

**The Call Centre Labour Process:  
A Study of Work and Workers' Experiences  
at JOBURG CONNECT, South Africa**

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by

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## DEDICATION

To my (late) grandmother, **Nontuthuzelo Magoqwana**

and

my mother, **Thembele Magoqwana**

For years of hard work, love and ubuntu

I salute you, Ndiyabulela

## ABSTRACT

This thesis is an investigation of the call centre labour process focusing on both the way work is organised and experienced by the operators and the management of employee relations inside a local government workplace – The City of Johannesburg (COJ) Call Centre. The City of Johannesburg is used to understand labour process dynamics in local government. Johannesburg was recently named the ‘World’s Second Most Inspiring City’ (by Global City Index, 2014) possessing economic and political influence within and around South Africa. Johannesburg is the economic hub of the country, contributing nine per cent to the South African GDP. But it needs to be emphasised that the focus of this thesis is on the labour process rather than the City of Johannesburg.

The nature of work in the COJ local government call centre involves answering calls about water, electricity, refuse removal, accounts and other general municipal services. The government’s objective was to have a more customer centred service delivery plan in compliance with the *Batho Pele* (People first) framework (RSA, 1997, White Paper on Local Government). This resulted in a shift in the government ‘mantra’ and philosophy from viewing Johannesburg residents as customers rather than citizens. This shift from public administration to New Public Management (NPM) has meant the introduction of private sector business principles into public services. This seeks to improve organisational and individual performance to enhance service delivery within South African municipalities. This is also meant to promote responsive and performance management culture.

The study uses Labour Process Theory set out in *Labour and Monopoly Capital* (LMC-1974) by Harry Braverman to argue for the need to contextualise the labour process debate within the socio-political understanding of work in South Africa. In developing the argument about the narrow analysis of public sector call centres based on economic lines I have reviewed literature on call centres which is influenced by Michel Foucault and Harry Braverman to understand the public sector call centre labour process. Inspired by Adesina (2002) and Mafeje (1981) this study uses a ‘complementarity’ approach to knowledge. This means the local context tends to complement the global trends though not without contradictions

within the local context. The case study approach was used for in-depth analysis of the local context through different methods (semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, observations and survey questionnaires) to collect data from different stakeholders within the City of Johannesburg between 2010 and 2013.

The concept of a '(dis)connecting city' is fitting for the COJ as this city connects the rest of Sub-Saharan Africa and South Africa to the world through its commerce and political influence. Based on the challenges experienced in this local government call centre I attempt to show the politicised nature of the public sector call centre labour process. I use the differential power relations in the frontline between customer and Joburg connect workers to illustrate this point. The lack of emphasis on the politicised nature of public sector call centres within literature is informed by the de-contextualised nature of these call centres. In the end, I argue that public sector call centre labour process is multilayered, contradictory and complicated because of these workers' role as citizens, customers, community members and service providers from a politicised community environment.

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## **LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS**

ANC	African National Congress
ACD	Automatic Caller distribution
APF	Anti-Privatisation Forum
BPO	Business Processing Outsourcing
BePSA	Business Enabling Processing South Africa
CCA	Call Centre Agent
CBD	Central Business District
CDE	Centre for Development and Enterprise
COJ	City of Johannesburg
CCMA	Commission for Conciliation and Mediation and Arbitration
CRM	Customer Relations Management
COSATU	Congress of South African Trade Unions
CWU	Communication Workers Union
DTI	Department of Trade and Industry
FIFA	Federation of International Football Association
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GEAR	Growth, Employment and Redistribution
ICT	Information and Communication Technologies
IDP	Integrated Development Programme
IVR	Interactive Voice Response
IMATU	Independent Municipal Trade Union
JMPD	Johannesburg Metro Police Department
LMC	Labour and Monopoly Capital
LPT	Labour Process Theory
MIIUU	Municipal Infrastructure Investment Unit
MOEs	Municipal Owned Entities

NPM	New Public Management
PPP	Public Private Partnerships
RDP	Reconstruction and Development Programme
RSA	Republic of South Africa
SA	South Africa
SADC	Southern African Development Community
SALGA	South African Local Government Association
SAMWU	South African Municipal Workers' Union
SANTACO	South African National Taxi Council
SAP-CRM	System Application Programme- Customer Relations Management
SECC	Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee
SMU	Social Movement Unionism
SPSS	Statistical Programme for Social Sciences
SWET	Space, Work, Employment and Time
TAS	Turnaround Strategy
UAC	Utilities, Agencies and Corporatised entities

# Chapter 1

## Introduction: Research Topic and Question

### 1.1 Introduction

In this introductory chapter I present the what and why of this study. I give a brief introduction to the call centre industry in South Africa to provide a background to the present research study. The chapter also sets out the research problem and associated research questions that the thesis seeks to address. The justification for the research and statement of the contribution the thesis makes to the field of sociology of work follows. Finally, a brief overview of the research methodology and justification for the City of Johannesburg (COJ) case will be included along with an outline of the structure of this thesis.

The study is about the South African local government call centre labour process. The focus is on the nature of the call centre labour process and experiences of workers in the City of Johannesburg call centre (Joburg Connect) frontline. Simultaneously the managerial and the employment relations within a government labour process are assessed. The nature of work in the local government call centre involves answering calls about water, electricity, refuse removal and other municipal services. The performance measure of these call centres depends on the average waiting time to answer calls, average talk time, percentage of abandoned calls and number of unresolved queries. According to Rumburg (2012: 1) call abandonment rate relates to the number of calls abandoned divided by all calls received. Service desk industry seeks to reduce this rate as it is believed to indicate low productivity. However, this does not correlate to the customer satisfaction as the number of calls abandoned does not necessarily mean customer satisfaction. The norm in service industry is eight per cent, though COJ seems to target 10 per cent (COJ, 2007). These performance measures affect and sometimes define the call centre labour process within local government. Call abandoned and increased waiting period in the call centre measure the effectiveness of the call centre. This is why Parks Tau (State of the City Address, 2013) emphasise improvement of customer relations due to “reduction of abandonment rate of calls from 27 per cent to 6 per cent”.

Governments, political parties, charities and corporations from different industries are choosing to use call centres to facilitate interaction with customers, clients, donors and citizens (Stevens, 2014: 55). The increase in call centres is explained as the result of relatively low call costs, dependence on Information and Communication Technology (ICT), and centralisation of service provision (Deery and Kinnie, 2004). The call centre work involves integration of telephone and computer technologies, with the headset equipped agent mediating relations between the customer and the organisation. The call centre labour process is unique in its integration of computer software, call distributions system and telephone system (Taylor and Bain, 1999). The workers occupying these call centre offices are called 'agents', 'operators' or 'customer representatives' and this thesis will refer to them as agents or operators given the focus on the public sector. Call centres that receive calls are known as inbound call centres while those who make calls are outbound call centres. These two different forms of call centres are not mutually exclusive as many call centres tend to receive and make calls at the same time. Telemarketing or sales call centres tend to be big and routine, selling goods and services of a third party organisation. In-house call centres tend to be situated in the customer service departments of an organisation while sales call centres are easily outsourced (Zapf, Isic, Bechtoldt and Blau, 2003: 311). Public sector call centres are mostly small, in-house and deal with customer care services. Whether in-house or outsourced, private or public, call centres use scripts and standardised ways of responding to the customer, making this kind of work distinct from other secretarial jobs.

Call centre work symbolises the real time-space compression as the geographical separation of production and consumption is compressed through 24-hour services around the world. Despite the move from developed to developing countries, call centre jobs are still very much concentrated in the first world, mainly occupied by women from the minority groups (Beerepoot and Hendriks, 2013). The move of these call centre jobs has been labelled under the umbrella of 'offshoring' services. This is not the same thing as 'outsourcing'. The former includes a migration of a service to a geographically different place not the people (Blinder, 2006). Offshoring involves the migration of non-core operations of international companies to cheap labour in the developing world (Maertz, Wiley, LeRouge, and Campion, 2010: 276). This Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) industry consists not only of voice-to-voice but also

back-office clerical and administrative operations outsourced to the third party. Voice-to-voice call centres are the most prevalent in offshoring and provide customer voice support 24 hours a day. Offshoring is driven by cost minimising and profit maximising, which subordinates the customer satisfaction needs. Low wages, high unemployment, high education attainment and English as a business language, along with IT infrastructure development, are among the key attractions of this industry. It thrives on 'space and time compression' technologies (Harvey, 1989) or what Castells (1996) has referred to as informationalism.

Based on this international presence in different sectors and industry, Stevens (2014: 56) asserted that "the call centre industry has become a global industry in its own right". BPO industry has been documented through consultancy work and market analysts' reports looking at the industry trends and future practices. Academic work on this industry is very limited and mostly studied within management studies (Mudambi and Venzin, 2010). For statistics and industry trends, I relied on Business Enabling Processing Outsourcing South Africa (BePSA) Western Cape, and research reports and policy documents by Department of Trade and Industry (DTI). In the search for call centre industry trends and academic analysis I used journals and newspaper articles to provide current debates on the issues of call centres in South Africa and abroad. *Work, Employment and Society* from Sage provided some of the most consistent debates around call centre labour process. J-Store, Google Scholar, Public Management journals, *Industrial Relations*, *Organisations*, *African Political Economy*, and *Capital & Class* were some of the key journals and sources that provided comprehensive debates on the issues of call centres, labour processes, service work, industrial relations and public administration.

Within the South African context, the *South African Review of Sociology* (SARS), *South African Labour Bulletin*, *South Africa Journal of Labour and Management Studies* and *Development Southern Africa* all provided a good understanding of the South African workplace and current debates around it. To keep up with local news on the City of Johannesburg (COJ) Municipality, *The Star*, *Sowetan*, *Mail and Guardian* and IOL newspapers provided a long and in-depth analysis on Joburg Connect and its challenges. Television debates on the state of COJ Municipality (at the height of billing crisis) were regular and provided an insight along with the COJ website on the managerial perspective. Recent

studies by postgraduate students (Masters) in different universities were also used to assess current research and the nature of findings in other sectors.

Within South African municipalities, call centres are a recent phenomenon. Their introduction was motivated by government's objective to have a more customer centred service delivery plan in compliance with the *Batho Pele*<sup>1</sup> (People first) framework (1998 White Paper on Local Government). Since the introduction of Batho Pele, government has shifted its philosophy in public administration, giving centre stage to the customers and citizens. This shift from public administration to New Public Management (NPM) has meant the introduction of private sector business principles to public services. Performance Management Systems, for example, have become mandatory for municipalities and various pieces of legislation govern performance management. They are a means through which municipalities can improve organisational and individual performance to enhance service delivery. They are also meant to promote responsive and performance culture.

The Municipal System Act (2002) stipulates that local municipalities should treat their residents as consumers. Chapter 6 of the Act states: "municipality must facilitate a culture of public service and accountability amongst staff ... gives members of the local municipality full and accurate information about the level and standard of the municipal services they are entitled to receive". Access to information and services by the 'customers' is a Batho Pele principle that is being realised through call centres, departmental (interactive) websites and customer care centres. Notably, call centres serve a different purpose to that of customer care centres. The call centre allows residents from 'anywhere' to call in, whereas the customer care centres are walk-in centres where municipal services are located in different parts of the municipality for citizens and customers to visit. They normally deal with customers' general complaints, accounts for water, electricity, refuse removals and all other municipal functions.

This thesis is an investigation of the call centre labour process focusing on both the way work is organised and experienced by the operators and the management of employee

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<sup>1</sup> *Batho Pele* is Sesotho for 'people first'. This is derived from the South African White Paper for Public Service in 2007 which aimed to transform the service delivery culture in public service. Public service had to be responsive and caring towards citizens. Batho Pele has eight principles including consultation, service standards, access, courtesy, information, openness and transparency, redress and value for money.

relations inside the local government workplace – The City of Johannesburg (COJ) Call Centre. It needs to be emphasised that the focus is on the labour process rather than the City of Johannesburg. I have used the City of Johannesburg to explore labour process dynamics in local government. Based on the sociological understanding of ‘labour process’ as defined in *Labour and Monopoly Capital (LMC)*(1974) by Harry Braverman. This thesis looks at the public sector labour process to argue for the connecting nature of this labour process to the citizen (sometimes called a customer). The concept of ‘connecting/disconnecting’ is important in understanding the COJ as this city connects the rest of Sub-Saharan Africa and South Africa to the world through its commerce and political influence (CDE, 2004: 27). The narrow analysis of public sector call centres based on economic lines, limits the understanding of these workplaces as they form the interface between the government and citizens. I argue for the politicised nature of the public sector call centre labour process as they connect the citizens to the government, with embedded differential power relations between the customer in the public sector and the frontline workers.

