

“You’re not going anywhere”
Employee Retention, Symbolic Violence and the Structuring of Subordination in
a UK-based Call Centre

Matthew J. Brannan¹
School of Economic and Management Studies
Darwin Building
Keele University
Staffordshire
ST5 5BG
United Kingdom
Tel. 01782 583610
Email: m.brannan@keele.ac.uk

Abstract

This article explores practices that produce and reproduce domination in and through organizational hierarchies and shows how high levels of employee turnover were managed within a UK-based call centre through the use of culturally bound employment practices. Using ethnographic methods the paper explores the experience of managerial retention strategies from the perspective of employees and draws upon some of the theoretical resources employed by Pierre Bourdieu, specifically in relation to his concern with structures of subordination, and with the ways that processes of symbolic violence appear legitimate. The paper therefore makes three contributions to our understanding of the sociology of work generally and the management of labour turnover in service industries specifically; first, it extends our understanding of the cultural basis of employment retention strategies in an interactive service work context. Second, it explores the ‘lived experience’ of these strategies. Finally, it considers the relevance of Bourdieu’s analysis for making sense of these practices in action.

Keywords: Domination, Call Centre, Employee Retention, Turnover, Symbolic Violence

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Introduction

Call centres have become a significant feature of the post-industrial employment landscape and a leitmotif for the growth of globalised service economies. Studies of employment relations in call centres identifies low morale and high turnover (Taylor and Bain, 1999, Mukherjee and Malhotra, 2009, Hechanova, 2013) as key characteristics attributed to the routine and repetitive nature of the work process and relatively low wages (Taylor et al., 2002). Turnover is considered endemic with recorded rates moving little in the past decade with averages of 25 per cent (IDS, 2004) and 24 per cent (CFA, 2012) per annum recorded respectively. Curiously little consideration has been given as to why employees continue to seek, and remain in call centre employment in such large numbers (currently 3.7 per cent of the working population in the United Kingdom, ContactBable, 2012). Turnover, often articulated as a business problem, is usually investigated from the perspective of employers with consideration given to ways to reduce replacement and training costs. Sociological treatments are rare but offer the opportunity to explore employee and societal implications more widely and this is important given that the 10 occupations with the largest jobs growth between 2000 and 2010 is dominated by front-line service based work including food preparation and service work, customer service representatives, and retail sales (Yates, 2003:100). The issue of turnover is also a public policy issue (Batt et al., 2009) given the regional concentration of call centre employment. The North East, North West, Scotland and Yorkshire regions of the UK all have more than 5 per cent of total employment working in call centres (CFA, 2012) for example.

Traditionally, the literature on retention of employees has focused either upon highly qualified and highly experienced staff or on those employees who add the most 'value' to organizations, generally assumed to be clustered around the summit of organizational hierarchies. In the case of front line service work (Leidner, 1993), however, it is typically the low paid, low skilled service worker who provides the continuity and customer service upon which businesses are judged. Paradoxically therefore, within many service organizations such as call centres organizational success is inextricably bound to the performance of front line service workers who appear most likely to leave the organization, due to a range of factors including low pay and high routinisation.

In contrast to taking high levels of turnover as a given, this paper explores the extent to which the managers within the case study prioritise employee turnover as an organizational issue and devised strategies to ameliorate it. Conceptually, this article draws upon some of the theoretical resources employed by Pierre Bourdieu, specifically in relation to his concern with structures of subordination, and the way that processes of symbolic violence and forms of domination are experienced as legitimate. Interestingly such strategies work in stark contrast to academic understandings of employee retention which often originate from an economic perspective which focuses on pay and invokes the ‘efficiency-wage hypothesis’¹ (see e.g. Burchill and Rubery, 1994). The cultural or sociological perspective offered here compliments existing analysis in order to understand the ‘stickiness’ of employment. The paper interprets the findings within a Bourdieusian framework to argue that the strategies witnessed in the call centre are examples of reconfigured forms of pedagogic action in that they work to impose cultural meanings and understandings about the nature of the call centre experience that reflect and further the interest of call centre managers. Moreover the effectiveness of such strategies is partially explained by the way in which they tended to be interpreted as legitimate by front line service workers, a process that necessarily involves symbolic violence. The central argument here is that whilst high rates of employee turnover are endemic in the industry, in this case at least, they are neither tolerated nor accepted as inevitable. Understanding the nature of symbolic violence at work is key to understanding why workers remain in employment where such work is monotonous, and greater rewards and possibly more favourable career opportunities can be found elsewhere.

The paper is organised as follows. Firstly, to contextualise the analysis and draw attention to the role of values and beliefs in the management of contemporary service workers I examine the relevance of retention strategies targeted at front line service workers. I then briefly summarise Bourdieu’s work as it relates to understanding organizations as sites for the production of forms of domination. The process of ethnographic data collection is then outlined and following the tradition of Van Maanen (1979), who establishes the division between the presentation and the analysis of data, I then present some observational data from the case study and, in a

subsequent discussion, explore the links between the various strategies observed in relation to the conceptual resources utilised by Bourdieu.

