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Abstract

Service work is often (mis)represented within western sociology through hyperbolic language, as its increasing incidence and changing character is seen as symptomatic of profound social change. This paper argues that many recent empirical investigations into, and the dominant representations of, the service encounter (employment involving employee-customer interaction which is represented as a particularly 'new' form of work) exaggerate its novelty as 'cultural' work. Through a critical analysis of some recent empirical accounts of the service encounter and drawing upon one example from the author's own ethnographic research into service encounters within north- eastern England, it is argued that the dominant representations over-emphasise the cultural, and underplay both the economic and gendered, dynamics of the employment experience. More specifically, we argue that it is the active combination of 'the economic' and 'the cultural' - the way in which gendered demands for employees to develop particular norms, values, personalities and identities are embedded within inequitable economic relationships - which can shape the employment experience of service employees. Dominant representations of the service encounter also reject the contemporary relevance of 'traditional' industrial sociological analyses of employment relations. However, given the weak empirical foundations of 'the cultural turn', we argue that this contention cannot be supported. In fact, it is suggested that many 'traditional' industrial sociological analyses precisely examine the interplay between economic, gendered and cultural relations and therefore continue to have relevance for understanding contemporary employment. Finally, our arguments are located within debates about the cultural turn within the wider sociological discipline.

Keywords:
Class Relations; Cultural Turn; Employment; Gendered Emotional Labour; Representation; Service Encounter; Service Work; Structural Dynamics; Subjectivity

Introduction

1.1

Service work is often (mis)represented within western sociology through hyperbolic language, as its increasing incidence and changing character is seen as symptomatic of profound social change (Druker 1986;Casey 1995; du Gay 1996). We must beware of pronouncing the coming of 'post-industrial society'on the basis of data which does not adequately examine the content of service work, thus concealing its wide variety, continuity

with the past and the fragility of a manufacturing/services distinction (Beynon 1992;Warhurst and Thompson 1998). This paper will suggest that many recent empirical investigations into, and the dominant representations of, contemporary private sector service work, specifically those presented within *Work, Employment and Society* (*WES* - the prominent and influential British sociology of work journal), also exaggerate its novelty. This will in turn lead us to challenge the recent 'cultural turn' within the sociology of employment and the wider sociological discipline.

1.2

We shall explicitly focus upon the 'service encounter' - employment involving employee/customer interaction - which is represented as a particularly novel form of work. In the early 1990s, two seminal *WES* papers contended that the service encounter can only be fully investigated using different analytical tools to those 'traditionally' associated with industrial sociology (Urry 1990;Allen and du Gay 1994), integral to a wider 'cultural turn' within the sociology of employment (Knights and Willmott 1989; du Gay 1996;O'Doherty and Willmott 2001). In fact, Allen and du Gay viewed developments within the service encounter as preceding the 'culturalisation' of all employment relations. It will be argued here that these claims have not been supported empirically.

The Cultural Turn and the Service Encounter

2.1

Those who emphasise the experiential and sociological novelty of the contemporary service encounter have viewed it as 'cultural' work. This proposition has two, related dimensions. Firstly, the content of work, communication between worker and customer, inherently involves cultural relations (Urry 1990; Allen and du Gay 1994; du Gay 1996; du Gay 2001). A product of such labour processes is the interactive experience of both worker and consumer, although it is important to remember that tangible products are often produced alongside the intangible within many services. Moreover, the 'quality' of employee/consumer interaction has been perceived, by business practitioners and academics alike, as crucial to competitiveness and capital accumulation within service delivery (Fuller and Smith 1991; Rosenthal et al..1997; Thompson and Findlay 1999; Sturdy 2001).

2.2

Secondly, because of the perceived importance of cultural relations between employees and customers, many interactive service workers have been subjected to managerially-inspired 'culture change' programmes (du Gay 1996; Jones et al.1997; Thompson and Findlay 1999; Sturdy 2001). The impetus behind these initiatives is a belief, which has been promoted through influential business and political organs (du Gay and Salaman 1992;Taylor 1997), that interactive service quality can be maximised through acceding discretion to employees and thereby facilitating 'genuine' and 'natural' worker/customer communication. 'Direct' or 'bureaucratic' managerial control is not seen as appropriate for eliciting the employee autonomy and commitment, viewed as crucial to service quality and 'excellence' within contemporary competitive conditions. 'Culture change' programmes focus managerial attention upon the attitudes and identities of interactive service workers. For Allen and du Gay (1994:266-7), this represents opportunities for the 'personal development' and 'self-actualisation' of such employees. It is also referred to, by managers and academics alike, as employee 'empowerment'.

2.3

A number of influential authors from the sociology of employment have also suggested that analysis of the substantive cultural turn within western economies should also be 'cultural work' in an epistemological sense (Knights and Willmott 1989; Rose 1990; Allen and du Gay 1994; Knights and Vurdubakis 1994; du Gay 1996; O'Doherty and Willmott 2001). It is argued that the increasing prominence of (especially interactive) service work within

western economies has thrown the very identity of 'work' and contemporary workers into a process of 'dislocation', and is productive of novel, 'hybrid' work-based identities. 'If the growth of service sector employment establishes a qualitatively new identity for 'work', it implies that new approaches to understanding that identity should also be sought' (Allen and du Gay 1994:265). The alleged dislocation of identity relations, not only within the workplace but within western societies more generally, has apparently revealed the discursive constitution of work-based identity, and the central importance (to employees) of securing ontological security through subjective workplace experience (Knights and Willmott 1989;du Gay 1996; O'Doherty and Willmott 2001). Simultaneously, 'traditional' sociologies of employment are attacked, and discarded, as outdated in the light of such dislocation. Thus, du Gay (1996:5-6) contends that the 'new approaches' should comprise of 'theoretical tools not traditionally associated with the study of work and organisation...it is within cultural theory that the most productive theoretical tools can be found for analysing work-based subjectivity and identity'. Similarly, O'Doherty and Willmott (2001:473) have recently defended 'the potency of post-structuralist analysis' for understanding employment experience.