As part of the modernising agenda and taking advantage of the technological efficiencies, local government has been encouraged to utilise call centres to deliver basic (social) services to citizens. This has been enhanced by the neoliberal agenda to commercialise the basic (social) services, applying private sector management practices to guide public sector governance. This is in response to the conservative notions of public sector as wasteful, bureaucratic and inherently inefficient, and unwilling to embrace change (Pollitt, 1993). According to Bloomfield and Hayes (2004: 3-5) these public sector changes in embracing the customer culture have been “crucial in introducing and facilitating the call centres agenda” in the public sector. Their use of ICTs and centralisation of access to customers is perceived as the advantage in promoting efficiency in information handling (Coleman and Harris, 2008). Call centres are now utilised to deliver professional and social services (Russell, 2012). The consistent absence of public sector’s nature of call centre work within literature symbolises the dominance in economic logic driving the understanding of the call centre jobs. This means a detailed study of the nature and experience of the public sector call centre labour process needs to be undertaken with the principles of providing social needs rather than cutting costs. Similarities within different call centres should not be denied but

emphasising the similarities should not mask the unique differences between various call centres and the circumstances under which they operate.

At the centre of the public sector call centre labour process is 'political rationality' which involves 'moral' principles including justice, freedom, equality, citizenship, fairness, economic growth and so forth (Rose and Miller, 1992). Due to the different markets, size and orientation of the call centres it becomes crucial to understand these workspaces using multiple tools of analysis rather than simply copying the private sector concepts. In this study I use the combination of Marxist, Weberian and Foucauldian concepts in order to provide an in-depth analysis of the public sector call centre structures, procedures and political organisational dynamics central to this relatively new workplace beyond the 'Panopticon Gaze' or 'Assembly Line' perspective. This thesis takes a Labour Process perspective inspired by Harry Braverman's (1974) *Labour and Monopoly Capital* to give a broad overview of work organisation, employment relationships and their impact on workers' well-being within the public sector call centre. This approach is adopted with an understanding of the 'complementarity' approach to knowledge production envisaged by Adesina (2002) and Mafeje (1981). They both argued for the co-existence of knowledge between the universal and local. Braverman's thesis needs to be contextualised within specific South African racialised and gendered labour process to capture the full picture of work and its experiences within the service sector.

The emphasis on the pure economic motives behind the call centres can easily reduce the political imperatives shaping this kind of work in the South African labour market. The pursuit of efficiency and profit in the private sector in setting up call centres shapes the working conditions and experience of work but a citizen disconnected from electricity/water access gives a different meaning to 'efficiency'. In the public sector call centre efficiency is not about the 'fast conveyer belt' producing more products or 'good customer service with a smile' it means quality of service provision, which is easy to access even without a smile sometimes. Consistent with this logic, Kirkpatrick and Martinez Lucio (1995) argued for the "political nature of quality in the public sector" which can be used to explain political interventions in working and managerial practices within the public sector (Foster and Hoggett, 1999: 24). To be disconnected from electricity as a citizen or customer means a breach of constitutional rights of access to basic services like water and electricity, whereas

calling a mobile company about inability to access internet might not be as life threatening. The lack of emphasis on the politicised nature of public sector call centres in the literature is informed by the de-contextualised nature of these call centres. These workers are citizens, customers, community members and service providers coming from politicised community environments which emphasise their racial and gender identity in the workplace.

What is taking place inside the biggest municipal call centre in South Africa could lead to insights regarding the relationships between the citizen/customer and the local government. This interface between the frontline worker and the citizen/customer has a class and race specificity shaped by the racialised history of the South African labour market (Von Holdt, 2003; Kraak, 1996). In applying labour process concepts in the public space one needs to be “alert to the instability of all our concepts about the world of work and ... to the dependence and, indeed the interdependence, between work and workers and the legal, political, social, economic and historical contexts in which they are situated” (Owens, 2002: 214). This becomes important in understanding the trajectory of work in the South African public service: the labour process and employment relationships need to be considered within the socio-historical and political context at the frontline.

According to McDonald (2008: 6) Johannesburg is a “world city and a capitalist city” based on its historical capitalist development and neoliberal policymaking. Johannesburg has been called a “divided city, a racially unequal city” (Beal, Crankshaw and Parnell, 2002), “a global connected city” (Taylor, 2004); “a city of extremes” (Murray, 2011); a “world class African city” (COJ, 2013a); “gateway to Africa” (World Cities Culture Report, 2013) as well as an “evasive city [which] requires that one comes back again and again to know anything about it” (Bremmer, 2010: 1). The above descriptions of the City of Johannesburg suggest the size and power possessed by this economic powerhouse of South Africa. Beal et al. (2004: 7) have argued that “Johannesburg is a test case of urban reconstruction. We would go further and argue that the Johannesburg case has wider significance of how we understand divided cities across the world”. It is the symbol of hope for many African migrants (Mbembe, 2008) and could be a ‘laboratory’ for the study of South African society at large as it possess the demographics, historical and economical representation of the country at large. Throughout this thesis I will refer to the ‘City of Johannesburg (COJ)’ as an administrative area while ‘Johannesburg’ will be used to refer to the city itself in spatial terms, for example, while the

City of Johannesburg will include Soweto, Johannesburg does not. The City's call centre is Joburg Connect which will be used instead of COJ call centre. This is used to differentiate the city call centre from other call centres mentioned in the study.

## **1.2 Brief South African context**

The South African economy was developed on the pillars of a racialised capitalist agenda to serve the Dutch and British capitalist elite from the exploited 'unfree cheap' African labour (Terreblanche, 2012: 2). Clearly, "sociology divorced from politics and history would be totally without meaning" (Rex, 1975: 247). This means the relations at work need to be understood within this context that has seen segmentation of South African labour market according to race, gender and class. Blacks and women, in particular, occupied precarious jobs defined by low wages, poor working conditions, insecure, manual, unskilled and semi-skilled. When Braverman (1974) was writing the *Labour and Monopoly Capital*, blacks and women were already 'degraded' in their position within the white monopoly capital. Magubane (2000: 496) asserted that "in United States and South Africa blacks of all classes face two evils: class exploitation and racial oppression". These two 'evils' therefore tend to make economic and political exploitation indistinguishable. This is the background that has informed most of the South African labour studies. Meer (1991) documented that in 1921, African females occupied more than 88 per cent of agricultural jobs with their male counterparts doing domestic service work in their coloniser's household. It is only in the late 1960s, that black females were employed in the retail frontline jobs due to labour shortages and self-service without 'shop assistants handling goods' (Meer, 1991: 73). Despite the increase in numbers, the racialised workplace constituted 100 per cent white management controlling the black workforce. Both the manager and customer were white, increasingly shaped by an 'apartheid workplace regime' (Kenny, 2005). These commercial jobs were preferred to domestic work as they were cleaner and better paid (Meer, 1991). This is opposed to the 88 per cent of white females occupying clerical, sales and professional work by 1980. By the 1970s black women were a commanding majority in textile and clothing factory with 95 per cent, mainly coloured and Indian females.

The upward mobility of black population has always been dependent on other races. For example, retail business was mainly a workplace for white females; when it began to be routine and boring it gave way to black females. As black males made their way out of the

domestic services due to the forced labour in South African mines, black women moved into the white households to be domestic servants. Domestic work forms a big part of service work occupied by mainly black women. Domestic workers' experiences were well described almost 40 years ago in the work of Jacklyn Cock (1989), who showed the white household as space of racist, sexist and class ideology. Both domestic work and institutionalised service work combined the emotional, manual and mental labour. The small distribution of African women in the professional, sales, clerical and manufacturing sector meant that domestic service was their predominant space. Performing mainly emotional labour and caring work, African women continue to dominate 'social reproductive' jobs of caring (Glenn, 1993). After 30 years, Cock (2011) noted that almost one million black domestic workers experience servitude and invisibility in the current dispensation. Domestic work services share the use of emotional labour within the service work jobs and are occupied by low skilled black women even in post-apartheid South Africa. Call centres join the service industry to provide a cleaner workplace with less drudgery for many low-skilled young women dominating unemployment in South Africa. It is therefore no surprise that black women are the main beneficiaries of this call centre industry in South Africa ("Black women benefit from call centres", 2004).

Local government call centres are situated in South African public bureaucracy which is fraught with stigmas of incompetence, incapacity and corruption (see Luiz, 2002). Inefficiency in the South African bureaucracy is ingrained in its racialised and gendered history. The inherent inefficiency of the racialised and gendered nature of the South African public service is shown by Posel (1999) in her description of the stratification between white males and white females. The latter were recruited in the public administration as a result of the shortage of government-experienced personnel. White women were then allowed to occupy the top secretariat positions within the civil service. On the other hand, blacks were treated as 'messengers' rather than as part of the public service workforce. According to Boon, Britz, and Harmse (1994: 334) there were 2 million information workers in South Africa, contributing 6 per cent to the GDP in the late 1980s. Of this, 70 per cent were secretaries, typists and clerks.

Call centres are perceived as the low-skilled part of clerical and sales service jobs in South Africa, with most workers in the sector using them as an entry into the job market. The

Department of Trade and Industry estimated that South Africa had 534 call centres in 2004, with almost 80 000 employees specialising in domestic customer service (91 per cent), with a small (9 per cent) but growing international segment. During a Global Study on the Call Centre Industry (2007) in South Africa, public sector call centres constituted 9 per cent of this growing industry's workforce (Benner, Lewis and Omar, 2007). This has changed given the nature of the industry, with South Africa marketing itself worldwide and government departments opening access through a toll free number. Statistics on the industry are dependent on consultancy work, which promotes Business Process Outsourcing rather than on academic studies as this is a fairly new (and neglected) area of research in South Africa. The home of South African call centres seems to be Johannesburg (51, 8 per cent) followed by Cape Town (38 per cent), Durban (7,9 per cent) and Eastern Cape (1,6 per cent) (BePSA Western Cape Report, 2014). South Africa's call centre industry is mainly dominated by banking and telecommunication sectors.

In this growing industry, South African labour studies lag behind their international counterparts (in scope and size). Chris Benner (2006; 2007) pioneered the studies in this industry. He studied the South African call centre industry using the SWET (space, work, employment and time) analysis to argue that the South African government needs to focus on marketing the country as a whole in a call centre competitive world environment. Comparing South Africa's call centre industry with India, he argued that South African call centres had the advantage of an efficient telecommunication infrastructure but suffered from severe shortages of managerial skills and low education levels (within the pool of potential operators) in developing its potential. On the other hand, Benner (2006) saw the massive unemployment rates (25 per cent) as the major factor in motivating more people to join the industry even though it did not provide 'protected' jobs. Other studies of the industry have come from the field of ergonomics. Fisher, Milner and Chandraprakash (2007) looked at the environmental factors affecting job satisfaction in a private telecommunication company. From the industrial psychology field Carrin, Basson and Coetzee (2006), Silver (2008) and Dladla (2009) Masters research focused on the relationship between job satisfaction and the locus of control within the call centre environment. All found a positive relationship between job satisfaction and job control. Banks and Roodt (2011) discovered from 44 managers surveyed in their call centres that

efficiency and quality dilemma in management of call centres in South Africa existed but efficiency performance strategies were prioritised.

From the sociological perspective, Webster and Omar (2003) have described the call centre labour process along with work restructuring studies in the post-apartheid era. They argued that call centres formed the new workplace order in South Africa creating more jobs but also characterized by 'apartheid workplace regime' described by Von Holdt (2003), as employment relations were racialised between managers, workers and customers. However, this study concentrated on fitting in with the international literature that has been polarised along negative and positive perceptions of this industry (mainly focusing on the private sector work environment). In her Masters of Arts (2001) thesis, Omar studied a semi-private communications company in South Africa and argued that some of the elements (working according to job targets and managerial control) resembled the "sweatshops of the digital era". From the South, Reena Patel's (2010) *Working the Night Shift: Women in India's Call Centre Industry* provides an in-depth study of these transnational call centres from a feminist perspective. She noted that call centre recruitment in India has recently tended to attract high school dropouts from 18 years old. It is argued that these mainly young women are more likely to stay in the call centre industry (lowering the turnover) at a lower cost than college graduates. Taylor and Bain (2005) observed that a move to India from United Kingdom or North America could save companies between 70-80 per cent of their costs. The side effects of these high school recruitment has been to contribute to geographical inequalities as some students will drop out for the quick money and then are very unlikely to upgrade their education qualifications later (Belt, 2002; Patel, 2010).

As opposed to 2004, South African call centres are said to have increased to employ more than 210 000 people in 2013 but serve the local market mainly (Cohen, 2013). It is argued that South Africa is an ideal call centre destination due to low operational costs, government subsidies, British (accent) cultural affinity and Information and Communication Technology (ICT) infrastructure. Big international companies seem to be increasing their presence in South Africa (Amazon, Lufthansa, Swiss Air, and T-Mobile among others) which begs the question of the pull factors and trajectory of jobs created in this industry (DTI,

2013: 12). As part of the top ten key projects in South Africa, the BPO industry has grown by 18 per cent between 2010 and 2012 (DTI, 2013).

Despite the well-known robotic and poor working conditions of the call centres, those employed argue that 'it pays the bills'. This means poor working conditions are better than not having the job altogether. Call centre jobs are characterised by their surveillance system which has brought to life Michel Foucault's notion of the 'panopticon'. Electronic monitoring and scripting systems along with the space arrangement of the workplace has deemed these workplaces "sweatshops of the digital era" (Ferne and Metcalf, 1998). Taylor and Bain (2003) have argued that it is the presence of call centres in every industry which makes it difficult to speak of the 'call centre industry'.