Retention Strategy and Front Line Service Workers

In an era that equates business success with the ability of organizations to harness the commitment and creativity of their employees (Becker and Gerhart, 1996), managerial focus on employee retention appears to have increased. Particular attention has been paid to the retention of highly or uniquely skilled staff as sources of competitive advantage who might be difficult to replace.ⁱⁱ (Huselid, 1995). The growth of service work and, in particular, interactive service work where the frontline service worker has ‘direct contact with the customer’ (Korczynski, 2002, 2) complicates the retention debate. In industries where the frontline service worker becomes ‘*the product*’ (Macdonald and Sirianni, 1996), organizational success is largely determined by the quality of the worker-customer interaction. Under such circumstances, the retention of frontline service employees, whether for reasons of quality or continuity, assumes a far more immediate importance.

As a relatively young industry high rates of labour turnover are identified as a key characteristicⁱⁱⁱ (Taylor and Bain, 1999, 102, Bain and Taylor, 2000, 11) and general perceptions of call centre work are far from positive. Deery and Kinnie for example note that call centre work is “characterized as ‘dead-end’ with low status, poor pay and few career prospects” (2004:3). Internationally call centres tend to exhibit similar characteristics in terms of job design (Pal and Buzzanell, 2008 and Neus et al., 2013). Indeed it has even been suggested that high rates of labour turnover are in fact beneficial, with, for example, Wallace et al., finding that high rates of turnover were “*tolerated, if not encouraged*” (2000, 175). Such ‘sacrificial’ (ibid) managerial policies, it is claimed, present opportunities to avoid the problems of employee burnout and emotional withdrawal by actively seeking to replace existing employees after a defined period of service: a mode of organizational catharsis.

Where the problem of high turnover has been addressed, explanations appear to be based upon a locus of extrinsic factors such as pay, reward and work-life balance. Thus the problem of retention might be solved by increasing employees’ pay (Kinnie

et al. 2000, 977); increasing the level and extent of employee engagement (Francis and D'Annunzio-Green, 2005, 79) and hence commitment (Arrowsmith and McGoldrick, 1996, 46); providing greater opportunities for employees to secure a more favourable work-life balance (Doherty, 2004, 440); or some possible combination of these. More recent work has also focused upon the possibility of increasing employee autonomy and providing for greater task variety (Holman, 2002, Kinnie *et al.*, 2000, Castanheira and Chamble, 2010, Rod and Ashill, 2013).

By contrast, the adoption of a more pro-active approach to initial screening and training of employees (Callaghan and Thompson, 2002) represent attempts to actively select candidates who are most likely to be able to cope with the demands of call centre employment. Callaghan and Thompson's focus upon notions of 'appropriateness' (2002: 241) and 'predisposition' (2002: 234) in the context of selecting the 'right' employees draws attention to workers' values and beliefs and how these may 'fit' into or align with the existing organizational context and culture. Such an approach clearly invokes a sociological sensitivity attuned to the production and reproduction of organizational hierarchies through an analysis of work and employment as central to, rather than removed from, wider social practice.

Understanding the active and on-going attempts witnessed in this study to manage turnover draws attention to the careful management of employees' expectations, segmentation of employees, and processes of drawing distinctions between organizations and extends the scope of the analysis beyond the formal boundaries of the organization. Clearly understanding the willingness of employees to remain in employment gives us a better understanding of the inter-organizational as well as intra-organizational dynamics at play. In the following section Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Jenkins, 2002) is explored to explain how systems of meaning become imposed by call centre managers upon employees yet are, in many cases, experienced as legitimate.

The Relevance of Symbolic Violence to Organizational Contexts

Bourdieu's work implicitly recognises organizations as important sites for the production and reproduction of social inequalities; places in which the reproduction of

forms of domination and subordination are hidden. Organizations are seldom a site for the collection of empirical data for Bourdieu but the workplace remains an important space acknowledged but little explored.

A notable exception to this is in the collection of accounts themed around ‘social suffering’, a suffering distinct from, but often including material suffering but related more fully to “positional suffering”. In *Weight Of the World*, Bourdieu et al., (1999) provides an understanding of the experiences of “individuals in social categories that might well be found together” through “complex and multi-layered representation” (ibid. 3). Indeed, reinforcing the claim that Bourdieu often acknowledges organizational context implicitly, the sections of the *Weight of the World* that deal with explicit workplace sites, such as the Sochaux Peugeot assembly plant (Pialoux and Beaud, 1999, Pialoux, 1999, Beaud 1999) the central sorting post office (Christin, 1999), and an “authoritarian paternalistic small business” (Christin, 1999:309) are interwoven with consideration of less formal organizational configurations.