2.4

What follows will challenge the cultural turn, primarily through a critical analysis of some recent empirical accounts of the service encounter which have appeared in *WES* (Sosteric 1996;Rosenthal et al.1997;Knights and McCabe 1998). Firstly, it will be argued that, far from confirming the 'novel', 'hybrid' identity of interactive service work, these studies are actually rather one-dimensional, focusing almost entirely upon the 'cultural' aspect of the employment relationship while neglecting the 'economic' dimension. Secondly, and relatedly, the nature and consequences of managerial control within the work situations is not sufficiently explored. Thirdly, the studies discussed fail to address the distinctly gendered nature of the service encounter. Fourthly, as a consequence of such lacunae, the empirical accounts listed above misrepresent the nature of employee autonomy and opportunities for self-actualisation within the service encounter and do not substantiate the cultural turn within the sociology of employment more widely. These arguments will then be illustrated and developed further through the use of one example from the author's ethnographic research into service encounters within north-eastern England. The conclusion to the paper will locate our key arguments regarding the dynamics and nature of the service encounter within wider disciplinary debates.

◆ Unbalanced Hybridity

3.1

The service encounter *is* inherently 'cultural'. Furthermore, all the representations of the service encounter considered here recognise that it is also an 'economic phenomenon' (Allen and du Gay 1994:266). That is, it is performed within the structurally-induced and inequitable capitalist employment relationship. Service encounters must ultimately produce value through, for example, the sale of products/services or the collection of debt. In fact, the very reason for the exposure of many service employees to 'culture change' programmes is a senior managerial perception that the nature of meanings produced and exchanged during employee/customer interactions is central to capital accumulation.

3.2

Allen and du Gay (1994) argue that it is the subtle imbrication of 'economic' and 'cultural' processes which facilitates the 'hybrid' identity of the service encounter, and offers opportunities for the exercise of autonomy, self-actualisation, the confirmation of identity and gratifying subjective experiences to the employees concerned. However, the empirical accounts discussed below offer a one-dimensional representation of the service encounter, or what could be termed 'an unbalanced hybridity'. The 'economic' aspect of service encounters is merely treated as a backdrop against which the 'cultural' work is performed.

Other research into the service encounter ([Hochschild 1983](#); [Ogbanna and Wilkinson 1990](#); [Fineman 1995](#); [Taylor 1997](#), [1998](#)) has shown that it is precisely the active *combination* of the 'economic' and the 'cultural' - more specifically the way in which demands for employees to develop particular norms, values, personalities and identities are embedded within inequitable economic relationships - which can have profound consequences for the subjective experience of employees.

3.3

The economic aspect of the service encounter manifests most clearly, at the level of employee experience, in the form of managerial supervision and evaluation of the labour process. Managerial demands and their implementation within the employment relationship are driven, at least partly, by the 'structural constraints' ([Pollert 1996](#):643) imposed by the social reproduction of the capitalist mode of production. Fully interrogating managerial supervision and evaluation is crucial when considering the extent of employee autonomy. However, it is precisely such an interrogation, which appears to be missing from the majority of recent accounts of the service encounter. This argument will now be developed by considering three studies in turn.

Sosteric (1996)

3.4

[Sosteric's (1996)](#) article, which (mis)represents the service encounter within a Canadian nightclub both before and after a managerially-inspired 'culture change', is a clear example of the reluctance to see the 'economic' aspect of the service encounter as more than a simple and passive backdrop to the truly 'cultural' labour process and as such exaggerates the opportunities for employee autonomy and self-actualisation therein. Thus, prior to the 'culture change', we are told that a special atmosphere existed within the club, facilitated by feelings of 'belonging', 'status' and 'prestige' (300-1) amongst the clientele, in turn engendered by highly personalised employee/customer relations. [Sosteric (1996:299-303)](#) argues that full employee autonomy was crucial in allowing these relations to develop:

> Employees brought their personalities and idiosyncrasies to work and found unique and enjoyable modes of self-expression in the workplace...Customers themselves were often aware of the attitudes and individual serving styles of the employees and seemed to appreciate the individuality this entailed...it was necessary for employees to *be themselves* (original emphasis).

3.5

However, the power of the economic dynamic to the service encounter, which in combination with cultural forces and demands can constrain as well as enable the 'individuality' of service employees, becomes apparent as Sosteric (304) goes on to describe how new employees were socialised into this social system. This largely took place through informal after-work staff gatherings. Staff who failed to learn the system had their contracts terminated. We hear that an overly submissive attitude towards patrons was particularly frowned upon. This clearly disputes the claim that highly personalised employee/customer interaction was developed through the full autonomy of employees. Rather, it seems that the 'individuality' of servers is channeled in a particular direction by the socialisation system. Furthermore, the study hints that employee compliance partly arose from the economic aspect of the service encounter, i.e. the need to maintain an income which was, with gratuities (dependent upon fostering personalised customer relations), well above the city and industry average. [Sosteric's (1996:306)](#) overall argument that the search for ontological security and a sense of identity are the most significant employee motivations in this case, a privileging of the cultural over the economic determinant of employee subjectivity and the separation of the two, is simply not supported by the empirical evidence offered.