Call centres have been referred to as the 'digital assembly line' resembling the manufacturing industry's dirty jobs. This labour process conception of the call centres asserts that these workspaces are an extension of the accumulation process of capitalist logic without being a departure from the Fordist forms of work (Head, 2003). The nature of these jobs has been a source of criticism based on their Tayloristic style of management. A typical advert for a call centre agent requires candidates with good communication skills, telephone etiquette, the ability to handle pressure, the ability to follow management demands, good typing skills, and so forth. This new niche of job opportunities in South Africa is part of the bigger government strategy to create wage employment for the young people in the labour market.

### **1.3 Methodology**

This is a brief introduction to the where, why and how of this study (see more details on methodology in Chapter 4). This was mostly a qualitative research study aimed at cultivating the internal dynamics of the employment relations and worker experiences of the labour process in the City of Johannesburg Call Centre (Joburg Connect). This study balances the objective and subjective experiences of call centre operators within the Johannesburg Call Centre. Dorothy Smith argued that "it is the individual's working knowledge of her everyday world that provides the beginning of the inquiry" (1987: 85). The value of analysing the 'everyday world' experiences of the frontline workers in the local government provides an opportunity to uncover the lives of the call centre operators employed at the frontline of

inadequate delivery of basic services. How the internal dynamics of work and the political structure of the labour process are shaped by their relationship to customer/citizens and managers, poses a challenge to understanding the labour process of the frontline by telephone.

This mainly qualitative research was supplemented by questionnaires that were administered to workers in call centre visits in 2011 and 2012. This method was used to generate data for a comparative analysis of work experiences in Joburg Connect. Observations, in-depth interviews and focus group discussions were the main techniques of data collection from the workers at the call centre. In-depth semi structured interviews were held with senior officials (in the Johannesburg Metro Municipality), researchers, activists (who have led the resistance against restructuring of the city), managers, shop stewards and trade union officials.

Data from the interviews and focus group discussions was taped, translated and transcribed into more than 200 pages of transcripts. The data was analysed using themes and coding of data to discover patterns in the responses of the participants. According to Kelly (1999: 143) "... coding means breaking up the data in analytically relevant ways". Despite the participants being informed about the purpose, methods, intended and possible uses of the data, access was still a challenge in the field. Given the suspicious nature of the local government environment, anonymity and confidentiality of the participants was crucial and therefore pseudonyms were utilised to adhere to the ethical contract with participants (Babbie and Mouton, 2001: 527).

#### **1.4 The significance of Johannesburg City as a case of study**

The Gauteng region seems to be the powerhouse for call centres, being home to 71 per cent of the call centres in South Africa, while Johannesburg alone accounts for 51 per cent of the call centres in the country (BePSA Western Cape Report, 2014). Because of its highly developed technological and office infrastructure, the City of Johannesburg will continue to be a benchmark for this industry within and around the Southern African region. Johannesburg has always had a high concentration of the headquarters of companies and service workforce (Rogerson, 1984). Evidence for this comes from the biggest media and digital marketing group from India (Aegis) which has acquired the Call Centre Nucleus (CCN)

and which has invested over R500 million (USD 65 million) to spread the call centre industry all over South Africa<sup>2</sup>. This company assists their clients in ‘communicating’ their products and building customer relationships through their high tech systems.

The primary research area is the City of Johannesburg for the following reasons. Firstly, this is the most developed municipality and the economic hub of the country. Secondly, the principles of *Batho Pele* (People First) in service delivery have been applied since 2001. These principles introduce the customer culture and seek to revolutionise employee behaviour in the public sector. Through performance management systems, customer care policies and technological developments, *Batho Pele* promotes a responsive local government and active citizenship. Thirdly, the City of Johannesburg Municipality conducts regular customer satisfaction surveys for quality evaluation in the Metropolitan area every four years (started in 2001). This provides rich information about customer perceptions of New Public Management in the Johannesburg Metropolitan Municipality. And finally, the implementation of the neoliberal policies from Egoli 2002<sup>3</sup>, decentralised the city operations culminating in corporatised utilities (water, electricity and waste) providing basic services to the customer at a price. This changed the business model of the city introducing the customer ethos in service delivery, resulting in centralisation of access to the city as early as the 1990s with the ‘One-Stop Shop’ introduced in 1997. This marked the beginning of the ‘single’ call-centre in 2001 (Nuttall and Mbembe, 2008). This makes it easier to track changes and developments of this call centre as it has been operational for more than ten years. The changes in the business model of the city governance and their implications for work experiences in Joburg Connect is key in understanding the labour process organisation of this public sector call centre.

The City of Johannesburg is one of the three big metropolitan municipalities in Gauteng along with the City of Tshwane (Pretoria) and Ekurhuleni Metros. Gauteng is the smallest province in terms of geographical size but has a dense population due to urbanisation of the

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<sup>2</sup> See <http://www.southafrica.info/business/investing/bpo-100709.htm#.VC5tG8uKDGg>

<sup>3</sup> Egoli translates to City of Gold. Egoli 2002 is a plan developed in 1999 by Johannesburg city to restructure its governance framework and model of financing the provision of municipal services. Samson, (2007: 124) describes Egoli 2002 as “overtly implanting market logic into the heart of municipality”. The plan referred to citizens as customers and argues for the strong customer focus in the business of running the municipality

rural South African poor and a high concentration of southern African migrants. This province contributes up to 33 per cent of the GDP despite being home to 26 per cent of unemployment rate (COJ, 2014). Gauteng has been governed by the ruling party African National Congress (ANC) since the dawn of democracy in 1994. See Figures 1-1 and 1-2 for maps showing geographical details.

Figure 1-1: Map of major South African cities (Johannesburg in Gauteng Province = 1)

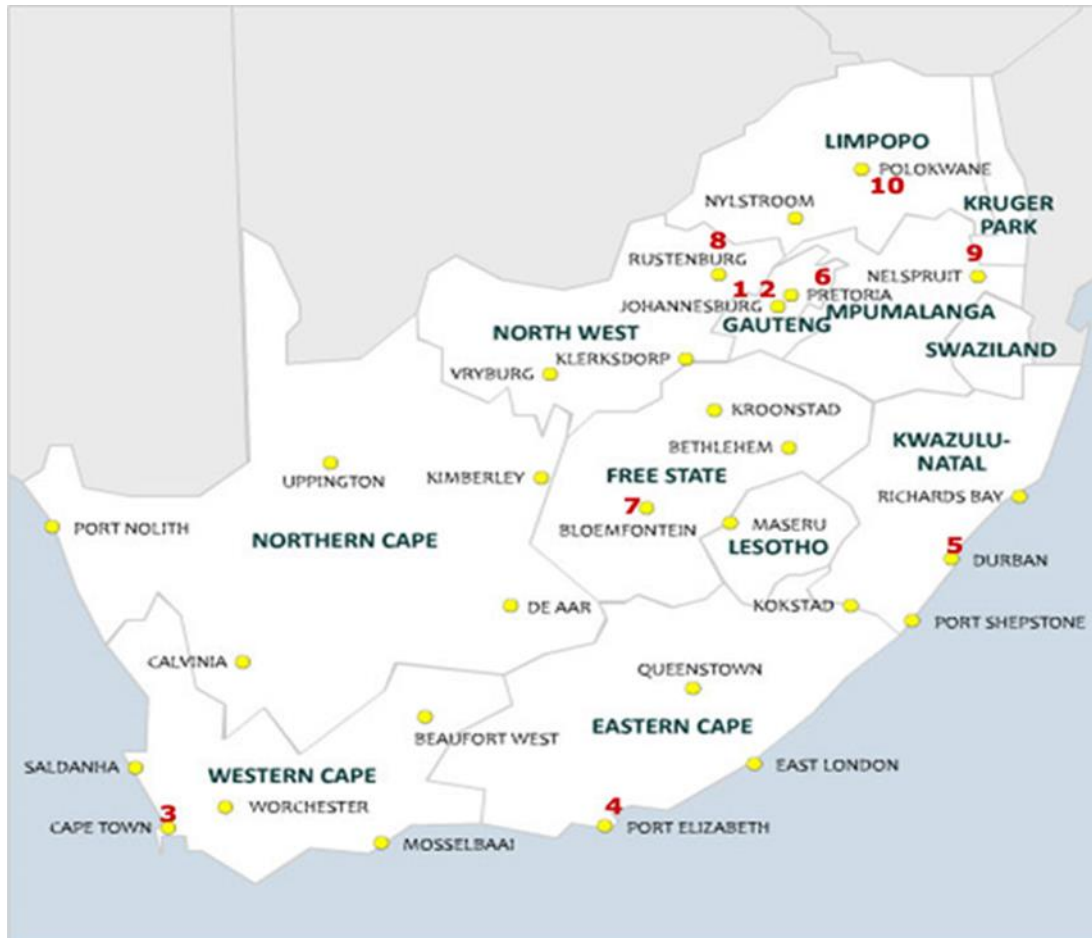


Figure 1-2: Map of the seven regions of the City of Johannesburg



The call centre of the City of Johannesburg has been selected as a primary research site for the following reasons. First, this is the oldest and largest municipal call centre in South Africa (Programme Phakama, 2006). The City of Johannesburg call centre employed more than 120 young call centre workers, between the ages of 18 and 35 from its inception in 2001 (COJ, 2007a). Though this is not a big number compared to private sector call centres with three shifts a day, this is the single biggest council call centre in the country, if not in the continent.

Second, the city continues to seek innovative ways to improve the customer satisfaction as this has plummeted in recent surveys, resulting in many officials accusing employees of bad customer service. This is a key target for the Joburg 2040 strategy devised by the council in 2012. The city employees are further under pressure to satisfy standards of service set up by the customer charter launched in September 2012. The city seeks to deal with the customer service complaints that have escalated during the billing crisis due to inflated water and electricity bills. Seeking 'to do things right the first time' so as to avoid the complaints from the customers, the City of Johannesburg sets standards and time limits to deliver its services. Though this charter does not form a legal document it seeks to enhance the customer care to all Johannesburg households.

Finally, the controversy around the billing system<sup>4</sup> has led the Presidency to intervene in this massive metropolitan municipality. Frequent complaints about the billing challenges experienced by customers have led to calls on national government to monitor customer care system around the country. Johannesburg will serve as the model for the relationships between the government and its local government call centres. It was reported in the month of March 2012 more than 8 000 complaints were registered by Johannesburg citizens to the Presidency Hotline which seeks to bring government closer to the 'people' (IOL News, 27 March 2012; Business Day Live, 27 June 2014). This hotline deals with complaints and how the public is treated by the government departments. The South African President mentioned in his State of the Nation Address (2014) that COJ is still battling with the billing crisis. This reference by the President points to the political power possessed by COJ that can potentially affect the ruling party's political position in the local government elections in 2016. The complaints about the thousands of unresolved queries by the City is at the centre of call centre challenges while the City seeks to raise its revenue by improving its customer service and connecting the public and government as a whole.

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<sup>4</sup> According to Mazibuko (2013: 11) the billing system is a system that "combines software and hardware to produce records and reports for managers and issue invoices for customers" on municipal bills. This is for the collection and payment system of municipal accounts by the customers. This is at the centre of the revenue generation for South African municipalities especially for the eight metropolitan cities that generate 80 per cent of their revenue from water, property, rates and refuse removal (National Treasury, 2014).

#### **1.4.1 Goals of the research**

This study explored the issues facing call centre workers in order to gain a better understanding of the workplace conditions and coping mechanisms in South African municipal call centres. The study investigated further the working conditions promoted by this rapidly growing industry and their implications for the South African public sector workplace. At the heart of my research, I sought to hear the voices from the frontline workers who have been talked about but never heard. Though this call centre is unionised and inbound, the trade union (South African Municipal Workers Union – SAMWU) seems to be facing peculiar challenges about these relatively new workspaces which exist at the intersection of citizens, service providers, customers and employees in the local government.

The specific objectives of the study are:

- To investigate the nature of call centre workplaces and the experiences of frontline workers
- To assess frontline workers' response to the new customer culture in local government. This will include both the coping mechanisms adopted by the workers both in acculturation to, and resistance against, the work conditions
- To investigate the relations between managers and worker organisations guiding the labour relations environment within the local government call centres
- To examine the customer-worker interface in the local government
- To assess the impact of the customer complaints system on the workers' experiences
- To investigate the kind of training/support that is available to the frontline staff in order to meet the Batho Pele vision.

#### **1.5 Organisation of chapters**

The scope of this research is confined to the City of Johannesburg in Gauteng province, South Africa; the single site focus allowed for the in-depth analysis of the local state labour process giving priority to workers' interpretation of their own labour experience in the call centre. This site was chosen because of its size and representation of the bigger South

African socio-political society. The study investigates what it means to work in the local government frontline. This thesis consists of nine chapters including an introduction and conclusion, in addition to conceptual, methodological and empirical sections.

Chapter 2 of this thesis looks at the literature pertaining to the call centre labour process and labour market conditions influencing the work organisation. It becomes very clear from the two dominant streams influenced by Braverman and Foucault that public sector call centres do not fit neatly into the two perspectives because of the limited attention to bureaucracy and the influence of political hierarchy in the public sector call centre. The main purpose of this chapter is to detail the labour market conditions that influence the call centre labour process generally and in particular in the developing world.