While the conceptual apparatus for what might tentatively be labelled a ‘general theory of symbolic violence’ is to be found throughout much of Bourdieu’s work, its ‘foundations’ are explicitly outlined in book I of *Reproduction* (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). The concept itself originates from an attempt by Bourdieu to apprehend the production, inherent in all societies, of relative stability and order through indirect cultural mechanisms rather than through direct overt coercive control. The distinction between cultural and direct control is important for Bourdieu and is partly explained in relation to existing power relations:

So long as overt violence [...] is collectively disapproved of and is liable to provoke either a violent riposte or the flight of the victim - that is, in both cases [...] the very relationship that was to be exploited – symbolic violence, gentle, invisible violence, unrecognized as such, chosen as much as undergone, that of trust, obligation, personal loyalty, hospitality, gifts, debts, piety, in a word, all of the virtues honoured by the ethic of honour, presents itself as the most economical mode of domination because it best corresponds to the economy of the system” (Bourdieu, 1990: 127).

Bourdieu's focus upon 'cultural' forms of control therefore echoes much of contemporary organizational theory in two important respects. First, we see a general concern with comprehending the basis upon which organizations (or institutional forms) appear both relatively stable and enduring. Second, the development and flourishing of forms of cultural control (as opposed to more direct control imperatives) relate directly to their effectiveness in terms of reproducing the dominant social-economic order, are necessarily historically specific and relate to forms of capitalist development. In other words, the appearance of specific forms of control is directly related to their effectiveness in attaining objectives associated with dominant interests.

The concept of legitimacy, a vital element in the distinction between coercive and cultural control, occupies a central role in the enactment of symbolic violence. Following Weber's concept of 'legitimate domination' (Weber, 1978), symbolic violence is the imposition of systems of meaning in such a way that they are experienced as 'legitimate', and it is this veneer of legitimacy that, for Bourdieu, obscures the power relations that permit the initial imposition of meaning. Moreover, the culture of the subgroup tends to facilitate this process being 'seen' as legitimate. Thus, for Bourdieu, symbolic violence is "the violence which is exercised upon a social agent with his or her complicity" (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992:167).

The exercise of symbolic violence occurs through *pedagogic action*, which takes three forms: diffuse education (in the course of interaction with competent members of the group), familiar education, and institutional education (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977:5). Pedagogic action, initiated by a pedagogic authority necessary for its appearance, (ibid: 11), confers the power to act (often misrecognised as legitimacy to act), reflects the interest of dominant groups, excludes ideas as 'unthinkable', and positively inculcates meaning and culture. For Bourdieu the interests of dominant groups are denied (Swartz, 1997: 89) through a process of 'misrecognition' wherein power relations, upon which dominant interests are formed, become obscured. Pedagogic action works to reproduce an arbitrary culture, and in doing so, helps to reproduce the power relations upon which it is built. For Bourdieu, all cultures are arbitrary in that, although their specificity can be traced to historical development and specific loci of power relations, they have no 'absolute' value or appropriateness and

are mere reflections of specific historical configurations of power relations. Crucially, however, some cultures are experienced as more ‘appropriate’ than others. In the following section the methodological approach is mapped before consideration is given to the case study itself.

Methodology

Ethnographic research is particularly well suited for exploring the experience of work, on the one hand, and endogenous understandings of work practices, on the other. Historically invoked to suggest the writing of culture (Yanow et al. 2012), but more usually associated with immersive fieldwork and participant observation (Brannan and Oultram, 2012), ethnography facilitates a relational approach to organizational research and may thus allow access to “the emergent subtle life of organizations” (Hodson, 2001, 52). Ethnographic techniques have a rich tradition and are particularly relevant (Brannan et al., 2007) to exploring interactive service work and form a growing literature (see *inter alia* Brannan, 2005, Houlihan, 2001, Knights and McCabe, 2003, Mulholland, 2002, Wray-Bliss and Willmott, 1999, Wray-Bliss, 2001).

Requiring “direct and sustained social contact with agents” (Willis and Trondman 2000, 5), I sought employment as a Customer Service Representative (CSR) between March 1999 and April 2000 at ‘Dioscuri^{iv}’ as part of an ethnographic project to understand new forms of work and employee relations in call centres. Employed on standard shift pattern and undertaking all duties required of an employee I participated in a number of social events and engaged in some voluntary work along with other CSRs^v. At the point of recruitment my research interests were made known to call centre managers who, dismissive of academic work, sanctioned the fieldwork “as long as it doesn’t get in the way of you making calls”.

Participation as a CSR allowed me to gain experience of managerial strategies aimed at reducing employee turnover first hand and to observe and discuss the impact of these with other CSRs. Participant observation thus fostered sensitivity to the lived realities of life as a front line service worker and how employees made sense of their working experiences. Documenting the strategies imposed upon these workers, their

reactions, accommodations and resistance is crucial for understanding and interpreting individual employment decisions. Field notes were compiled *in situ* and recorded on my workstation to form an extensive fieldwork journal. Interviews conducted six months after withdrawal from the field allowed for fieldwork observations to be discussed and refined with participants. In addition I returned to the site (April 2009) to gain a sense of how the field had changed over the course of a decade and it became clear that whilst the vast majority of employees had changed, the managerial practices seemed to have remained similar. Patterns of behaviour that through the lenses of the original ethnography looked like the idiosyncrasies of particular managers could now no longer be explained as such. Revisiting the original unstructured entries into the fieldwork journal, notes and interviews transcripts supplemented with more recent observational material and informal discussions with current CSRs and managers provides the basis of analysis presented here.