3.6

Highlighting Sosteric's neglect of the economic dynamic to the service encounter, an 'unbalanced hybridity', we actually hear very little about managerial control within the nightclub prior to the culture change. Following Friedman (1977), the managerial strategy is described as one of 'responsible autonomy'. However, it is worth remembering that Friedman's (1977:78) 'responsible autonomy' entails a form of managerial *control,* 'giving workers leeway and encouraging them to adapt to changing situations in a manner beneficial to the firm...(which) attempts to capture benefits particular to variable capital'. It refers to employee discretion 'within limits' and some managerial mechanisms for supervision and evaluation of the labour process (in turn arising from the economic dynamics to the labour process) always accompany this managerial 'strategy' (Friedman 1977). Sosteric mentions the 'monitoring' of employees prior to the 'culture change' programme but no details are given beyond this. Are we to presume that there were no (managerial) limits and prescriptions in relation to the form and content of worker/customer interactions? This is suggested by such statements as 'management had little real control over the labour process' (314) - the direct opposite of what Friedman meant by 'responsible autonomy' - but then thrown into doubt by contentions that *management*...(was) facilitating the creative and co-operative construction of highly complex meaning and status systems...and a carefully constructed subjectivity' (314 my emphasis). How was management facilitating this? Who precisely was constructing subjectivity? Resolving these ambiguities and lacunae does seem crucial for a full understanding of the 'emotional labour' (Hochschild 1983;Taylor 1998) and 'individualities' deployed by the nightclub employees. The very power of managerial demands for particular types of cultural work, 'individualities' and forms of emotional labour from employees often relates to their 'embeddedness' within structurally-induced and inequitable economic relationships (Taylor 1997, 1998; Taylor and Tyler 2000). A full investigation of both the economic and the cultural aspects to the service encounter (and their interrelation) would help us to discern whether employees were presenting their 'authentic personality', as Sosteric (1996:309) claims and, in turn, whether the increasing incidence of the service encounter within western economies does really signal a 'dislocated identity' for work and workers at the dawn of the twenty first century. Sadly, the clear inhibition of Sosteric to fully integrate the consequences of the economic dimension to the service encounter (for example, the nature and impact of managerial control mechanisms) into his analysis and argument means that the cultural turn, from this source at least, is bereft of empirical support

3.7

The economic aspect of the service encounter *is* part of Sosteric's analysis of the managerially-inspired 'culture change' within the nightclub. The rationale for change was a management perception that 'quality' customer service needed to be generalised to a wider market than that pandered to through personalised worker/customer interactions. Empirical details are given of the managerial control mechanisms that followed from this desire to maximise value. Interestingly, O'Doherty and Willmott (2001) attack Sosteric's account of the culture change for not fully incorporating the cultural turn. They argue that 'a more sensitive analysis, guided by the insights of poststructuralism' (468) would have led Sosteric to conclude that the resistance, conflict and disorder precipitated by the culture change resulted from managerial moves which restricted 'opportunities to secure and maintain an established but malleable sense of identity...indeed, punished their mainifestation' (470). This reinterpretation of Sosteric also ignores the economic dimension to the service encounter. Recognising the economic dimension might lead us to argue that the resistance, conflict and disorder precipitated by the culture change was *also* a result of declining employee income, as the opportunities for fostering personalised relations with customers declined. Sosteric himself mentions this point (310) but does not develop it as an argument.

Rosenthal et al. (1997)

3.8

Rosenthal et al. (1997) also fail to fully examine the economic dimension of the service encounter within their assessment of the impact of a managerial initiative (also described as a 'culture change' programme) aimed at improving 'service quality' at 'Shopco'. Consequently, we are again (mis)presented with a picture of managerially-sanctioned total employee freedom within the service encounter. Quality improvement initiatives are heralded by some as beneficial to employees, and attacked by others who view them as the most complete system of managerial control and degradated labour developed to date. While rightly critical of these polarised interpretations, often formed on little empirical foundation, Rosenthal et al. (1997:497) argue, on the basis of their investigation at 'Shopco', that 'the optimism of the management writers and others is better supported...than the pessimism of the control school'.

3.9

One of the aims of the 'Shopco' quality programme was to increase the discretionary content of service encounter jobs. Firstly, through allowing employees more freedom to make decisions, for example in relation to exchanges or credits, without referring to a supervisor. Secondly, through encouraging workers to 'be themselves' and find ways 'of transferring effective styles of interacting in their personal life into their dealings with customers' (Rosenthal et al. 1997:487), as opposed to the imposition of interactive scripts and rules. This would then enable workers to meet the individualised expectations of different customers through 'natural' and 'genuine' communication. Rosenthal et al.. (1997:488-92) report that staff engaged in:

> high levels of the kind of customer-oriented behaviour sought by management...(staff) discretion and responsibility have increased noticebaly...Moreover, this new discretion was not accompanied by any increase in human or technological surveillance.