Chapter 3 of the thesis provides a theoretical framework built on the labour process debates inspired by Harry Braverman's *Labour and Monopoly Capital* (1974) to provide a context for the understanding of the public sector service work. This chapter argues for the continued relevance of Harry Braverman's thesis (degradation of work in the 21<sup>st</sup> century) within the state labour process. The insertion of resistance to his thesis by the later left scholars (Burawoy, Edwards, Friedman, Thompson) has distorted the purpose and objective of *Labour and Monopoly Capital* thesis. This insertion provided a gap to the postmodern (influenced by Michel Foucault) scholars for criticising Braverman about the 'missing subject'. However, we see Foucault and Braverman complementing each other in explaining the objective and subjective aspects of work in the call centre labour process. Max Weber's bureaucracy provides an additional tool in understanding the public sector work organisation. Braverman, Weber and Foucault help to explain the complex web of control and hierarchical mechanisms applicable in the state labour process.

Chapter 4 outlines the rationale behind the study and justification for the single case. This is done by looking at the literature pertaining to the methodology of qualitative study and the ethnography of call centre studies. The chapter also describes the study site and participants, procedures and techniques used to collect and analyse data. Both the experience of the researcher and methods employed in the field are described to outline the limitations and challenges of the study.

Chapter 5 is intentionally situated between conceptual and empirical chapters and it introduces the City of Johannesburg's socio-economic and political environment. In this chapter, the metaphor of the '(dis)connected city' is used to describe the relations of the city with its workers, customers/citizens and community. This is the first chapter that introduces the views of the managers, officials, unions and activists regarding the changes introduced by the city through Egoli 2002's neoliberal policy. The central aim of this chapter is to provide a broad overview of the City of Johannesburg, looking at the restructuring of the city since 2001. It is against this background that the city's call centre was established in 2001, to centralise access to the city.

Chapter 6 describes in detail the physical environment of the call centre. The focus is on the work organisation and work relations within the call centre. Details on recruitment, training, the labour process and worker-manager relations help to create a picture of the internal dynamics of the call centre workplace. In this chapter the call centre composition and technological environment facilitating the nature of the call centre job is detailed to capture the nature of the call centre labour process in local government.

Chapter 7 of this thesis explores the workers' subjective experiences of the conditions of work. This chapter draws a picture of the impact of challenges of working in the call centre on the workers' lifestyles. It is these experiences that redefine the labour process in the public sector. The issues of safety, health, commitment and morale form the foundation of this chapter to establish the impact of customer experience on the worker's subjective measures of their well-being.

Chapter 8 looks at the forms of resistance employed by the workers to counter the customer abuse and anger towards the local state. It combines the collective and individual forms of resistance. As part of the collective resistance, the South African Municipal Workers Union (SAMWU) is described along with Communication Workers Union to detail the challenges in this workspace. We explore the relationship between SAMWU and management, workers and their trade union. The implementation of Programme Phakama<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Phakama (means Rise in IsiZulu)- was a 5 year (2005-2010) plan aimed at developing and improving Revenue Management and Customer Interface Services in COJ. Phakama sought to create a single view of the customer and standardize customer interface throughout COJ practices by implemententing intergrated IT system to standardize customer service in COJ (COJ, 2007).

in COJ tended to produce wage disparities between the City and recently integrated call centre workers from the Utilities. This chapter looks at how the union deals with these challenges and illustrates broader South African Trade Union challenges manifested at the local level.

Chapter 9 summarises the key findings of the study with a specific focus on the conceptual contributions to the labour process studies of call centres. This chapter makes conclusions regarding the political mediation of bureaucracy and its influence in the call centre labour process within the public sector.

## Chapter 2

### Call Centre Labour Process and Labour Market Conditions

#### 2.1 Introduction

This chapter looks at the labour market conditions facilitating call centre work. Both in South Africa and India, call centres are part of the strategies to absorb unemployed youth into the labour market. India has taken most of the offshore jobs, which is why South Africa tends to be compared to India. Beerepoot and Hendriks (2013: 825) have argued that the quality of call centre jobs should be evaluated based on the features of the local labour market and employment opportunities available. "Social relations of the labour process are connected to those of labour markets" (Peck, 1996: 25). This means the local labour market is expected to influence the labour process within the call centre industry. The labour market conditions can facilitate the nature and extent of call centre industry. Call centres have increasingly become a typical contemporary workplace within the service sector, providing opportunities and challenges to different audiences. They are also embraced for their massive employment opportunities by developing world governments as their "footloose and global nature" seems to bring spatial division of labour to life (Massey, 1984). Offshoring has become one of the ways to save on labour costs through increased division of labour.

As they compress space and time through Information and Communication Technology, call centres provide a perfect setting in which to analyse interactive service work both locally and internationally. Taylor (2010: 252) cautioned us against "overemphasizing the technology as a driver. The widespread nature of call centre must take into account the political and economic environments of deregulation, organisational restructuring, financialisation and broader thrust of neoliberalism". This means call centres have become central in the pursuit of cost efficiency and competitive advantage.

Garson's (1988) description of call centres as "electronic sweatshops" has paved the way between two dominant sociological perspectives on call centres, one influenced by Braverman and other by Foucault. Call centres have been studied from different perspectives including Human Resources, Ergonomics, Geography, as part of the

information economy but most of the scholarly attention has come from the Labour process perspective, influenced by Braverman's *Labour and Monopoly Capital* (1974). Taylor and Bain (1999) have been at the forefront of this perspective labelling these call centres "assembly line on the head". The call centre labour process facilitates 24-hour, seven-day a week customer service. Optimists, drawn mainly from new service management literature (Schneider and Bowen, 1999), have argued for the image of the more empowered, semi-professional, highly skilled and committed employees, delivering customised service. Most of these accounts are endorsed by management and business studies. Despite Taylor and Bain (1999) emphasising the variation of the call centres according to size, market orientation, and so forth, the pessimistic picture of the call centres has dominated the literature. The 'production process' is shaped by the surveillance system which controls the pace, quality and content of the work processes. It is hardly surprising that labour process theory has been mixed with Foucauldian discourse and sometimes used to decorate the titles that deal with the 'subjective' nature of call centre labour process.

Looking at the international literature on call centre labour process, I situate the public sector call centres within the customer model, promoted by neo-liberal policies. In this chapter, I divide the call centre labour process studies within two approaches, Marxist (influenced by Taylor and Bain) and Foucauldian (Ferne and MetCalf, 1998). The former is influenced by the Labour Process theory on control and resistance while the latter is based on supremacy of the surveillance discipline by Michel Foucault. In the end, I argue that this industry will provide another 'black women's factory'. This is not a coincidence as the labour market and social structures are mutually embedded given the social character of labour (Peck, 1996). This argument is developed against the backdrop of Kenny's (2005) work on the retail industry and Cock's (1989) work on domestic workers. Call centres join this service industry described by the authors to provide a cheap and insecure labour workforce mainly occupied by black women. The latter continue to occupy the secondary segment of the labour market in the post-apartheid workplace.

## **2.2 Call centres: Dominant perspectives**

Ferne and Metcalf's (*Not*) *Hanging the Telephone Payment System in the New Sweatshops* (1998) study of call centre remuneration system using the Foucauldian perspective has influenced the pessimistic view of this fairly new workplace. They argued that the

surveillance system within the workplace gave management total control over the workforce. This was induced through the panoptic effect engraved in the technological system itself. It is believed that the new workplace rendered the human supervisory powers redundant as the 'all seeing machine' sought to monitor, assess and measure the work: "... for call centres, Bentham's panopticon was truly the vision of the future and these organisations are the very epitome of what Foucault had in mind" (1998: 2). This referred to the intensity of control and monitoring of work through technology with every individual worker visible to the machine. This form of unobtrusive power displaced the physical cohesive power by the managers as the workers regulate their 'own' behaviour through the panopticon power. Based on the individualising nature of the labour process, call centres seemed to be less sympathetic to collective organisation as the rewards and punishment are individualised. Fernie and Metcalf (1998: 2) went further to argue that "the tyranny of assembly line is but a Sunday school picnic compared with the control that management can exercise on computer telephony". The control imperative in the call centre labour process goes beyond the Fordist assembly line which paced and control worker movement.

The 'lack' of movement by workers is due to the Automatic Caller Distribution (ACD) which seeks to 'fire' call after call without any break in between calls. This means workers will be attached to their chairs until official breaks as the central machine locates and directs calls as soon as one ends. This Automatic Caller Distribution, along with other software, controls the pace, length and 'quality' of each call. The latter is ensured by call recording and anonymous listening to customer-worker interactions. Constant silent surveillance through call recording means that operators do not know which conversation is recorded or listened to. As a result direct supervision is redundant as the operators are constantly under surveillance with less resistance (Sewell and Wilkinson, 1992a). Though some have criticised the 'totalising panoptic power' in the workplace, Fernie and Metcalf's work sparked debates between Foucauldians and Labour Process theorists. The latter saw greater continuities with the call centre in forms of control and resistance rather than something entirely new (Callaghan and Thompson, 2001; Taylor and Bain, 1999 Bain and Taylor, 2000).

Bain and Taylor's, *Entrapped by the 'Electronic Panopticon'? Worker Resistance in the Call Centre* (2000) research in Scottish Banks depicted different individual and collective forms of call centre resistance. They argued against the neglect of worker resistance in the Fernie

and Metcalf (1998) account of call centre work. Bain and Taylor (2000) argued for the heterogeneous nature of call centres based on size, industry, market, complexity and call cycle time. The use of the electronic panopticon as 'totalising control' of the workplace is very 'simplistic and false'; it ignores the complexity of the employment relationship and call centre labour process. Despite the Foucauldian belief about the internalised gaze (Bain and Taylor, 2000), they continued to argue for worker resistance in the call centre. According to Mulholland (2004) the challenges faced by managers in call centres include high turnover, high absenteeism, work avoidance, sales sabotage, and sick leave rates, which hardly symbolises any perfect panopticon control.

Thompson and Ackroyd (1995: 625) went further to argue that the Foucauldian framework is flawed; it is not, as claimed, a better alternative to accounts of workplace social relations. Control is not only about discipline and creation of obedient and docile bodies, it is part of capitalist logic to create profit. "By treating workplaces as an extension of disciplinary practices and the factory, hospital, and other organisations as paler versions of carceral institutions, the specific character of the employment relations is lost" (Thompson and Ackroyd, 1995: 624). This means capital-labour relations is localised and without any significant inclusion of labour as an actor in the relationship. The managerial intentions to control can never be assumed to be the actual practice, as the workers find ways to observe whether they are being listened at or not. This is echoed by Adesina who argued that "the perfect control apparatus has not been invented. This is mainly, because unlike other commodities entering the production process labour power has a unique character of being bound-up to its bearer, the workers who are thinking, living and active human beings" (1988: 388). In the end, Bain and Taylor (2000) argued, control and surveillance within these call centres are a means to an end, rather than an end in itself forming part of the ability "to compete and make profits". The fixation with electronic panopticon has been criticised by LPT proponents arguing for the lack of credible evidence in surveillance as the 'dominant managerial control'. Thompson (2003a) strongly criticised the 'newness' of the unobtrusive nature of the surveillance and its 'continuity' from second wave LPT debates. He argued that Edwards, Burrawoy and Friedman clearly demonstrated the shift from "direct and coercive nature of control" towards a consensual and indirect one, so this unobtrusive control system is not new. Labour Process proponents again showed the interdependence of

surveillance system with the 'circuits of capital', which seems to be totally neglected by the individualising post structuralist in the 'electronic panopticon age'.

On the other hand, Head (2003) strongly believed that Fordist production and Taylorist principles guide the labour process of these call centres which make it difficult to assess any change to cleaner jobs. He argued that this "digital assembly line" performs the same functions that Henry Ford applied in the conveyor belt where the pace of work was controlled by the assembly line. The routinisation and standardisation of answering calls has resulted in call centres being described as electronic sweatshops, battery farms, assembly line or production lines, the epitome of panoptic power. During the labour process, work is 'produced and consumed' at the same time within this interactive industry. Work is intensified through scripting and engaging the worker's feelings and body for a capitalist to maximise profit. This view saw the call centre labour process as the epitome of the assembly line production with management using the electronic surveillance for control over the labour process. Whether these call centre can be fitted within the so-called post-industrial workplace is a different question.

On the assembly line, discipline and control could be enforced by the line itself so there was no need for supervisors to determine the speed. This gave the power to the managers to accelerate the pace of work whenever it wanted to. All that was needed was to press a button and the line would go faster. The worker was simply a 'cog in a machine' within the production system (Head, 2003). This resilient workplace design is said to be the most common in the call centre labour process, as the Automatic Caller Distribution (ACD) controls the pace and number of calls within the 'digital assembly line'. The Interactive Voice Response system (IVR) and ACD with the scripting programmes have fragmented the labour process in itself while workers have to deal with routine calls and standardised answering mode (Bain and Taylor, 2000).