The Organization and its Structure

Dioscuri is a non-unionised, inbound, domestic, business-to-business call centre employing CSRs who are required to collect and organise information from clients pertaining to computer failures, log this information and initiate appropriate responses to resolve reported problems. These characteristics make the call centre ‘similar’ to call centre management models found across social market economies, liberal market economies and recently industrialised economies (Holman et al., 2007). During the time of the participant observation the call centre was divided into teams of between four and ten CSRs. Team members’ workstations were tightly grouped together, although the call centre was situated in an open plan style office environment. The office contained a number of communal areas, and these locations often provided opportunities to talk with other team members: sites of significant importance were a kitchen area, staff canteen, toilet area and cloakroom and outside smoking area.

Individual teams reported to specific corporate clients (the call centre’s ‘customers’) and incoming calls were allocated through an automatic call distribution system. Interactions were standardised, with slight variations between teams according to specific client requirements. The call centre exhibited a relatively flat hierarchy: most employees worked as entry CSRs with limited promotion prospects to the post of

‘problem solver’, which carried only a minor pay increase but included greater autonomy and discretion. Problem solvers could work off-line and thus avoid answering incoming calls. CSRs might expect promotion to problem solver after approximately two years experience. Beyond this, the position of team leader was appointed by the call centre management team and often externally recruited. During the period of the fieldwork the call centre expanded from around 250 staff to 400 with one team leader and problem solver per team.

The CSRs’ primary task was to ensure that calls from customers were answered promptly and information recorded quickly and accurately. Following an initial assessment of the problem, the CSR would resolve it, either by offering advice themselves, or, more typically, by contacting a third party support agency. In this sense their work tasks included aspects of autonomy and problem solving, although these could only be applied within the remit of established procedures. The tasks that were carried out by CSRs, with respect to the management of the customer interaction and technical nature of the interaction, were often highly complex and involved both human and computer interaction.

Recruitment and Segmentation

The call centre demonstrated a marked preference for hiring new graduates through heavy recruitment from temporary work agencies during the early summer months, when the labour market became swollen with newly qualified graduates. While not a formally required qualification, almost three quarters of all CSRs at Dioscuri were either graduates or undergraduates, the industry average being 35 per cent (Hay, 2010) Many graduate CSRs reported that they considered themselves over-qualified for the role of CSR, with most explaining that as their first post-university employment, Dioscuri was a “stop-gap” measure until other opportunities emerged. This appeared to fit with the perception that Dioscuri offered short-term employment as a stepping-stone to other better paid, more highly skilled, or more desirable work.

As a HR manager explained, whilst the recruitment of degree qualified CSRs was not part of an explicit recruitment strategy, some managers felt that CSRs who held degrees were more likely to ‘fit into’ the call centre environment, and that in this

sense graduate recruits were certainly preferred. The recruitment and training process stressed the importance of being an ‘all-rounder’, and ‘up for it’ (phrases used in initial training and induction sessions, and repeatedly used by call centre managers, training staff and members of the team).

Surprisingly in the decade that had passed since the initial fieldwork little seemed to have changed in the discourse employed by employees and employers to describe the ‘sorts of workers’ working at Dioscuri. The euphemistic concepts of being an ‘*all-rounder*’ and ‘*up for it*’ effectively collapsed into a shared understanding that signified the importance of taking part in organised social events and generally having an out-going and proactive approach to work. During a formal conversation, a HR manager confided that aside from the ability to work quickly and accurately, the most important qualities of CSRs were being ‘outgoing’, ‘friendly’, ‘lively’ and ‘energetic’ and having ‘good communication skills’ - phrases clearly indicative of the degree to which the call centre hierarchy considered social skills important to becoming a successful CSR. In the importance attached to the social dimension of work a pervading sense of continuity with university life seemed to resonate with many CSRs as Ian articulated:

Ian: It is hard work, being on the phone all day, and it can be a bit dull really. But there is a great social life ... I do like work where everyone is up for it.

Researcher: What do you mean by ‘up for it’?

Ian: You know, like we all go out at the weekend and have a laugh, nights out in town ... there is always someone to go out with, there is normally a crowd, and if I don’t go out with someone from here (the call centre) I know I’ll bump into someone up town.

Researcher: Do you think it’s a benefit of working here?

Ian: Definitely. It makes all the crap worthwhile, the fact that I know that I can have a really shitty week and at the end of it all its all forgotten when your dancing with your mates up town. It’s a lot like Uni, loads of crap dull work but endless drinking and socialising to get you through it.

Recruitment through local temporary agencies allowed devolution of recruitment responsibilities and yielded further benefits. The conditions of service for temporary

workers were less favourable than permanent staff and provided the call centre management with more ‘flexibility’; for example, agency workers’ contracts were renewed on a week-by-week basis. The ever-fluctuating and unpredictable call volume ensured that the ability to release a significant proportion of staff from employment was an important aspect of the overall management strategy.