3.10

The authors mention (493-4) that 'discretion is clearly defined and limited...(and that) employees may be governed at more of a distance, but they are still governed'. However, we are given no further details about the operationalisation of such managerial prescription and control and how it might shape and constrain employee discretion and individuality within the labour process. While it has been suggested that this failure to fully examine the nature of managerial control at 'Shopco' results from methodological flaws within the research process pursued by Rosenthal et al. (Knights and McCabe 1998; Taylor and Tyler 2000), we can also add to this the reluctance of service encounter investigators to examine the 'economic dimension', of which some form of managerial supervision and evaluation of the labour process is an integral part. The economic hiatus in the 'Shopco' study is further revealed by the presentation (496-7) of the service quality programme as a wholly discursive phenomenon. A full examination of (economic as well as cultural) power relations within the workplace would have revealed the greater power of managerial discourses, in comparison to the discursive reconstitution of management by employees (Rosenthal et al. 1997:497), wedded as they are to inequitable economic and structural arrangements. The 'unbalanced hybridity' of Rosenthal et al. means that we still await convincing empirical justification for the cultural turn within the sociology of employment.

Knights and McCabe (1998)

3.11

Knights and McCabe's (1998), in their study of Total Quality Management (TQM) at 'Qualbank', an organisation where the service encounter is only one among a number of tasks within the overall labour process, *do* discuss managerial control. However, again, the economic dimension to the service encounter is not sufficiently explored and an

'unbalanced hybridity' is offered. Managerial control, employee experience and employee subjectivity are cast in overly 'cultural' terms.

3.12

Qualbank management claimed that TQM had effected a change in the attitudes and culture of the workforce, such that every employee was aware of the nature and importance of quality customer service. Central to this was 'employee empowerment', whereby workers were encouraged to engage in their own 'problem solving', relating to their experience of service delivery. Some 'problems' were to be raised as 'snags' and resolved through discussion with colleagues. Management (442) argued they had generated a 'love of empowerment' amongst employees. 'The end goal for management is that employees internalise control: control has not disappeared so much as been metamorphosed' (Knights and McCabe 1998:443). The limits, contradictions and unintended consequences of this managerial 'strategy' and the 'spaces' for employee resistance - all of which are seen as partly emanating from the 'economic dimension' or what Knights and McCabe (1998:433) term 'bottom line considerations' - are also explored.

3.13

However, despite the above, it can be argued that managerial control in this case, as illustrated by the direct quote above, is cast in overly narrow and 'cultural' terms. Consequently, even Knights and McCabe fall short of fully integrating an economic dimension into their analysis of the service encounter. TQM is conceived (433) as a 'management *discourse*...(which) has power effects that can transform individuals into subjects who secure some sense of their own identity through participating in the practices it embraces' (my emphasis). This may well be but TQM, as an attempt at managerial control, is also more than this. It is a managerial discourse, which is often, as in this case, embedded within structurally-induced inequitable economic power relationships. The foundations of TQM are truly 'hybrid' (i.e. economic *and*cultural), and its effects upon employees must be evaluated in many more ways than simply looking at the transformation or non-transformation of subjectivity and identity. Knights and McCabe do utilise, and recognise the embeddedness of the TQM discourse within, 'bottom line considerations' in explaining the 'failure' of TQM, when judged in relation to the simplistic claims of Qualbank management. However, these forces are absent from analyses of employee compliance with, and resistance to, the TQM programme, which is seen as wholly shaped by the power, or otherwise, of cultural socialisation within the workplace and beyond.

3.14

It has been demonstrated elsewhere (Filby 1992; Fineman 1995; Taylor 1998; Thompson and Findlay 1999) that the introduction of quality management to service encounters, within the context of the inequitable capital-labour relation, can coerce behavioural compliance with demands for service quality, without fully transforming employee attitudes or commitment. Many service workers develop abilities as 'sophisticated surface actors' - that is, they can convince customers of a particular personality, but not themselves (Taylor 1998;Taylor and Tyler 2000). Furthermore, it has also been argued that economic dynamics, not only discursive or cultural workplace relations, can effect the subjectivity of some employees and facilitate 'deep acting' (Hochschild 1983;Taylor 1998). Knights and McCabe (1998:445) argue that:

> For TQM to transform employees, some form of constant coercion or incentive seems to be required. But coercion contradicts the spirit of empowerment, trust or openness that are seen as central features of a TQM culture

3.15

Although at a discursive and cultural level 'empowerment' may be about acceding full autonomy to employees, when service encounters are analysed in their fully 'hybrid' state, employee 'empowerment' is precisely about managerial attempts to coerce particular

personalities, individualities and forms of emotional labour from employees, through a complex mixture of supervision, incentive and sanction (Ogbanna and Wilkinson 1990;Taylor 1997, >;1998). This has been argued in relation to 'employee empowerment' more generally (Harley 1999; Ezzy 2001) and will be developed specifically in relation to the service encounter in the following section of this paper. Knights and McCabe appear to be suggesting that such managerial coercion is inhibited by the 'discourse' of TQM and empowerment, and we consequently hear nothing about managerial supervision and evaluation of employees' *implementation* of the quality programme. We can thus suggest that Knights and McCabe adopt a narrow, culturalist definition of management control, in the context of TQM implementation, which is offered by proponents of the cultural turn, and they judge the effects of TQM purely in these terms. Once again, we find little credible empirical support for the cultural turn.