The ACD receives inbound calls, automatically place calls on queues, and (in conjunction with other software) offers management information gathering package (Bain and Taylor, 2000). The technology in call centres tends to control speed, and ensure that the operators know their queue numbers and average waiting period. Dubbed the 'new ruthless economy' (Head, 2003) the call centre labour process possesses the manufacturing sector's

characteristics with its scientific managers, overwhelming power unconstrained by labour organisations, disregard of labour laws, and controls not only the speed in the assembly line but also the minds, feelings and appearance of the workers (Head, 2003: 109). This 'industrialisation' of the service industry has led to high turnover within the call centre industry as the workers tend to vote with their feet.

Poynter (2000) endorsed this view by arguing that new forms of service work embody practices that were once the preserve of the assembly line and manual employees, routinising and deskilling professional work. A form of organisation that was once the preserve of manual labour has been rapidly diffused within industries that were previously associated with white-collar workers and the exercise of the 'mental' labour (2000: 151). This resuscitates the negative and Marxist views of the office, as Poynter (2000: 151) argued mental labour has become variously "Taylorised, de-professionalised, routinised and manual, sharing many of the traits of the assembly line". The digital surveillance and control forms the epitome of call centre woes.

Technological supervision of the call centre is dependent on the ACD, IVR and scripting software integrated in the labour process. ACD physically locks workers into the computer workstation by call distribution immediately after the wrap up time. This also enhances management monitoring of the labour process, information gathering and measurement. Through the ACD, managers are able to gather information about the timeframe of the call and number of calls taken by the operator. As much as technology distributes the number of calls, it also records the conversations between the customer and operator during the interaction process through IVR. The latter is a quality-monitoring tool used by the management to discipline and punish when necessary. Monitoring calls ensures a standard way of treating the customer in addition to scripts (Korczyński et al., 1996; Callaghan and Thompson, 2001; Bolton and Houlihan, 2005).

Coming from a Weberian perspective Frenkel et al (1999) and Korczyński, Shire, Frenkel and Tam (2000) have posed the major critique of the Labour Process Theory (LPT) perspective of call centres. They argued that the absence of the frontline worker in the labour process due to its fixation with the manufacturing sector. The presence of the customer in the frontline work requires that we re-examine the theoretical concepts in the labour process theory.

This approach argued that the rise of service work and interactive service work (in particular) challenges the focus on management and labour as the main role-players in the labour process. The customer has to be included in the analysis of the labour process especially in the interactive service work.

The more important point is the recognition of this third party participation but also that it can no longer be assumed that the interests of each party are in conflict (Bolton and Houlihan, 2005). The customer is also under the control of both algocratic and bureaucratic systems. For instance, through the IVR system the customer has to queue and punch the right information in order to be redirected to the relevant consultant. The customer has to be patient and cautious to follow careful instructions given by the IVR machine as she could restart the whole process of calling if she gives wrong information or punches the wrong key on the phone keypad. This is why Aneesh (2006: 15) argued that “the computer has become the commander of both the frontline and the customer”.

The extension of ‘McDonaldisation’ (Ritzer, 2001) in the service sector has meant that management controls not only what the workers ought to do but also what they should say and how they are supposed to say it. Through scripting and voice/accent training, managers control the frontline, by limiting their interaction through scripts. Despite the customer (as the new boss) and the algocratic systems to control the labour process of the call centres, operators still have to adhere to the company regulations, which means meeting the targets. Through this performance management system, call centre operators are required to use their interactive skills to keep the customer ‘happy’ but also maintain the targeted numbers prescribed by the organisations.

This Weberian perspective (Frenkel, Korczynski, Shire and Tam, 1999; Korczynski et al., 2000) on how call centres are controlled by ‘customer-related normative values’ which supplements the ‘hierarchical and bureaucratic control’ tends to over-emphasise the customer presence in the frontline. This approach on the elevated status of the customer presence and authority in the frontline fails to acknowledge Braverman’s (1974) foresight on different control mechanisms including the ‘habituation of the worker’ to facilitate the extraction of the surplus value from the workers. “Putting the call centre frontline on the shoes of the customer” (Korckzynski et al., 2000: 675) is part of the training and creation of

the sustained indirect forms of control for the worker to counter resistance from an early age of those who enter labour market.

Chapter 6 of LMC, 'The Habituation of the Worker to the Capitalist mode of Production', is dedicated to control beyond the physical means of scientific management. Braverman (1974: 97) argued that

... generations which grow up under capitalism are not formed within the matrix of work life, but are plunged into work from the outside, so to speak, after a prolonged period of adolescence during which they are held in reserve. The necessity of adjusting the worker to work in its capitalist form, for overcoming natural resistance intensified swiftly changing technology, antagonistic social relations, and the succession of generations, does not therefore end with the 'scientific organisation of labour' but becomes a permanent feature of capitalist society.

Cohen (1987) is very critical of reducing labour process debates to 'control and deskilling'. She argued that profitability and accumulation is at the centre of capitalism which makes the labour process less about control and more about exploitation: "Exploitation is both central to the capitalist labour process and contradictory within it, in that it is a relationship which delivers surplus value and produces an inherent conflict of interests of which undermines the production of surplus value" (42). Workers do not struggle for 'power' but they resist exploitation. This forms the centre of the bargain between 'effort and reward' as the workers seek more while capitalists give less. She further argued that "within control paradigm workers could be depicted as engaged in an ongoing process of resistance to and thwarting of the domination of capitalism" (Cohen, 1987: 45). This could be criticised for lacking consciousness as workers focus on their economic needs rather than the 'revolutionary' struggle, but as Cohen (1987) noted, this fight against exploitation is 'political' in its nature. The absence of economic analysis of the capitalist labour processes tends to define the labour process only in political terms without connecting it to the material conditions of workers. This means the 'contested terrain' of work is not only rooted in 'power-related' struggles or 'transformation' but economic exploitation of workers by the logic of accumulation and profitability (Cohen, 1987).

### **2.3 Gendered call centre labour process**

Like many service workplaces, the call centre workforce is mainly female (Belt, 2002; Patel, 2010; Stevens, 2014). The extent of the gendered nature of the call centre workforce is influenced by the geographical area and complexity of the call centres. Most of the low skilled, routinised and low paying call centres tend to be dominated by women (Patel, 2010). D’Cruz and Noronha (2007) argued for the complexity of work in the technical call centres. Mostly occupied by males who did not regard themselves as ‘technical assistants’, technical call centres are characterised by job autonomy and satisfaction. Both types of call centres are characterised by the use of emotional labour which was previously absent in the Ford’s assembly line.

The main competencies required in the call centre job are customer interaction skills, keyboard skills, knowledge of procedures, product, services and legal regulation, technical proficiency in programming languages and databases. Potential operators are unqualified but not unskilled, simply “lacking standard indicators of possession of skills” (Callaghan and Thompson, 2002). The perceived centrality of social skills and competencies leads to management using rigorous selection and training procedures more usually associated with discretion jobs (Boreham, Parker, Thompson and Hall, 2008: 74). Some of this social competency is gendered as females tend to possess more of the social skills required in the call centre. This then forms one explanation for the number of women in the call centre jobs. These social skills are precisely based on feeling management. Training is always focused on self and customer interaction rather than technical expertise and procedural knowledge. Nickson, Warhurst, Witz, and Cullen (2001) also suggested that social skills should be extended into the service sector by including ‘aesthetic labour’ which means the “recruitment of attitude, personality and appearance are part of the skills” (Callaghan and Thompson, 2002). These have been very critical in the recruitment, selection and training of the service workers especially in the frontline. This contributes to work production and corporate image for customer appeal. The algorithms determine the ‘what’ of the job through scripts and training workers more than focusing on the ‘how’ (Aneesh, 2006).

Call centres are famous for their flat organisational structures with limited career opportunities which have directly contributed to the low retention rate and employee dissatisfaction. Two or three years are perceived to be the maximum number of years to

work in a call centre environment (Deery and Kinnie, 2004). One can only move from being an agent to team leader, and there are very limited opportunities beyond being a supervisor. Belt (2002: 65) has warned against the generalisations labelling call centres as 'careerless' as some of the operators are moving up the call centre structures though they are restrained by the nature of the organisation of work.

## **2.4 Public sector call centres**

The call centre labour process and working conditions are shaped by the customer segmentation, along with a combination of national, historical and organisational factors that shape the organisation of work and labour control over the pace of work (Collin-Jacques and Smith, 2002; Russell, 2012). The outsourced call centres tend to be routinised, cost saving requiring minimal skill while the mostly public sector call centres tend to require 'worker discretion' and more time allocation than the normal mass production mode (Van den Broek, 2003). Call centres in the public sector have operated in the form of small helpdesks but have increasingly embraced the concept of the sovereign customer which seeks to produce a responsive and cost efficient administration. Conducting research on tele-nursing, Colin-Jacque and Smith (2002) cautioned about some instances in which call centre work might be 'inappropriate and unethical' in the public sector. This referred to the limited occupational professional discretion given to nurses in complying with the nursing software designed for tele-nursing. The latter is part of the 'New Public Management' influence in the public sector where 'discourse of efficiency' takes precedence over the collective and 'political good' of the citizens (Tsakalotos, 2004). This discourse introduced private sector managerial styles of business operation into the public sector. NPM reforms were complemented by the electronic government notion of transparency which sought to restructure the work order in the public services. Electronic government (e-government) means the "use of technology to open up access to and delivery of government services to benefit citizens, businesses and employees" (King, 2007: 48). E-government strategy regards call centres, government websites, emails and faxes as part of channels by which citizens may access information. Call centres are created in the public service to close the digital divide and encourage active participation of citizenship, thus call centres are about social inclusion. Though limited in scope and size, public sector call centre literature is growing with most studies influenced by the private sector notion of mass production (or mass

bureaucracy) Taylorised services. Public sector call centres are generally expected to have more stable working hours and better working conditions than those in the private sector. Bramming, Sorenson and Hasle (2009: 127) noted that the Danish government call centre's working conditions were better due to "lack of competition in the public administration".

Occupied mainly by experienced public servants who have migrated to the call centre (Bain, Taylor and Dutton, 2005; Pupo and Noack, 2009; Huws, 2009), public sector call centres focus less on reduction of costs and more on customer satisfaction. This means that because of the nature of the 'target market', size and orientation, they tend to lean on the quality rather than quantity side of the contradiction noted by Korczynski (2001). Public sector call centres are funded by the state (sometimes voluntary organisations) to provide assistance to the citizen-customer. These call centres are part of the interconnected network between different departments and citizens; as Gluckmann (2004: 796) observed they are not 'self-autonomous workspaces' but part of the whole production-to-consumption system.

The advantages of these call centres seems to be that they reduce large volumes of enquiries so that front-line staff can concentrate on delivering services; they reduce travelling costs for citizens, customers having to queue, and the time spent in face-to-face customer interaction. They also make it easy to monitor both quality and quantity of contact with service users and to better control the nature of the advice given to the customers (Fisher, 2004). In a nutshell, public sector call centres, as in the private sector, are designed for the back office to focus on the delivery of the basic services rather than spending time on telephone calls.

The tendency to outsource call centre operations within the private sector is very minimal in the public sector (Van den Broek, 2003). This is due to the nature of the labour process defined by bureaucratic and political pressures. Burgess, Connell and Hannif (2006) detailed the justifications of keeping call centres in-house. Outsourcing of public sector call centres will tamper with confidential nature of information handled by the agents who are scrutinised by the media and other political parties. Many people who contact call centres are dealing with 'life threatening issues' linked to access to basic services of the state. Though public sector call centres tend to be smaller than their outsourced counterpart, they are more likely to receive higher salary rates and to be unionised (Benner et al., 2007).

## **2.5 Individual and collective resistance in call centres**

Through privatisation, outsourcing and deregulation, call centres tend to see little unionisation, but it is generally believed that union presence makes a difference (Benner et al., 2007). The understanding of the role of trade union in the call centres has been limited to an almost exclusive focus on work organisation and management control (Russell, 2008).

Call centres form part of the longstanding challenge of the white collar unionism within the service sector. The organisation of white collar workers posed a challenge to the trade unions due to its heterogeneity and 'contradictory class location' (quoting Wright in Ramsay, Baldry, Connolly and Lockyer, 1991). This is the result of the inclusion of both senior and lower grade employees within the white collar jobs, which sometimes creates role conflict with those who hold senior positions but who are also representing the workers. Apart from class consciousness debates about the poor participation of the white collar workers in unions, Crompton and Jones (1984) also noticed the rise in white collar trade unions in the wake of economic reforms (1960-70s) where white collar job security was threatened by mechanisation, bureaucratisation and rationalisation. It is worth noting the differences within the sectors (public and private sector) when it comes to unionisation as the outsourced call centre tends to pose more threats to unionisation in this industry (Shire, Hotlgrewe and Kerst, 2002; Benner et al., 2007). Public sector call centres tend to be unionised, small and inbound which makes the working conditions better than their outsourced counterparts.

The vast literature on the frontline service work, through the lens of managerial control, has tended to portray the frontline workers as the passive agents of the 'totalising and individualising' enterprise discourse (Du Gay and Salaman, 1992: 622). However, Wray-Bliss (2001: 47) warned against underestimating the frontline 'political agency' in (re)shaping their own (and our understanding) of the workplace. Taylor and Bain (2003) observed that call centre workers did not only resist the electronic and technical surveillance but also the normative controls by the management. Call centre workers insert their own conceptions of appropriate emotional behaviour during the customer interaction.