The effect on the employees was, however, not as fortuitous. The endemic insecurity of ‘flexible’ temporary employment contracts left workers with little scope for any long-term planning of their own. Amongst the researcher’s team, for example, 60 per cent of the CSRs were temporary employees. The presence of such a large number of employees on temporary employment contracts created divisions amongst CSRs. It was not unusual for consistently outstanding performance to be rewarded with the conferment of a permanent contract - such contracts were used as a disciplinary tool. CSRs were routinely ‘incentivised’ to increase performance with the promise of permanent contracts leveraged in team leader briefings, the formal appraisal process and apparent in informal ‘chatter’ between CSRs.

New employees, often referred to as ‘*the temp*’ by other members of staff, were required to perform ‘tea and toast’ functions at the whim of more experienced CSRs and team leaders. This signified the relative inexperience and a clear ‘status divide’ (Geary, 1992) between temporary and other workers. Whilst a small number of workers (mostly current under-graduate students) found the flexibility that weekly contracts offered to be advantageous, a more common response drew attention to negative effects of flexibility. The following extract from a follow-up interview with a team member is typical of accounts of the impact of short-term contacts on workers:

Jenny: ... It’s just that I’m on a short contract and when I started they said that after three months I’d be ‘perm’ (call centre terminology for a permanent contract) but I’ve been here for eleven months now and I think I should be made perm ... other people who started after me are perm and I don’t think that’s fair.

Researcher: ... Apart from in work, how does your contract affect you personally?

Jenny: ... well firstly I think if you're perm you get more money, because it's paid monthly like, and it's from Dioscuri not the agency and I think Dioscuri pays more than the agency. But it's only a bit more, not loads like. The other thing is that recently I've been talking to Len (Jenny's partner) about getting a house together, but unless I'm perm there is no way I'd get a mortgage.

Through informal discussions with CSRs and team leaders it became clear that the initial period of employment within the call centre was considered the most demanding. The prospects for 'temps' were considered '*touch and go*' as to whether they would 'survive' the initial training period. This was reflected in the fact that in any new recruitment drive, managers expected to lose approximately 70 per cent of new starters within the first month. Despite the demands placed upon new staff and the resulting high levels of turnover, call centre managers seemed undaunted by initial attrition; rather, they appeared to regard it as a positive outcome:

Researcher: ... it seems that the transition from training to working can be really stressful.

Amanda (call centre manager): ... yeah I know, it is difficult to get the balance right but I do think that you really need to be a certain 'kind' of person to do the job well, you have to be fairly tough.

Researcher: ... To deal with difficult calls?

Amanda: ... That's one aspect of the job, but it's better if staff find out early that the service centre is not for them, rather than later.

(Discussion, recorded in fieldwork journal)

Amanda illustrates how the transition from training to working effectively constitutes a continuous recruitment process with the initial 'shock' of being thrust into taking call used to assess the strength of new employees.

To summarize, an analysis of employees' initial entry to Dioscuri uncovers several managerial strategies. Firstly, selection shows a distinct preference for recruitment of employees with significant exposure to university education. Secondly, Dioscuri made extensive use of both temporary agencies and contracts to service its

recruitment needs. Finally, and perhaps most significantly in relation to the current research, little is done to ameliorate the high turnover of initial recruits. However, as CSRs' length of service increases, turnover rates fall dramatically. The following section explores how this is achieved.

The Internal Labour Market and Distinction

The complex nature of the customer interaction at Discouri may help explain its management's preference for recruiting recent graduates through employment agencies. The call centre was overwhelmingly staffed by "twenty-somethings", a fact actively mentioned during the recruitment process and highlighted as a positive aspect of the work environment. Moreover, the careful positioning of the call centre as a 'Service Centre' by management forms part of a rhetorical strategy employed to distinguish Dioscuri from other local and national call centres. Although the academic literature that draws attention to the diverse nature of the call centre industry (see for example Batt and Moynihan, 2002, and Bain *et al.*, 2002) and thus provides some evidence for this distinction, it is difficult to sustain from the perspective of CSRs in this call centre, at least in terms of the work process.

The skill sets of experienced CSRs facilitated some CSR movement between call centres, suggesting at least a degree of homogeneity between them. Other local call centres include an retail IT support centre, a payments centre to service billing enquires for a large utility company, a customer service centre for a cable television company, and a number of smaller local and national government service providers which had adopted a call centre form. During the course of this research, the local economic outlook in terms of job vacancies was, especially for interactive customer service skills, very good with low unemployment (all of the above-mentioned call centres, for example, were actively recruiting throughout the period of fieldwork). On the basis of repeated everyday discussion with and observation of CSRs, including those with experience of working at other call centres, and reconfirmed through follow-up interviews, I found that it was well known amongst CSRs that all of these organizations offered very similar work. The work was primarily responding to incoming telephone calls, with only slight variation in their quality of interaction (the utility organization was associated with angry and aggressive customers), autonomy

(the cable television company was known to be very highly scripted and to offer little or no autonomy), and work pressure (the focus for the retail organization was to make further sales on top of its support function and was considered a high-pressure environment).