The Gendered Service Encounter

4.1

The service encounter investigations discussed above also fail to address the distinctly gendered nature of this employment. Other research has demonstrated that it is largely women who are employed within interactive service work (Filby 1992; Tancred 1995; Taylor 1997), and often because they are deemed to possess appropriate 'natural' abilities because of their sexual difference from men (James 1989; Halford and Savage 1995; Taylor and Tyler 2000). It is also argued (Filby 1992; Taylor and Tyler 2000) that such cultural assumptions can inform a gendered managerial supervision and evaluation of the service encounter, which constrains (both female and male) employee autonomy.

4.2

Gendered analysis of the service encounter reveals its truly 'hybrid' character. Part of the explanation for the predominance of women, and for the gendered management of the labour process, lies within cultural expectations and stereotypes regarding the differing, 'natural' capacities of women and men. However, another crucial part of the explanation, especially for the power this sexual differentiation process (Guillaumin 1995) can exert over employees, is the way in which these cultural and discursive demands are made within structurally-induced and inequitable economic relationships (Filby 1992; Taylor and Tyler 2000).

4.3

It is insufficient to justify neglecting the gendered nature of the service encounter by positing this as a 'separate issue' to the one which may be under consideration. Gender relations infuse, and are infused by, all aspects of such work situations (Pollert 1996; Acker 1998). Thus, to fully appreciate the opportunities for, or constraints upon, employee autonomy and 'empowerment' within the service encounter, we must recognise that 'gender relations are everywhere', that 'gendering takes place inside class relations' and that 'while class relations can be conceived abstractly in a mode of production, gender relations have to be analysed in lived experience...(but we are demonstrating) one system, not two' (Pollert 1996:645-7). Thus, in order to investigate the process of 'gendering' within the service encounter, we have to carefully examine the 'lived experience' of service encounter employees. This will now be done through the exploration of one particular labour process.

The 'Economic', The 'Cultural' and Gendered Emotional Labour

5.1

Here, through the use of one example of ethnographic research conducted by the author within north-eastern England, it will be argued, in contrast to Allen and du Gay (1994) and du Gay (1996, 2001), that the economic and cultural dimensions of the service encounter combine to prescribe and constrain the norms, values, feelings and identities of employees.

Due to spatial limitations, we will focus upon one particular aspect of this process - how the economic and the cultural combine to demand gendered emotional labour from employees. 'Emotional labour' refers to the management of human feeling, during social interaction within the labour process, as shaped by the requirements of capital accumulation (Hochschild 1983). Hochschild (1983:33) posits two major forms of emotional labour: 'surface acting' and 'deep acting'. The former involves pretending 'to feel what we do not...we deceive others about what we really feel, but we do not deceive ourselves'. 'Deep acting' means 'deceiving oneself as much as deceiving others...we make feigning easy by making it unnecessary'. We will outline the gendered deployment of surface acting and deep acting in the service of valorisation. As such, we are suggesting that feelings, within the service encounter, and thus norms, values and identities can be shaped by managerial demands as much as 'the private emotional system' (Hochschild 1983) of employees.

The Research Site - 'Flightpath'

5.2

Our argument is based upon research, conducted between 1994 and 1997, into a telephone sales operation within one regional centre of a major British airline ('Flightpath'). The labour process had been shaped by a 'culture change' programme prior to the research process.

5.3

The research focused upon the labour process of Telephone Sales Agents (TSAs).This primarily involves agents receiving, and dealing with, calls from people who are interested in purchasing a particular service from Flightpath. TSAs are equipped with a headset, a telephone system and a computer system. TSAs themselves push a button when they wish to receive a call. 'Dealing with' calls usually involves placing the caller on hold and accessing information from the computer system. According to Flightpath Telephone Sales Worldwide management, the overall aim of this work is to transform as many of the calls as possible into actual bookings and sales.

5.4

Within the centre studied, TSAs are divided into teams of nine. They are managed by one Sales Team Supervisor (STS). In turn, a team of eight supervisors is responsible to one Sales Team Leader (STL). STLs, as a team, are responsible to the unit manager of the centre studied. S/he is then accountable to the head of Telephone Sales UK. Everyone within the centre is rewarded through individualised performance-related pay. Of all TSAs, 81% are female while 52% of STSs are female. Above this level, only one STL is female. The TSA labour process is a form of gendered employment in that the majority of those employed are women and, as will be illustrated below, it involves skills and abilities which women are deemed to possess by virtue of being female.

'Culture Change' at Flightpath

5.5

The dynamic behind the Flightpath culture change programme was the perceived importance of 'quality service' and 'customer satisfaction' within an increasingly competitive business environment. As we have seen, within service encounters, quality of customer service is often perceived as one, if not *the,* key differentiation strategy by management (Fuller and Smith 1991; Leidner 1993; Hughes and Tadic 1998).

5.6

Managerial discourses, emphasising the centrality of service quality delivered through the service encounter, were certainly evident at our research site. At Flightpath, telephone sales was seen as one unique part of the company where employee/customer interaction

and the generation of revenue occur simultaneously. TSAs are often the first point of contact a prospective customer will have with the company.