Despite Bain and Taylor's (2000-2004) consistent argument for the call centre workplace conditions forming the conducive environment for collective and individual resistance by

the operators, the exaggerated view of the worker “commitment and subjectivity which translates to individualism” sought to portray the ‘death of collectivism’ in these service workplace (Knights and McCabe, 1998; McCabe, 2007). This argument is based on the physical structure and age of the call centre workers. Call centre operators are tied to their desks constantly answering mostly under heavy supervision, which makes this work hard to organise. The ‘individualising’ nature of the call centre working conditions, especially regarding individual contracts, results in disillusion about unions (Stewart, 2005; Webster and Omar, 2003; Bain, Gall, Gilbert and Taylor (2004). This is also apparently exacerbated by the ‘youthful’ nature of the call centre operators who tend to be individualistic and anti-union. These perceptions of individualised workplaces were first suggested by Andre Gorz (1982: 23-33) who claimed that the “traditional working class is now no more than a privileged minority”. He saw many people belonging to the ‘neo-proletariat’ characterised by insecure jobs, with no class identity, temporal, casual, contracted and part-time labour. Gorz (1982) was very sceptical about the collective efforts to address the working conditions of this ‘non-class’ as the trade unions represented the few. According to Gorz’s (1982: 69) description of neo-proletariat, call centres are part of the non-class that can only resist the capitalist production system by breaking away thereby liberating themselves from work.

Suggesting changes in the union organisational strategies, Danford, Richardson and Upchurch (2003) argued that unions need also to deepen the bargaining issues to include issues like training, bullying and discrimination; these might allow unions to rebuild their social legitimacy. Wray-Bliss also added that “privileging the customer relations over industrial relations” frontline staff may be interpreted as contributing to the “declining political visibility and viability of unions” (Wray-Bliss, 2001: 46). Their feelings of responsibility to the customer might hinder the clerks’ political forms of collective resistance.

According to the concept of Customer-Oriented Bureaucracy by Merck Korczynski (2003), the presence of abusive and irate customers calls for the formation of informal ‘communities of coping’ to assist one another in this contradictory environment. These communities of coping are embedded in the ‘collective emotional labour’ shared by these frontline workers. These ‘communities of coping’ then form a potential solidarity from which trade unions can emerge (Korczynski, 2003: 71). This theory contends that trade

unionism in the frontline should not only be based on bread-and-butter issues of pay and conditions but should also “acknowledge the enmeshing of consumption and production that occurs in the service work” (Korczynski, 2007: 579). This simply means that trade unionism in the frontline can grow out of ‘customer service’ issues which then ease the pain of the frontline workers and therefore the pressure on customers, since worker-customer satisfaction is interrelated, “seeking to create not only decent jobs, but also decent customer service to deliver to the customer” (Korczynski, 2007: 579). Within the discourse of new unionism, the new methods of recruiting and participative workplace bargaining ought to be stressed and prioritised. This requires the trade unions to be strategic and flexible in order to organise this relatively ‘new’ segment of workers.

Paul Brook (2007) has responded to this ‘neo-Weberian’ approach of collectivism by arguing that Korczynski (2003, 2007) overstated the dominance of ‘capitalist consumerism’, which reduces the issues of collectivism only into customer service, while neglecting other worker frustrations beyond customer service. Brooke (2007) further argued that service worker militancy has a long history that is neglected by this neo-Weberian approach. Brooke rejected the notion of ‘communities of coping’ as the result of negative experience with the customer and argued for “collective solidarity arising from common class interests” (Brooke, 2007: 369).

Though disenchanted, Gorz (1999) suggested that if trade unions “see their task as that of defending the interests of those with stable jobs, the trade unions run the risk of degenerating into a neo-corporatist, conservative force, as has occurred in a number of countries in Latin America”; trade unions should challenge the societal issues affecting the whole working class. This was further supported by Waterman (1999) in his concept of Social Movement Unionism (SMU) which suggested that trade unions should organise beyond the bread and butter issues and form alliances with the civil organisations to tackle social, environmental and political issues. This combination of workplace and socio-economic and political agenda for trade unions is of interest for public sector call centres, as they are situated at the intersection of customer, service provider, service user, and citizen.

## 2.6 State of call centres in South Africa

The first call centre in South Africa appeared in 1970s and increasingly penetrated different sectors by 1999 mainly Finance, Hospitality and Transport services (Benner, Lewis, and Omar, 2007: 10). South Africa is regarded one of the top ten possible recipients of the Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) Industry (BePSA, 2013). In the quest for more jobs (promoted by the DTI, Business Trust and BePSA Western Cape), South African government seeks to create more than 5 million jobs by 2020 (New Growth Plan 2010). Devising provincial initiatives to attract the foreign investment in this sector- CallingtheCape (Western Cape), Contact in Gauteng and KZNonSource are among the major examples. The latter then explains the concentration of contact centres in these three provinces led by Gauteng followed by Western Cape and KwaZulu Natal.

The Business Process Outsourcing and Offshoring industry is said to be among the top three priority sectors to absorb most unemployed youth, given its massive numbers in recruitment. Growing at 18 per cent between 2007 and 2012 the BPO industry seeks to create 30000 additional jobs by 2015 (Willcocks, Craig, and Lacity, 2012: 32), which can have a massive contribution to the absorption of the unemployed youth in the labour market (38 per cent). This industry was honoured at the UK based National Outsourcing Association Awards to be the 'Offshoring destination of the year in 2012' (BPeSA, 2013). This industry in South Africa caters for big brands like Amazon, Lufthansa, T-Mobile, Swiss Air and IBM. Boasting about its 'cultural affinity and neutral English accent' BPO industry is mainly dominated by UK market (62 per cent). Most of these BPO jobs are focused on Voice (84 per cent) with telecoms sector dominating (35 per cent), banking and insurance (27 per cent), aviation (15 per cent) and retail (8 per cent) (Everest Group, 2012). This industry is said to be worth USD 1,3 Billion in South African expected to double this figure in 2016 to USD 3. 06 Billion (Frost and Sullivan in Willcocks et al, 2012: 29).

The ability to create massive job opportunities was dubbed by Communication Workers Union (CWU) General Shop Stewards Council (2013) as the "modern day mining industry". This is in line with labels of call centre industry as factory of the digital era because of the Fordist characteristics. The document highlights this claim by making an example of

Vodacom (mobile telephone company) which created 1000 job opportunities through this industry in the City of Johannesburg, facilitate by the Johannesburg IQ. The latter provides affordable rental spaces for companies to employ people around the City of Johannesburg. Government has developed training programs through Service SETA, DTI and Monyetla Talent development Programme. The latter simply translated to 'opportunity' (in Sesotho Language) which seeks to train future customer contact centre workers. The Monyetla Talent Development Programme trains up to 4500 students for absorption into the industry (DTI, 2013). Of the 4500 labour pool, 81 per cent are black and 54 per cent are females, reflecting the general labour market trend in unemployment. This is a sector (BPO) specific training programme developed to prepare the unemployed young people for the call centre work. This is part of the incentives to attract the offshoring business (BPO SA, 2010). On top of many other incentives to attract this industry, South African government provides first six months free telecoms infrastructure for new investors (BePSA Western Cape, 2012).

A major study of Call Centre South Africa industry was conducted in 2007 by Benner, Lewis and Omar, as part of the Global Call Centre Project by some German researchers (Huws and Shire). In this detailed sociological report, it was reported that South African call centres were not unique in character but the striking features were racial composition and union density within the sector. It was reported in 2007 that Africans were generally underrepresented in the higher levels (7 per cent of managers) of the call centre industry despite being the majority of the population (79 per cent). This was in contrast to their white counterparts, which comprises 11 per cent of the total population but 61 per cent of the management in this industry. This was however challenged by some newspaper articles that argue that 'black women are beneficiaries of the call centre industry'. This is based on the numbers of blacks (63 per cent) in this industry. More than 40 per cent is occupied by Black females with 28 per cent as supervisors, with White males occupying 38 per cent of the managerial positions (Balancing Act, 2005; Issue 220).

The average call centre employs 77 agents including team leaders and managers with large call centres being more than 1000 agents (Benner et al, 2007: 13). Most of the South African call centres are said to be inbound (79 per cent) serving the domestic markets (91 per cent). The average starting salary for the outsourced call centre agents is between R3 500-R4 5000

per month while in house call centres pay just over R6 500 per month (BePSA Western Cape, 2012).

These statistics confirm the global call centre projection made by Benner et al (2007) where black females seem to dominate this industry. This research noted significant salary differences between small and big call centres while in-house and smaller call centres paid more (R78 000 per annum versus R73 000) they were mostly likely to be unionised as well. This was also differentiated by sector, with manufacturing sector paying more (R97 250 per annum) while telecommunications was the least paying (R58 000 per annum). Benner et al (2007) argued that unions make a difference in the call centre industry. They argued that those call centres with unions paid more, with better working conditions and low attrition rate but arguable dropping more calls than their outsourced counterparts. The unionised call centre agents experience slightly more training (12,9 days) compared to the outsourced big call centres (12,7 days).

Within the research reports mentioned above, public sector call centres are only mentioned by Benner et al (2007). They argued that these call centres occupy 9 per cent of the South African call centre environment in 2007. This has definitely changed given the rate at which government's departments and metropolitan municipalities are rolling out call centres as part of their service delivery channels. These call centres they tend to be small, unionised with agents possessing customer interaction discretion as compared to the big outsourced call centres. From a browse of different metropolitan municipalities websites it seems that all seven metropolitan municipalities in South Africa have call centres to respond to customer enquires about the services offered by the metros. It is therefore imperative that South African researchers start detailing the work organisation and employment relations of these call centres. The current study seeks to close this gap by describing and detailing the public sector call centre environment along with its opportunities and challenges within South African labour market.

## **2.7 Conclusion**

Different perspectives have influenced the studies of call centre labour process but the negative perception of call centres (as sweatshops of the digital era) still dominates the debates. The issues regarding alienation, customer orientation, bureaucratic (in)efficiency, emotional labour and technological control have been the source of debates among the Anglo-Saxon industrial sociological studies. However these studies are yet to engage in detail with the complex public sector call centre labour process, which focuses beyond the issues of control or sovereignty of the customer on the frontline.

Despite the similarities and differences between private and public sector call centres, it remains crucial that we detail the contextual uniqueness of the public sector call centres. Public sector call centres provide a unique opportunity to understand the trajectory of work re-organisation within the public sector in the face of changing state functions. Due to the bureaucratic nature within the political environment, public sector call centres focus on both productive and politicised labour rather than on the former only. This is why I find it relevant to combine Weber's rational bureaucracy, Foucault's disciplinary mechanisms along with Marxist labour process theory to develop a full picture of the public sector's bureaucratic and political environment. As Foucault seeks to show how industrial discipline arose out of prison discipline, Weber explains how bureaucratic discipline benefits the capitalist production system. Labour Process Theory provides the most consistent explanation of the social relations at the point of production and why they are structured the way they are.

## Chapter 3

# Theoretical Framework: Labour Process in the Service Sector

### 3.1 Introduction

This chapter forms part of the theoretical background that informs this thesis; it provides an overview of the labour process debates and its challenges. The focus of these debates forms part of the foundation for the service work labour process within the digital era which is the main focus of this chapter. The Labour Process Theory (LPT) continues to be resilient under the changing nature of work as an analytical tool within the study of work. Karl Marx's theory on work continues to be the only consistent theory in studying capital-labour relations though it has been criticised for being redundant. The insertion of *emotional labour* by Hochschild (1983/2003) within the labour process concepts is useful in describing the nature of the call centre labour process. These processes cannot, however, be treated as homogenous as the socio-historical context sometimes shapes how emotional labour is experienced and expressed (Vincent, 2011).

Although this chapter will move between the macro and micro analysis of service work labour process, I shall argue for the resilience of the labour process theory, which needs to be complemented by other analytical tools, as it is especially relevant in the public sector today. Dealing with bureaucratic discipline in modern organisations, Max Weber's theory of rationalisation and efficiency continues to provide an insightful understanding of public work organisation. In exploring the current labour force in call centres, Foucault's industrial discipline metaphor of the panopticon become useful for understanding the worker resistance in these organisations. Despite the postmodern criticisms of the LPT (Sewell and Wilkinson, 1992b; Knights and McCabe, 1998) that argue for the new centre of struggle (identity) rather than capital-labour antagonism, I will maintain the use of Braverman's concepts to understand work organisation in the call centres.

Marsden (1999) saw Marx and Foucault as complementing each other. Marsden proposed a positive interconnectedness between Marx and Foucault, by arguing that "Marx explains why production is organised as it is, Foucault explains how is it organised" (1999: 149).

According to O'Neill (1986) "Foucault's studies on disciplinary society (1978; 1979) may complement Weber's formal analysis of the modern bureaucratic state and economy ..." (42). These tools for analysing the call centre environment co-exist and are interdependent in the public sector, as both the socio-economic, bureaucratic structures, and subjective experiences affect work organisation and employment relationships.