Furthermore, the in-house company magazine, 'Cogs', subtly reported the glamour of projects that lay beyond the confines of the call centre. Whilst profiling internal promotion, Cogs also published details of internal vacancies, offering tantalising glimpses into life at Dioscuri beyond the walls of the call centre. Some of the many graduates who worked in the call centre would often report that their time spent in the call centre was 'good work experience'. During an informal chat at his workstation, Rajesh told me that his 'lack of commercial experience' had prevented him from securing the 'proper graduate job' that he desired but that having Dioscuri's name on his CV would either help him to impress future prospective employers or secure employment in other areas of Dioscuri's business after he had 'done his time' in the call centre. When discussing their reasons for working within the call centre, CSRs often raised the theme of using the call centre as a way of moving into other areas of Dioscuri as exemplified in the following excerpt from a conversation with Trish in the canteen:

Trish: I just don't want to be on the phones all the time, I mean I've got a degree I should be doing something different. I'd like to work on some of the big client projects they've got running, you know...

Researcher: What in the call centre? You mean like move to another team?

Trish: ... No, (laughs) I mean with Dioscuri but not in the call centre, like in consultancy or something like that, I've had two really good appraisals and I am hoping that they'll say to me they have an opening on the other side.

Through the researcher's time in the field, and as reconfirmed a decade later, no CSR was able to move through the internal labour market into other areas of the organization. Yet CSRs often spoke of visibly demonstrating good performance as critical to advancement within the company. In part this reflects an attempt by call

centre managers to design HR strategy to achieve high levels of employee commitment (central to Kinnie *et al.*'s (2000) high commitment model). Dioscuri did maintain the *appearance* of an effective internal labour market, however, CSRs within the call centre were, despite the widespread celebration of the potential for career advancement, effectively barred from achieving it.

In the final month of fieldwork, an email from the call centre management team, forwarded from the team leader to all CSRs, appeared unilaterally to restrict the operation of the Internal Labour Market. The title of the email read “*FW: Staff Resourcing*” and the first section of the message, written by Julia, the team leader, in bright blue Comic Sans font size 16 text, proclaimed, “*see, you’re not going anywhere!*” When the e-mail’s readers scrolled down to the lower portion of the message, written by the call centre manager, they read that movements away from the call centre had to be curtailed for “*the time being because of specific business pressures*”. The juxtaposition of the colour and font used in the email against the business rationale behind the text reinforced the feeling that the employees had been subject to a circus trick in which their hopes and aspirations of progression underwritten by hard work and loyal service had been exchanged for the promise of progression only to realise that this was merely an illusion.

The positioning of Dioscuri is a significant factor in explaining the nurturing of the feeling of favored employment. Yet, as evidenced by the voice of some of the CSRs represented here, there was a general level of dissatisfaction regarding current tasks and roles, repeatedly expressed as unhappiness at being ‘*on the phones*’. Given the favorable labour market conditions, however, can the positioning of the call centre as distinctive, together with the marketing of invidious career opportunities, really account for the decline in turnover figures? Although CSRs frequently spoke of leaving the call centre, monthly rates of turnover for CSRs who had completed training remained at between five and 10 per cent. Explanations for this varied. For example, the researcher frequently overheard conversations relating “*the hassle*” and “*aggravation*” of applying for a new job. Such inertial forces clearly have some impact on levels of turnover, yet it seems unlikely that these alone can account for a rate of turnover around 15 per cent lower than the industry average. Closer observation of espoused reasons for remaining at Dioscuri often revealed a cultural

centripetal force at the heart of many CSRs' decision to stay, a striking example of which was provided during a follow-up interview that posed the direct question: why stay at Dioscuri?

Rachel: ... Sometimes I really feel like it's a battle working here, you're always on show, everything you do is watched really closely, so it's always important to make sure you put on a good show. It's really draining, even thinking about it now, day in day out, making sure you do a really good job it takes so much effort. But I think it is worth it! I have to think it's worth something! I work really hard but I know that it gets noticed by them (gesturing to the call centre manager's desk, which rather ironically, was vacant), and I know that if I keep going I'll be rewarded. So, in answer to your question, if I left I would feel like all the hard work was for nothing, that's why I choose to stay.

Discussion

Given the high rates of turnover in comparable organizations, the reduction in employee turnover, from a tolerated level of 70 per cent for new starters to below 10 per cent for CSRs with more than 6 months' experience, represents a significant success for call centre managers. This success is even more remarkable given the environmental context in which this call centre was operating: the high percentage of CSRs employed as temporary employees, the availability of alternative similar employment in the local area, the rapid expansion of the call centre, and the evident level of dissatisfaction expressed by many CSRs in relation to their current job role are all factors which might impact negatively upon employee retention. Reflecting upon the data presented here, it seems clear that Dioscuri was largely able to employ highly qualified staff (in terms of formal educational attainment) in roles that were generally perceived as being of sub-graduate level. Although Dioscuri offered a slight wage premium, this is not sufficient to explain its success in terms of retention given the absence of extensive training and development opportunities, financial participation and autonomy and flexibility.