5.7

An essential characteristic of a managerial focus upon customer satisfaction is a senior management perception that there is a requirement to actively manage the delivery of service quality (Fuller and Smith 1991; Jones et al. 1997). However, at Flightpath, and this is also noted elsewhere (Jones et al. 1997; Rosenthal et al. 1997), the delivery of quality should (according to management) simultaneously be achieved through the 'empowerment' and autonomy of workers rather than through managerial prescription. In fact, as we have seen, for Allen and du Gay (1994) and du Gay (1996), this is one of the defining features of this novel and expanding area of employment. Flightpath as a whole, and the telephone sales centre studied in particular, achieved huge commercial success within the research period. Telephone sales management attributed this to the 'culture change' sweeping through the organization, 'empowering' TSAs, and enabling them to deliver quality customer service 'spontaneously' and 'naturally'. Facilitated by competitive pressures within the airline industry, the mobilisation of employee commitment to an organisational aim of service quality is a crucial element in the culture change programme at Flightpath. It will now be argued that this development can constrain the feelings and identities of employees and, simultaneously, has particularly gendered consequences.

The Telephone Sales Labour Process

5.8

Despite managerial claims of empowered employees at Flightpath, the work of individual TSAs was supervised and measured in a most thoroughgoing manner. The major form of work measurement at the telephone sales centre studied consists of monthly targets which individual TSAs must surpass. These targets were divided into 'hard' and 'soft' dimensions.

5.9

'Hard' targets refer to quantitative measurement. Each individual TSA has a revenue target, relating to the value of airline services which are sold to customers, and they are expected to surpass this each month. STSs in turn have a team target which has to be attained on a monthly basis. STLs are targeted in terms of the monthly monetary performance of (eight) STSs. The Unit Manager is ultimately responsible for ensuring that STLs deliver monthly returns to target. The unit as a whole is targeted within the telephone sales division according to these calculations. There are other hard targets, described by management as 'productivity' evaluation. This involves measurement of the number of calls answered per agent per week, the amount of time spent in conversation with passengers per week and the amount of time spent in 'wrap up' - the time between the termination of one call and the opening of a new one. Each individual has a particular productivity target.

5.10

The evaluation of the TSA labour process by 'soft' standards is more ambiguous. They were described by management as referring to 'teamwork, commitment and also their call structure, their job skills if you like' (STS). Management stressed that overall evaluation of agents was a 50/50 split between hard and soft standards. This measurement directly shaped individualised performance-related pay.

5.11

The supervision and evaluation of TSA/customer interactions according to soft standards largely takes place through 'remote' and 'known' monitoring. The telephone system within the unit enables STSs, STLs and training staff to 'listen in' to the content of any agent/customer call at any time during the working day. This can be done without the knowledge of the agent. STSs claimed that they randomly engaged in remote monitoring, and sometimes taping, as a form of 'quality assurance'. Furthermore, STSs routinely

observe and tape the telephone interaction of each team member with their knowledge. This is then used in review and appraisal weekly meetings. TSA performance-related pay is shaped by an STS monthly report, resulting from the weekly review and appraisal. This is based upon evaluation according to both hard and soft standards.

5.12

The individualised managerial surveillance system at Flightpath has gendered assumptions about the 'natural' capacities of women and men embedded within it. This can firstly be observed through the selection of TSAs. Selection panels argued that they attempted to select 'personalities' who will 'naturally' deliver quality service. The personalities selected were overwhelmingly female:

> The vast, vast majority of the agents we select are women...we are looking for people who can chat to people, interact, build rapport. What we find is that women can do this more, they're definitely more natural when they do it anyway. It doesn't sound as forced, perhaps they're used to doing it all the time anyway...women are naturally good at that sort of thing. I think they have a higher tolerance level than men (male selector, STL).

5.13

Once selected, agents are expected to deploy their 'natural' personality within employee/customer interactions, regardless of the emotional stance which customers may adopt towards agents.These gendered beliefs, and the way in which they are also inscribed within the training, supervision and evaluation of TSAs represent demands for gendered emotional labour and the production of sexual difference during employee/customer interaction. 'Sexual differentiation' is the process through which social significance is attached to anatomical differences which serve to assign particular social beings to distinct social collectivities: wherein 'sexual difference' is constructed and appropriated (Guillauman 1995).

5.14

TSAs are, to some extent, trained in the techniques of emotional labour. They are instructed to respond to the perceived feelings and expressions of customers in a manner which upholds the commercial interests of Flightpath. These managerial demands do not only encompass surface acting. Examples were observed, during the training process, of TSAs being taught how to 'deal with' customers that appeared 'insulting' through actively 'working on', shaping and changing feeling. Gendered assumptions inhered within such managerial prescription of TSA deep acting. Thus, female TSAs were expected to respond in a 'polite' manner to male customers who interacted in an insulting, often sexualised, manner. One comment from a trainer, which illustrates this prescription, describes TSA training in a technique of deep acting which Hochschild (1979) labels 'bodily emotion work':

> If a man's having a go at you...don't get ruffled, you've got to keep your cool...He can really talk to you how he wants. Your job is to deal with it...*just take a few deep breaths and let the irritation cool down* ...think to yourself he's not worth it (my emphasis).