Marx's study of productive and unproductive labour made a link between political economy and public bureaucracy (Goldman and Van Houten, 1977). Despite his focus being the working class and change in its composition, Braverman indirectly referred to bureaucracy when he looked at the 'intermediate' segment of workers within the state sector. Wright (1974) suggested an integration between the Weberian and Marxist theoretical traditions in an attempt to understand the organisational dynamics of the public sector.

Marxists have generally continued to focus on the dynamics and contradictions of a capitalist society seen as a total system, while paying relatively little attention to the organisational dynamics of the state ... Analysts in the Weberian tradition in contrast, have continued to treat organisations in isolation from the social contradictions in which they are embedded (Wright, 1974: 103)

This observation by Wright is part of the bigger theoretical objective of this study to look at the bureaucratic aspects of the labour process and how this affects the organisation of work. To understand the differences in Taylor's concept of efficiency in the shopfloor, requires a look at Max Weber's concept of rationality and efficiency in public bureaucracy.

### **3.2 Efficiency and bureaucracy at work**

In popular and academic discussions, 'efficient' management, labour, administration or public service is the order of the day. It is assumed that there is no need to define the concept as it is deemed to be 'common-sense'; people or organisations are called inefficient or efficient when comparing input to output in terms of resources or money (Wallis, 1989). Efficiency is also associated with productivity whether it is that of the organisation or labour (Baldamus, 1961). To maximise efficiency is the chief purpose of the rational bureaucracy. The ordinary use of the term 'bureaucracy' has a negative connotation, associated, for instance, with a 'slow-moving organisation'. This is particularly applicable when people deal

with public sector administration. The latter is said to be serving people with 'deliberate obstruction and incompetence' and is thus inefficient (Wallis, 1989: 3).

These earlier perceptions of the bureaucracy are different in an academic context. The term is normally associated with the German sociologist, Max Weber, who observed a new way of organising modern societies by arguing that the old types of organising according to charisma and tradition were being displaced by 'rational legal authority' (Weber, 1964). These 'giant machines' are governed by impersonal rules, and procedures that are applied universally, without regard for the personal characteristics of particular individuals, and they are rationally designed to serve some broader purpose (Handel, 2003: 7). Weber recognised the tension between professional civil servant and political authority in public organisations. He argued that professional civil servants would undermine political leaders because of their knowledge of the organisational principles (Weber in Handel, 2003: 10). The rules that govern the work processes ensure a continuous organisation as the officials leave their jobs. This is also ensured through written documentation, contractual arrangements, and qualifications for those holding the positions. This was one of the key processes employed within the capitalist administrative system in an attempt to explain the continued search for an efficient and profitable workforce. Weber argued that bureaucracy, obsessed with power and formalism, views the world as an object to be administered and extends its tentacles as far as it is able to reach. The process of arranging the labour process in an orderly and hierarchical way, controlling the division of labour, is explained as rationalisation, according to Weber, who saw this process not only as part of capitalist organisation but also of an orderly and functional society (Weber, 1964). Hierarchy and control are key features of bureaucracy and help to maintain secrecy. "Secrecy-maintaining activities within bureaucracy and between bureaucracies" seek to control access and flow of information from criticism (Sjoberg and Miller, 1973: 130). This is countered by media 'raptures' that tend to undermine this secrecy and open bureaucracy to public scrutiny. Unhappy people within bureaucracies tend to be used by the media to unravel some of the secrets hidden from the public scrutiny.

... although bureaucracies strive for secrecy about some of activities, they lack the ability and the resources to monitor the flow of information so as to ascertain

whether all the materials being disseminated are consistent with 'official policy', often 'the left hand doesn't know what the right hand is doing'. (Sjoberg, 1973: 133)

The lack of transparency, inefficiency and wasteful hierarchies within the public bureaucracy motivated an attack on the bureaucracy as a system from postmodern thinkers. In spite of the proven false nature of their argument, postmodern thinkers believe that contemporary organisations are 'post bureaucratic' – less hierarchical, team-based and decentralised sources of power. Bureaucracy is said to be stifling innovation and creativity so in this 'postmodern' society many argue there is no need for bureaucracy; hence we see 'de-bureaucratisation' or 'post-bureaucratisation' (Piore and Sabel, 1984; Clegg, 1990; Cooper and Burrell, 1988). This conception of the organisation focuses on the organisation of production rather than the production of organisation (Hassard; 1993). These are sentiments are shared by postmodern inspired theorists (Clegg, 1990) who argue that strong corporate cultures and information networks define the contemporary organisations. This is a result of privatisations, decentralisation, team-based work, horizontal authority, and fluid organisation. However, Thompson (1993: 190) has argued that this is a 'premature' burial of bureaucracy. He argued that more organisations centralise their businesses in terms of "conception and disperse execution around the world". This means, through information technology, senior managers in the organisational head office can plan, control and monitor an organisation from a distance, while production is based on different parts of the world.

Within the public sector the bureaucratic model has come under attack through implementation of 'pro-business' management systems. Bureaucracy was said to be slow and wasteful in delivering services to citizens, hence 'New Public Management' instead of administration (Hughes, 1998). Coupled with the customerisation of frontline work, according to Merck Korczynski (2003b), bureaucracy is now structured to serve the sovereign customer. He argued that both managers and frontline workers are under the 'customer spell' of control which ties efficiency with customer satisfaction. He termed this 'Customer-Oriented Bureaucracy'. Trained to please the customer, the frontline worker now works with the company towards one goal – customer satisfaction. Despite Korczynski's optimism about the empowered frontline worker, he later argued for the contradictions faced by the frontline workers. According to Korczynski, workers have to be both 'customer

friendly' and 'efficient' during interactions with the customer (Korczynski, 1995: 81). The 'discourse of efficiency' in order to expand the market is evident in the public sector when citizens are called customers. This Weberian approach by Korczynski fails to notice the connected nature of this discourse to the neoliberal demands of the workplace which seeks to control the customer and the worker alike. This tends to reduce the capital-labour relations to 'good customer service', designed as means to an end for the accumulation process of capitalist production system (Brook, 2007). This interface between the bureaucracy and customer cannot solely define 'efficiency' of the organisation.

The public sector's understanding of efficiency, as better housing, better quality of water, and so forth could be beneficial for citizens in terms of tax expenditure on social services. Efficiency goes beyond the economic rigidities which make it necessary to investigate physical and non-economic aspects of efficiency. This is why Baldamus (1961: 5) argued that "the social problems of efficiency are ultimately problems of control of human effort" which can be explained beyond economic rationalities. Fischer and Sirianni (1994: 5) argued that "the failure to connect the organisation to the political economy of the larger social and historical context" neglects the interconnected nature of capitalist society and production system in particular.

Criticising Weber for failing to capture the fragmented nature of work and its hierarchical control as part of the bigger capitalist production, "inequality, subordination, conflict and domination" are part of the organisational life which is emphasised by the division of labour (Thompson and McHugh, 2002). The most consistent critique of Weber's bureaucratisation comes from Johnson (1972) who emphasised the omission of the dual function of rationalised bureaucracy (to control and put under surveillance by capital and others). This stressed the need to control the labour force by the capital. Weber assumed that the 'bureaucrats' share a common belief in the importance of obedience to the organisation's requirements. Marx believed in the antagonistic nature of labour process which is said to be absent in the 'ideal-type bureaucracy' as the workers abide by the rules of the organisation. Inevitably, this relationship is shaped by the dialectic of power-resistance as the individuals with agency seek to control the labour power expenditure. This more critical approach to the study of work has been largely influenced by Marx and resuscitated by Harry Braverman.

### **3.3 The Labour Process debates: Harry Braverman**

The Labour Process Theory within the Sociology of Work has been influenced by diverse ideas examined in different debates. Below I will provide an overview of the various debates characterising the Labour Process Theory. Influenced by Marx's conceptions of work which remains the "only true general theory of work" (Abbot, 1993: 205) worth discussing. The study of social relations in the capitalist production system is grounded in *Capital Volume I*, where Marx examined the nature of capitalist labour relations. This has provided the major influence in the study of work, as the *Capital* became the cornerstone for the analysis of work. Labour process is the actual process of the performance of work but Marx described it as comprising three elements: one as purposeful activity, that is work itself; secondly, the object on which work is performed; and thirdly, the instruments of work (Marx in Nichols, 1980). Labour process is not in itself peculiar to capitalism; it is a fundamental condition for human existence. For Marx, labour process is not only about the relationship between Humans and Nature but also concerns interaction among humans, which means it is a social process. He distinguished human labour from that of animals as "conscious and purposive rather than instinctive" (Marx, 1992: 174). Due to the exploitative nature, under capitalism, of the social relations during the production process the relations are inherently antagonistic. The dialectic and antagonist nature of the labour process is the driver of change both within the workplace and society at large. This is directly linked to capital trying to exert control over workers, as bearers of labour-power, which then resist, and thus transform the capitalist production processes. The labour process is "inextricably linked to the struggle for profit production" (Thompson, 1983: 41). The latter is the direct result of the owners of the means of production maximising on surplus extraction from those who strive to maximise wages (sellers of labour power).

The ultimate outcome for capital-labour relations is profit which seeks to degrade work and reduce pay through fragmentation of tasks in almost all occupations. The understanding of the capitalist labour process is imperative in the study of work as it challenges the 'managerialist' rhetoric about the worker satisfaction and individualism on the 'shopfloor', guided by human resource principles. The dynamic and historical nature of the Labour Process Theory provided the basis for the understanding of capitalist social relations, which means the production process is both about material and social relations. LPT focuses on

three immanent capitalist labour process laws which include the separation of intellectual and manual labour, hierarchical control and fragmentation of labour (deskilling) (Thompson, 2010: 9). The ultimate goal is control of the labour process through coercive (and later indirect) force mechanisms.

After 40 years of *Labour and Monopoly Capital* by Harry Braverman, we still witness the tendencies and trends of the capitalist production system in terms of reduction of skills, income and occupations. His subject was the study of “the structure of working class, and the manner in which it had changed” (Braverman, 1974: 3): this included income, skills and occupational shifts within the capitalist society. Braverman situated his critique of capital at the centre of his ‘degradation of work’ thesis. Central to his thesis, is the understanding of the nature and transformation of labour power under capitalism. Braverman sought to understand work from the structural perspective in contrast to his predecessors who individualised work (Elton Mayo and his Human Relations School of thought). He believed that the subjective experiences of workers in the capitalist production system had ‘objective roots’. It should be noted that Braverman’s concern was not the degradation of skill in the entire society but “the structure of working class and how it has changed” (Braverman, 1974: 3). His objective was political in nature and he tried to understand the ‘process of occupational change’ under the then myths of up-skilling by the increased technological revolution.

Rooted in the Marxist understanding of the political economy, Braverman explained the world of work and its degradation tendencies in the expansion of capitalism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Braverman revived this Marxist conception of work in his monumental *Labour and Monopoly Capital* (1974) which continues to endure in the critical understanding of the world of work today. Building from the Marxist notion of work as ‘conscious and purposive action’ he maintained that this intelligent exercise is distinctive to humankind. At the heart of human work is “conception that precedes execution but the idea as conceived by one can be executed another. The driving force of labour remains human consciousness” (Braverman, 1974: 51). This formed the starting point of Braverman’s analysis of capitalist social relations at work. It is only under the capitalist production system where the capacity to work is purchased and sold under a contractual agreement. In the purchase of labour power, the capitalist buys an unrealised potential which comes with difficulties. This point of

'indeterminacy of labour power' poses a challenge for the translation of the capacity to work to actual performance of work. The latter sets in motion the labour process to create use value and profit. At the centre of Braverman's analysis, he seeks to show how the "labour process had become dominated and shaped by the accumulation of capital" (Cohen, 1987) rather than production of use value. This forms the centre of Cohen's (1987) defence of Braverman's analysis of work. She argued that control has always been perceived to be central by all the major LPT writers neglecting valorisation: "In fact, Braverman's primary concern is not with 'control' or even deskilling<sup>6</sup> *per se*, but with the specifically capitalist logic which constructs these tendencies" (36). It then becomes the imperative of the capitalist to control the expenditure of labour power as the possession of the latter does not guarantee productivity. Discussing in detail the difference between social division of labour and detailed division of labour, Braverman saw the latter as the essential principle governing 'all forms of work in capitalist society, no matter what setting or at what hierarchical level' (1974: 82).

This breakdown of tasks into minute elements ensures cheap labour power at the same time "destroying all-around skills where they exist" (Braverman, 1974: 57). This fragmentation of tasks was perfected by Fredrick Taylor's scientific management within modern workplaces. Critical of Taylor, Braverman saw the removal of knowledge from the shopfloor to managers; separation of conception and execution; and monopoly of knowledge by the managers as sources of degradation of labour. Braverman (1974: 115) argued that "separation of conception from execution was not limited to manual and mental labour divide, but also mental labour (in itself) was subjected to the same principles". The break of the unit of labour process formed the cornerstone of capitalist control over the labour power. Frederick Taylor's vision was for the low skilled and poorly trained workers to be able to run the machines previously run by highly skilled workers. To cheapen the labour costs, managers are then expected to plan and communicate their plans in the form of 'minute tasks' to the workers. This ensures degeneration of human labour to

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<sup>6</sup> Adesina (1988: 91) argued that "deskilling represents one of the worse cases of mis-reading in the LPT. Braverman never used it, and as far as I can gather deskilling is an invention of Elger (1977, 1979, 1982). Few if any of those who read Braverman from the point of view of the analysis of skill, have ever engaged with his Chapter 20: 'A Final Note on Skill' (1974)'. In this study, I acknowledge that Braverman never used the term and I use 'deskilling' term in inverted commas throughout my study to illustrate this point.

the level of an animal as conceptualisation forms the distinctive feature of human work. This ultimately will lead to massive numbers of proletariat jobs in every industry and occupation.