That these turnover characteristics endured throughout the period the researcher was in the field, and remained in place a decade later, suggests that Dioscuri's cultural approach to the management of turnover was far from a temporary or idiosyncratic phenomenon. Moreover, although the claim is not advanced that this formed an intentional managerial control strategy, its effects are both relatively consistent and systematic. Although the assessment of employees' 'best interests' is a subjective judgement, on the basis of the data presented here, it would be difficult to argue that graduate CSRs were well served during their employment in the call centre. Indeed, an explanation of the inherent domination required to maintain retention stability, together with an apparent collusion in this domination, appears to mirror Bourdieu's proposed theory of ideology that combines enduring class interests with an identification of the mechanism that allows for misrecognition of these interests (Fowler, 1997).

From an organizational perspective, Bourdieu's notion of *misrecognition* (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 168) offers a useful explanation for why organizational members may act against their own interests and pursue those of the organization. Moreover, approaching the organization as a locus for processes of symbolic violence sensitises us to the commission of pedagogic action, rendering intelligible both Dioscuri's attempts to inculcate systems of meaning within subordinate groups and the complicity of those subordinates in that process. For example, I have noted the great care taken in the recruitment process to select candidates who were predisposed to thrive in the call centre environment. This recruitment process implicitly favoured the employment of graduates, recruited for their perceived mix of intellectual and social skills which, whilst clearly of value to Dioscuri, were arguably secondary in importance to the 'cultural code' likely to be inscribed within the university graduate. The graduate recruit's exposure to extensive pedagogical action over the course of education made them more likely to fit into and embody a cultural ethos based upon the pursuit of performance-based organizational objectives, and to be receptive to subsequent inculcation in that organizational culture. A work hard play hard culture fuses the sociability required in customer service with a work ethic based on deferred reward in return for investment in hard work and unquestioning devotion to abstract work. Interestingly in many economies service sector growth has been accompanied by an expansion of Higher Education.

Domination at Dioscuri was subtly structured through segmentation; the presence of a numerically significant insecure element of the workforce caused anxiety and division. The route to overcoming this anxiety, and to securing a permanent contract ‘performance for permanency’ demands symbolic exchange of performance by CSRs in pursuit of permanent contracts. The concept of exchange captures the legitimisation of the pedagogic authorities’ definition of performance, which reinforces the right to monitor and assess. Surveillance of CSRs’ response to initial enculturation through organizational induction and training was particularly invasive with experienced colleagues often sitting next to new CSRs and listening directly to their calls. However, as the quotation from the HR manager clearly illustrates, management wanted this process to be completed quickly, with those unable to demonstrate suitable characteristics and behaviours released from their contracts upon its conclusion.

Employee reviews and appraisals were explicitly couched in the language of progression and sought to reward CSRs with permanent contracts following demonstrations of performance (expressed by the achievement of individual targets). In subscribing to this careerism, and adopting management’s ethos, CSRs ultimately legitimised the deployment of such contracts. The award of permanent contracts was always celebrated with social events making the segmentation process highly visible to all CSRs, and offering aspiring temporary workers a positive and concrete example of progression. This reinforced the apparent meritocratic and careerist ethos of Dioscuri and further legitimated the widespread use of temporary contracts.

Once recruited, however, CSRs could not expect a slackening of emphasis on performance, and one of the key ways in which performance was induced was through the notion of ‘performance for progression’. During the initial recruitment process, new CSRs were encouraged to think about careers that lay beyond the confines of the call centre, and although many CSRs felt over-qualified, the potential for career advancement was mapped out. Thus the call centre became, for many CSRs, inextricably linked to any notion of career progression. Furthermore, company appraisals reinforced the myth of the ILM by exploring CSRs’ own career goals -

often constructed, with the assistance of call centre managers, by reference to the aspiration to move out of the call centre.

The appraisal system therefore became a key aspect of the promotion of Dioscuri's ILM, the symbolic exchange of performance for progression being perfectly articulated by Rachel, who conveyed a sense of symbolic investment, the accrual of which is yet to be realised. Despite the apparent managerial enthusiasm for movement out of the call centre, CSRs were often frustrated in their attempts to do so. Over the thirteen months of ethnographic fieldwork, no CSR was able to move internally to other areas of Dioscuri's business, and the overt reassertion of this was made clear by the call centre manager's email to all team leaders effectively imposing a moratorium on staff movement out of the call centre.

The constant but apparently unfulfilled promise of movement outside the call centre represented a uniquely unsustainable project. Yet CSRs, despite a sense of growing frustration, appeared to still believe in the possibility of such career progression, and over the shorter term the build-up of tension was effectively defused by strategic reorganization of personnel. Despite the lack of possibility for, or examples of, CSRs moving from the call centre into other areas of the business, CSRs frequently reproduced romanticised notions of the possibility of progression as they saw it. In part, the celebration of the ILM formed part of a much larger process whereby Dioscuri sought to distinguish itself from other local call centres. This was achieved through the construction and reinforcement of myths surrounding the nature of the work at Dioscuri in relation to that at other call centres and the celebration of factors such as the working 'atmosphere', the staff canteen, car-parking facilities, and transportation options.