5.15

Despite the above examples of managerial prescription, TSAs, telephone sales management and members of the training section stressed that the training programme was only a framework for the delivery of quality service, within which employees were expected to use their discretion. The nature of every possible worker/customer interaction cannot be prescribed. TSAs argued that they frequently, with the encouragement of management, interact with customers in their own personal or 'natural' manner. This is known as 'building rapport'. However, the individualised surveillance and remuneration system outlined above encourages 'positive divergences' while aiming to eliminate 'negative divergences' from

managerial prescription within agent/customer interaction (Taylor 1998). Unless TSAs 'spontaneous' feelings or 'emotion work' (Hochschild 1979) can be utilised as 'positive discretion' (i.e. to deliver quality service as defined by management), many employees are coerced into deploying emotional labour, given the knowledge that they can be supervised at any time - through the targeting system, direct observation, known and remote monitoring. It is important to remember that the results of this supervision shape both the material and symbolic remuneration which TSAs receive from their employment. With management also explicitly stating that consistent TSA failure to meet monthly targets would result in dismissal, we are witnessing here the mobilisation of powerful managerial resources in demand of emotional labour. This mobilisation has been driven by the structural constraints imposed by the capitalist mode of production and exhibits the inequitable nature of the capitalist employment relationship, i.e. the economic dimension of the service encounter. Managerial demands and discourses are embedded within these economic relationships.

5.16

There is clear evidence from the research of coerced surface and deep acting. In relation to the latter, a female TSA commented;

> You can't let yourself be impolite towards a customer or feel angry with them....As we are always told, they pay our wages...I suppose it's something that I learnt to do since I came here...you're taught to think about the customers, to think about what they're like and to try and get on with them whatever they're like.

5.17

Gendered assumptions about the 'natural' abilities and 'personalities' of women and men, including the capacity of female employees to engage in and 'put up with' sexualised encounters (Filby 1992; Hughes and Tadic 1998), are embedded within managerial attempts to prescribe TSA emotional labour and facilitate deep acting and 'natural' social interaction. The majority of female and male TSAs interviewed agreed that the few male TSAs within the telephone sales centre studied were actually supervised and evaluated according to distinct criteria. Females tended to be judged according to both 'hard' and 'soft' standards. For male TSAs, the nature of their interaction with customers could be overlooked if one was considered a 'good seller' (i.e. consistently surpassed 'hard' targets). Consequently, we are suggesting that the (cultural) demands for TSA emotional labour are not only structurally induced by the dictates of capital accumulation (the economic dimension), they are also distinctly gendered - aimed particularly at female TSAs.

5.18

Some suggest that managerial initiatives such as those developed at Flightpath facilitate 'total' managerial control of the emotional labour process (Hochschild 1983; Sewell and Wilkinson 1992; Ritzer 1998). However, our research findings suggest that gendered managerial control of the emotional labour process and the service encounter is not 'total'. This concurs with the findings of Filby (1992) and Jones et al. (1997) and the argument of Thompson and Findlay (1999). Despite managerial attempts at detailed prescription and surveillance, and the enormous power of their demands upon employees, the emotional labourers under consideration here were still able to find some 'space' to 'negotiate' their feeling production within the labour process. This is partly a result of the integrally incoherent, fragmentary and contradictory nature of 'management' (Hyman 1987; Watson 1994). Although they are not absolutely central to the argument of this particular paper (this is pursued in more illustrative depth elsewhere (Taylor 1997, 1998; Taylor and Tyler 2000), these are important points to hang on to.

Conclusions

6.1

We were urged, at the beginning of the 1990s (Urry 1990; Allen and du Gay 1994), to recognise the 'hybrid' nature of the service encounter, as its prominence increased within western economies. However, it has been argued here that the majority of subsequent service encounter studies have produced a one- dimensional and overly 'cultural' (mis)representation of such employment. The empirical accounts from *WES* discussed above do not adequately investigate the economic or gendered dimensions of the service encounter, or how the economic and the cultural dimensions of the service encounter can combine to demand the development of particular norms, values, feelings and identities from employees. For example, Sosteric (1996) and Rosenthal et al. (1997) do not sufficiently consider the nature of managerial control, and how this might impact upon the subjective and gendered experience of employees. Knights and McCabe (1998) do discuss managerial control, however, in terms of its impact upon the subjectivity of employees, it is analysed at a purely cultural level. The way in which economic and gender relations within the service encounter can affect the subjective domain of employees remains unexplored by Knights and McCabe. Consequently, the claims of Allen and du Gay (1994) that the emergence of the service encounter as the symbol of paid employment within western nations at the dawn of a new century concomitantly signals a dislocated identity for work and workers, and as part of this dislocation process offers opportunities for the exercise of autonomy and self-actualisation to those involved in service encounters, are unconvincing and bereft of empirical support.

6.2

Our own empirical example of the telephone sales labour process at Flightpath demonstrates that the delivery of quality service through the service encounter has been considered important to capital accumulation within a leading global company. Consequently, Flightpath management have embedded discourses of 'quality service' within their selection, training, supervisory and evaluative processes. Inherent to the quality management programme is an expectation that employees will work beyond managerial prescription when interacting with customers and delivering service quality. Flightpath management assume that women workers in particular can accomplish this 'discretionary' aspect of the job, utilising skills which they supposedly possess by virtue of their sexual difference from men. However, quality management at Flightpath which aims to emphasise the significance, and tap the presumed potential, of this (gendered) discretion simultaneously involves detailed surveillance of the labour process in an attempt to eradicate 'negative divergences' from managerial prescription. In contrast to the claims of Allen and du Gay quoted above, this erodes rather than expands employee autonomy, intensifying demands for the production of gendered emotional labour.

