter in relation to 'reading bodies' rather than work on one's own body. Qualitative data from this ethnographic study indicate that whole bodies are involved in the process of identity work.

Findings suggest that bodies matter in call centre work on several planes of analyses. The fleshy body is evoked in all aspects of agents' call centre work, including managing spatial and temporal dislocation between the agents' actual location and their pretence of being in the US; the adornment of bodies in preparation for work, body posture and emoting through voice; training modules which highlight idealized western bodies; and through visualization and corporeal imaginaries. Nuances around the politics of embodiment and othering are also evident, as call agents describe both the processes by which they construct the western client (and their own identities) but also how their actual encounters may sometimes destabilize these imaginaries. Firm-level differences are also evident and variations are seen in the adoption of surveillance cultures, and full/ part cultural immersion and identity masking based on how risk-averse the outsourcing companies were. Thus, the characterization of global outsourcing and identity work as a homogenous process is challenged, and multiple variations and complexities are unearthed.

'Body dys-appearance' and disembodiment in call centre work is also explored in detail in this study. While previous research has focussed on the lack of touch-based contact in interactive service work and regarded call centre work as disembodied, this study teases out the analytical differences between the body, body work, body regulation and embodiment. While the physical body may be invisible to the western client, the worker's body is most certainly visible to the call agent, their team and managers and is hence subject to regulation and control. Even there, variations exist, as there is evidence of agentic process and self-regulation in the ways call agents 'work on their bodies', whether it is to 'teach your body' to sleep in the day and work at night, or by adorning the body to make it visible to the self, or changing from Indian to western clothes before starting a night shift. These actions are performed by workers' bodies, they are not imagined or projected; even though these body practices may well be informed by embodied understandings of identity work.

Body work as a framework can be used to describe call centre work, using Gimlin's (2007) inclusion of work on one's own body. This opens up a new set of theoretical possibilities in understand how bodies matter in call centre work. When the call agent labours to learn skills of masking mother tongue influence in their native accent, or pronounce words in an Americanized accent, they are performing body work. Call agents' narratives clearly indicate that the body is central to such work, and is infused in their body posture, their attitude and ultimately their tone of voice. Adoption of western pseudonyms and knowledge of western culture similarly are embodied practices, even if their purpose is to mask the worker's own bodily situation, and a host of behind-the-scenes bodily tasks are performed to make these performances authentic. Body regulation (Turner, 1983) and body pedagogics (Shilling & Mellor, 2007) also provide new ways of understanding identity work as an embodied practice, highlighting ways in which the fleshy body can occupy multiple positions on different cyber planes (Shilling, 2012). The development of the term 'corporeal imaginaries' in this paper extends current thinking on dual interpellation (McDowell et al, 2007) by linking it with the politics of othering; through a recursive and fluid form of empathetic identity construction,

which is simultaneously complicit and ambivalent. The westernized client is hence constructed based on the idealizations and fantasies of the embodied other, and in this process, the call agents locate themselves as the familiar other. When symbolic difference is challenged through real-life encounters, the fantasy dissolves, and the power inequalities entrenched in global capitalism become visible.

Embodied performances of gender and race in identity work also needs further explication. While previous research has highlighted the gendered and racialized nature of call centre work (Mirchandani, 2005; Nath, 2011; Poster, 2007) they have focussed on identity management techniques being developed as ways of stemming racial abuse. The nature of this racial abuse needs further exploration. While racialization was evident in the call agents' experiences of dealing with customer abuse, the findings further unpack the politics of race and nation as pivotal to these processes, rather than racial abuse per se. This subtle but important differentiation matters, as it helps to dislocate racialization from colonial histories, and relocate them within the racial politics of neoliberalism, global capitalism and nationhood. Thus, when an Indian living in the US challenges the Indian call agent living in India, the relational customer abuse is not based on the colonial master and servile call agent, but a tension arising from diasporic post-colonial social location, mediated by unequal conditions of global capitalism. Polar constructions of the 'West and the Rest' and the 'West in the Rest' can then give way to more differentiated understandings.

The concept of corporeal imaginaries proposed in this paper may be a useful concept to understand the didactic processes by which workers visualize clients' bodies in the absence of a face-to-face encounter. In an increasingly globalizing world where technology and social media are driving virtual rather than in-person contact, corporeal imaginaries may become a key tool for body pedagogic practice in service delivery. Further research may consider a wider application of body work in other forms of global service work and corporeal imaginaries in areas such as cyber-gaming, social media and internet dating services. Bodies then provide a connective thread, between individual and organizational discourses around bodily discipline and global processes of economic production and consumption.

Declaration of conflicting interests

Funding

Acknowledgements

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