The impact of these strategies became mutually self-reinforcing. Recruitment preferences, for example, focused upon groups that were likely to identify with the prevailing careerist ethos that the call centre sought to promote. Thus graduates who had been unsuccessful in securing what they considered appropriate graduate jobs were likely to view the call centre as offering work experience to gain further employment within the wider auspices of Dioscuri. The employment of many CSRs as temporary workers provided an incentive to subscribe to the system of appraisal

that was linked to the conferment of permanent posts. Furthermore, the nature of the work process required a high level of social skill, which managers considered graduates more likely to have. More precisely, the promotion of non-work socialising was an important aspect of attracting and retaining ‘up for it’ recruits.

Conclusion

The account presented here explores the experience of managerial practices designed to minimise the turnover of established employees, which has been identified as a key challenge facing service-based organizations. I highlight the high levels of labour turnover experienced of new employees and note that little was done to ameliorate this either by managers or fellow CSRs. In contrast to existing literature, which appear to take high rates of turnover as either given, or beneficial, this research finds that call centre managers deployed a number of coterminous strategies to ensure the continued employment of staff that had completed initial training and induction.

The constellation of recruitment, segmentation, the prospect of entry onto the ILM, and socialisation provides an effective process of re-aligning CSRs’ expectations. Bourdieu’s concept of symbolic violence is used here to suggest how these processes ‘worked’ upon their subjects, with the result that, to a large extent, graduate CSRs, whilst considering themselves over-qualified, sought to align themselves with the dominate managerial ethos of Dioscuri. I therefore point to the crucial role that employee collusion and consent, in the form of misrecognition, plays in understanding the effectiveness of this particular turnover strategy, especially when managerial practices are seen as forms of pedagogic action.

This is not to assume that this ethos was totalising; employees are clearly not eternally trapped within this or any other organization. Whilst some fully trained CSRs did leave Dioscuri, dissent and frustration often voiced, in general the organization has clearly been successful in reducing the level of turnover. A question for further research might be to explore the destination of those that did leave this or similar organizations. As mentioned previously, there were a number of rival call centres local to Dioscuri and it would be interesting to know if leavers took similar work, or what their particular exit trajectories looked like. Furthermore, studies based upon

longitudinal research, might explore employment patterns over a greater period of time; some CSRs at Dioscuri for example had previous experience at other call centres and therefore a circuit of call centre employment might be emerging.

A reading of Bourdieu that interprets managerial practices as pedagogic action which engage with pre-socialised subjects that emerge from higher education, together with an analysis of the centrality of CSR complicity in the project of governing the call centre through the production of shared ‘great expectations’ appears to make some sense of retention at Dioscuri. Bourdieu’s analysis of the structuring of subordination offers a theoretically rich framework for the interpretation of the production and reproduction of domination, which might usefully be extended into organizational domains to make sense of the experience of organizational life. Furthermore, the analysis presented here draws attention to the intersection of various forms of pedagogic action, in this case between university education and management practices, yet further work might usefully seek to explore these intersections more fully. This would complement Bourdieu’s analysis by understanding the organization as an important site of domination but also contribute to organizational analysis by considering the confluence of subordinating inscriptions that converge at the point of production.

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ⁱ Broadly the idea that for competitive firms it is 'rational' to pay in excess of market clearing wages to attract the best employees (Akerlof, 1982)

ⁱⁱ The need to retain the most valuable members of staff is, however nothing new, with, for instance, rational choice economics, which emerged 40 years ago, prescribing the payment of efficiency wages (Stiglitz, 1974) or market excess wages to attract, retain and inspire the loyalty of high value labour as a remedy to the costly problem of high rates of labour turnover

ⁱⁱⁱ The growing call centre literature has tended to take high rates of labour turnover as an 'inevitable' (Houlihan, 2000, 237) feature of the industry (call centre employment is portrayed in the literature as being relatively short term with Fernie and Metcalf (cited in Houlihan, 2000, 230) claiming that average employment duration for call centre staff is around 18 months). Explanations of high rates of labour turnover, provided by call centre employers, focus on "*intrinsic pressures of the job*", and "*flat structures that curtail promotion opportunities*" (Taylor and Bain 1999, 110).

^{iv} It was agreed with the Call Centre management team that the identity of the call centre and those who worked there would not be identified by name. Therefore *Dioscuri* and the names of respondents are pseudonyms.

^v Following the British Sociological Association's guidelines on informed consent, the research was made known to *Dioscuri* management and co-workers. Despite this, the duration of the fieldwork may have meant that the researcher's status may, over time, have become blurred. With this in mind, opportunities to reassert the status of the researcher were exercised on a number of occasions and reconfirmed by re-entry to the field to conduct follow-up interviews. This was achieved by explicitly restating the research agenda or by asking for permission to take notes of conversations