6.3

Our empirical research reveals the truly 'hybrid' nature of the service encounter. The power of the gendered managerial demands and cultural assumptions about the respective capacities of women and men, investigated in part of this paper, must be related to their inscription within the structurally-induced, economic and vastly inequitable capital-labour relation. The greater the resources of management (in this case individualised surveillance and reward systems at Flightpath), the more inequitable the relation and the more intense the managerial demands (for gendered emotional labour). We have advocated the mutual constitution of gender and class relations, while simultaneously recognising that these phenomena are of a different analytical order.

6.4

There is an issue about how representative the Flightpath case is of general trends within the service encounter. The widespread adoption of quality initiatives can be noted, but these can be immensely varied in their form and focus (Wilkinson and Willmott 1995). Many recent studies do reveal an increased managerial concern with the delivery of service quality through the employee-customer relationship and the manifestation of this concern

within selection, training, supervisory and evaluative processes (Ogbanna and Wilkinson 1990; Fuller and Smith 1991; Cressey and Scott 1992; Filby 1992; Kerfoot and Knights 1994; Fineman 1995; du Gay 1996; Sosteric 1996; Jones et al 1997; Knights and McCabe 1998; Thompson and Findlay 1999; Sturdy 2001). Moreover, the research at Flightpath was part of a wider project examining the impact of quality programmes within the service encounter. Here, it was found that while Flightpath management were engaged in the most far-reaching and detailed surveillance of the service encounter, management within the other service organizations studied suggested that the Flightpath 'model' was one they wished to adopt in the future. Thus, the processes reported and analysed above may by now be common across many areas of the service sector.

6.5

The preceding discussion has relevance for some wider debates. As we have seen, those who stress the 'cultural' character of the service encounter also reject the contemporary relevance of 'traditional' sociological analyses of employment relations. However, given its weak empirical foundations, this critique is also unconvincing. The resources of (post-structuralist) cultural theory, seen as more appropriate for the analysis of contemporary paid work by du Gay (1996) and others, have clearly enhanced our understanding of the service encounter by stressing the inherently 'cultural' nature of this employment, and demonstrating that employees can derive meaning and gratifying subjective experiences within employment relationships through means other than 'creative labour'. However, as we have seen, this is not the whole story. The cultural turn focusses *only* upon these aspects of the employment relationship, while we have argued that economic and gender relations infuse cultural relations and vice-versa. Furthermore, many 'traditional' industrial sociological analyses (e.g. Beynon 1974; Nichols and Beynon 1977; Pollert 1981; Westwood 1984) do precisely examine the interplay between economic, gendered and cultural relations and therefore continue to have relevance for understanding contemporary employment relations. It is difficult to accept du Gay's (1996:9-39) argument (also suggested by O'Doherty and Willmott (2001)) that 'traditional' studies ignore 'what goes on in people's heads' and only see individuals within capitalist employment relations as personnifications of economic categories.

6.6

The recent paper by O'Doherty and Willmott (2001) claims to develop a new position within the sociology of employment, 'one that is informed by poststructuralist insights but does not neglect or reject established traditions of "modern" sociology and labour process research' (457). However, despite claiming that 'for us, an attentiveness to the processes of constitution, translation and mediation between capitalist market pressures and managerial strategies is important and central to any critically informed analysis of the labour process' (460) and 'we have stopped short of abandoning the central concerns and familiar linguistic terrain of labour process analysis - whether that be "direct control", "responsible autonomy" or "capitalism"' (472), the economic dynamic to the employment relationship slips from their actual analysis of 'how relations of production are accomplished in practice' (460). This is illustrated through their re-interpretation of Sosteric referred to earlier in the paper.

6.7

'Traditional' sociological approaches to paid employment, such as those identified above, do not neglect subjectivity at work *per se.*, rather, they neglect a specific understanding of subjectivity favoured by proponents of the 'cultural turn'. This sees subjectivity at work, and beyond, as exclusively concerned with 'producing the self', pursuing ontological security and self-identity, not in spite of but because of (discursive) power relations. Those who suggest that economic and gendered power relations can constrain subjectivity at work are castigated not only as 'traditionalist' but 'essentialist'. The latter charge will no doubt be levelled at this paper. However, I am merely suggesting that we must examine economic and gender relations, alongside cultural relations, when studying the service encounter and the extent of autonomy employees exercise over the form and content of their interaction

with customers. The exercise of autonomy *can be* one, although it is certainly not the only, means through which paid work may be experienced as subjectively gratifying. There may well be a debate over the meaning of autonomy put forward by this paper. However, in the final analysis, all positions within this debate ultimately rest upon untestable assumptions about human nature (Lukes 1974). There are also those who will attack the notion that workplace 'reality' can be represented or misrepresented, as they refuse to distinguish between reality and its representation. However, this paper argues that workplace reality is much more than 'an epistemological convenience' (O'Doherty and Willmott 2001:466). There is a material world out there - real working people with real working experiences - to be represented and misrepresented. The postmodernist critique of this position is contradictory in that it merely replaces one version of 'reality' with another (Larrain 1994; Philo and Miller 2001).

6.8

The argument of this paper will be familiar to those who have embarked upon attacking the cultural turn within the wider sociological discipline (Ray and Sayer 1999; Eagleton 2000; Philo and Miller 2001). It is certainly hard to disagree with Ray and Sayer's (1999) accusation that the cultural turn within sociology (in their eyes represented particularly by the influential texts of Hall (e.g.1997)) has mistakenly conflated the 'economic' and the 'cultural' by subsuming the former into the latter. Philo and Miller (2001) extensively outline the costs of such a mistake. In short, social science is in danger of losing its 'critical edge'.

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