The separation of mental and manual is further subdivided into minute tasks in order to control the production process and thus deskill the worker. This means the labour process is then organised by the capitalist with labour itself becoming part of capital. This was part of scientific management's 'pre-planning and pre-calculation' of all elements of the labour process. 'Deskilling' the job tasks, division of labour and monopolisation of knowledge by the managerial staff meant a coordinated control over the labour process.

### **3.4 Control and resistance**

Inserting individual resistance and subjectivity into the labour process by Braverman was the work of Andrew Friedman, Michael Burawoy, Richard Edwards and Paul Thompson. Influenced by Herbert Marcuse (*One-Dimensional Man*, 1964 reprinted in 2002) these authors thought they were reconciling control with consent, inserting the neglected informal nature of workplace relations on the shop floor, but this created a 'value-less' debate around Labour and Monopoly Capital (LMC) (Spencer, 2000: 229). Adesina (1988) has argued for the misinterpretation of labour and work by the labour processes scholars engaging in the debate. He argued that "Cressey and MacInnes (1980) misinterpreted Real and Formal Subsumption of Labour as the total subordination of worker" (1988: 89). This substitution of 'labour by worker' meant that labour process debates focused on the latter rather than work in itself, as Braverman focused on these objective work structures changing the forms of work. This focus on the individual worker rather than 'work' was to appear later in the labour process debates as the 'missing subject' which was embraced by the then Left radicals who sought to emphasise Marcuse's (2002: xxvii) notion of "free and creative subject ... who stands in opposition to an object-world". The emphasis on resistance comes from this lost sense of individuality and self-determination by structures and the objective world. These conceptions of LMC paved the way to a misunderstanding of Braverman's (1974) focus which was the study of work and changing forms of occupation in 21<sup>st</sup> century American production system. The focus of the 'worker' rather than 'objective conditions of work' twisted the debate from onset (Thompson, 1989). In his introduction Braverman (1974: 27) addressed this issue:

There are those who hope to discover, in some quick and simple manner, a replacement for the 'blue-collar workers' as an 'agency for social change,' to use the popular phrases. It is my feeling, to put it bluntly, that this constitutes an attempt to derive the 'science before science' and I have tried to dismiss such preoccupations from my mind on the theory that what is needed first of all is a picture of the working class as it exists, as the shape given to the working population by the capital accumulation process.

The failure to understand the collective resistance of work by Thompson and Ackroyd (1995) considered this perpetual endorsement of 'individual subject' at the centre of the debate. In dealing with alienation and exploitation, workers were now "using individualised forms of resistance-misbehaviour" (Thompson and Ackroyd, 1995) which reduces alienation to dissatisfaction with work.

Ackroyd and Thompson (1999: 47) came from the understanding that "control can never be absolute and in the space provided by the indeterminacy of labour, employees will constantly find ways of evading and subverting managerial organisation and direction of work. This tendency is the major source of dynamism within the workplace". This persistent message about the worker 'agency' in the shopfloor contributed to the limited understanding of Braverman's thesis. The focus on control, resistance, and consent was at the heart of first response to LMC by Friedman, Edwards and Burrawoy.

Andrew Friedman's *Industry and Labour: Class Struggle at Work and Monopoly Capitalism* (1977) elaborated on the labour process and went beyond the coercive nature of control to exploring the indirect forms of control. He argued for the concrete micro analysis of labour process which illustrated different forms of worker resistance. He differentiated between direct (coercive) control and 'responsible autonomy'. The two are differentiated according to the central and periphery approach of dividing workers where managers give discretion and job security to the white collar workers. The latter enjoy the 'responsible autonomy' rather than periphery workers (unskilled and semi-skilled manual workers) who submit to direct forms of control. These systematic divisions amongst the working class are a major method to cope with uncertainties of capitalist mode of production. However, Friedman (1977: 108) noted that these divisions do not "eradicate the fundamental contradictions of

the capitalist production". Friedman contributed to the understanding of the micro and subjective understandings of labour process within the LPT debates.

Richard Edwards' *Contested Terrain: The transformation of the workplace in the Twentieth Century* (1979) also centred an approach around 'active subjects' as he argued for the 'contested' nature of workplace control. He criticised Braverman's lack of acknowledgement of the union's role in the labour process and thus class struggle. Edwards believed that worker resistance had been omitted and resulted in the elevation of managerial perspective in determining the workplace politics. Defining control as the "ability of capitalist/managers to obtain desired work behaviour from workers" (1979: 17), Edwards saw the workplace as the site of class struggle with the dialectical conflict at the centre of the accumulation of capital. His understanding of the individual subject contributed to his discussion on different forms of control based on "immediate work processes and detailed control" (see Spencer, 2000).

Through class conflict at work and resistance from the workers, managers sought to revolutionise the labour process through different forms of control (Simple, Technical and Bureaucratic control). Edwards argued that every stage of capital accumulation produces (sometimes in combination) a certain form of control. For example, when firms are small, employers tend to enforce the direct forms of control – simple control. The second one emerges when the machines directly control the pace of work with supervisors ensuring that everyone works. Technical control ensures that power is vested in the machine rather than the supervisor and "the power relations are more invisible" (Edwards in Fischer and Sirriani, 1994: 103). The last form of control is bureaucratic control which is based on the job rules, requirements, criteria and work procedures. This form of institutionalised power ensured that top managers determined the rules, criteria and procedures and thus control over the whole enterprise. According to Edwards this form of control exists alongside the simple and sometimes technical control. He argued that Braverman's focus on 'technical' processes of work undermines the power of social relations which shape the workplace processes which are in turn shaped not only by technology but also by "imperatives of appropriating surplus labour". This individualised understanding of LMC was continued by Michael Burawoy in 1979 and 1985.

Michael Burawoy's *Manufacturing Consent: Changes in the Labour Process under Monopoly Capitalism* (1979) argued for the focus on individual subjective experiences of work at the point of production. His outright insertion of the subjective worker in Braverman's LMC claimed to challenge Marx and Braverman's shortcomings through the study of a single case of a large unionised modern corporation. He focused on consent rather than coercion as a means of control. His central argument was on the 'negotiated outcome' rather than direct control which shapes the social relations at work thus locking the workers in the capitalist mode of production. The most important way of manufacturing consent according to Burawoy was through shopfloor activities termed as 'games' especially that of 'making out'. These games insert the worker as an individual in the labour process rather than as a member of a class. In Burawoy's *The Politics of Production* (1985) he went further to highlight conditions during which consent is gained in a unionised large cooperation like Allied Corporation. Arguing that Marx "never conceptualised the 'political apparatuses of the production process'", he was describing the "particular type of regime – market despotism" (Burawoy, 1983: 588). The latter is controlled by the market conditions where worker dependence on wages leads to subordination. According to Burawoy (1983) Marx failed to realise different conditions in which different forms of despotisms prevailed.

Differentiating between 'hegemonic factory regimes and despotic regimes' Burawoy argued that the latter was produced in a condition where unions, welfare and internal labour markets were absent resulting in workers being dependent on wage and market competition. These forms of regimes were most relevant in early capitalism where coercion was dominant. In the quest for profit, capital intensified work which gave rise to under consumption and considerable resistance from workers and resulted in state regulation of the employment relationship. These despotic regimes are characterised by consent over coercion; they "must be replaced by hegemonic regimes in which consent prevails, although never to the exclusion of coercion" (Burawoy, 1983: 590). These regimes vary from country to country and depend on the state regulation and welfare system. These variations are evident within advanced capitalism too, as each sector differs according to market competition in order to balance coercion and consent. Despite the original and insightful nature of his work, Burawoy was criticised for his non-dialectic and less contradictory approach by Clawson and Fantasia (1979: 671): "He offers, what is in effect a version of elite

theory, in which all events strengthen the control of capital”; this then incorporates workers into the system of capitalist exploitation. Clawson and Fantasia further argued that Burawoy neglected the external coercion necessary to preserve control and its limits. In his last paragraph on the habituation of the worker, Braverman argued that

... manipulation is primary and coercion is held in reserve – except that this manipulation is the product of powerful economic forces, major corporate employment and bargaining policies, and the inner workings and evolution of the system of capitalism itself and, not primarily of the clever schemes of labour relations experts. (1974: 104)

It is this broad understanding of the labour relations background that seeks to manipulate the worker rather than ‘consent’ as Burawoy (1979) would like to believe. Despite his emphasis on the subjective nature of the labour process though under (objective) oppression, Burawoy and other labour process writers failed to recognise the initial purpose and objective prompted by Braverman (1974). The insertion of subjectivity in Braverman’s thesis distorted his argument in trying to explain the ‘objective conditions of work’ which give rise to subjective consequences of work.

Braverman’s focus on the ‘objective conditions of work’ mentioned the subjective experiences of work which were never opposed to each other, despite beliefs to the contrary by some. “Structure is no longer opposed to agency” (O’Doherty and Willmott, 2009: 947); this is a reflection of browsing through LMC without an in-depth understanding of Braverman’s entire thesis. Braverman (1974: 27) foresaw this so-called neglect of subjectivity as a ‘self-imposed limitation’ which sought to go beyond the ‘dissatisfaction’ at work but studied the content of the capitalist production system in order to understand ‘work itself’, not the effects of capitalism on the subjective experience of workers.

This self-imposed limitation to the ‘objective’ content of class and the omission of the ‘subjective’ will, I fear, hopelessly compromise this study in the eyes of some of those who float in the conventional stream of social science. For them, by long habit and insistent theory, class does not really exist outside its subjective manifestations. (Braverman, 1974: 27)

When Burawoy (1985) argued that “we must investigate the conditions under which the interests of labour and capital actually become antagonistic. In short we must go beyond Marx” (29), it opened a niche for the post-structuralist criticism of Braverman, where subjectivity and identity became the centre of struggle. This group emphasised the ‘indeterminacy of subjectivity’ as opposed to ‘indeterminacy of labour’ where identity becomes a new centre of struggle within the workplace. This analyses the workplace as individualised and consumption based rather than as associated with class and collective forms. This cultural turn on the study of work was mainly endorsed by the postmodern thinkers influenced by Foucault (David Knights and Hugh Willmott).

Criticised further for overemphasising degradation of labour without acknowledging the re-skilling of other occupations, this seems to be a two-way direction of looking at capital accumulation. This linear and deterministic model of the degradation process, without allowing a process where workers were challenged to improve their skills and recapture conception and execution of work, was the cornerstone of the second wave of the debates (Burawoy, 1979; Knights, 1990). This ‘unilinear’ movement was challenged by Gartman (1999: 95) who argued this process within the manufacturing industry was fraught with “contradictions between economic imperative of production and cultural imperatives of consumption”.

This perceived ‘one dimensional and objectivist economism’ according to Isaac and Christiansen (2012) is an unfair criticism of Braverman (1974) who stated from the first chapter that his intentions were not to capture the subjective experience of workers but the objective roots of such experiences. Braverman did not render the workers as ‘powerless subjects and gave everything to monopoly capital’ as some have suggested (Isaac and Christiansen, 2012: 115). Braverman believed in the revolutionary potential of the working class as evidenced in his response to such criticism below.

Some readers have concluded, chiefly on the evidence of my description of a process of ‘degradation of labour’, that I myself am pessimistic about the future of working class consciousness. But if readers will take trouble to compare, they will find that wording which I have used to describe the effects of capitalist mode of production on the physical, moral, and mental constitution of the working population differs

from the Marx's only in being milder ... But neither Marx nor Engels considered themselves pessimists on that account; on the contrary, they found in this unremitting assault of capital upon the humanity of labour the precondition for revolt ... I have every confidence in the revolutionary potential of working class. (Braverman, [1976 in] 1998: 315)

Critics have also highlighted the issue of 'time' as the major flaw in Braverman's thesis. They argued that Braverman was fixated with "teleological conception of time, where scientific management is seen as the decisive moment which changed the capitalist production forever" (Isaac and Christiansen, 2012: 116). This also tends to define time inaccurately as Braverman (1974 [1998]) himself referred to time as a "social, historical concept not a purely chronological one" (315, Appendix 1). This means time was presented as a more "complex, involving frequent shifts, setbacks and transformations" rather than as linear and chronological as critics seem to suggest (Spencer, 2000: 227).

Finally, one enduring critique was the portrayal of the labour process as one form without taking into account the issues of race and gender in affecting the production processes. In supplementing Braverman's thesis, Adesina (1991) argued that the context specific labour process theory provides more relevance in understanding variation of work organisation especially in peripheral contexts. This seems to extend the understanding of degradation of work through the peripheral contexts. In his defence of Marx's 'wage theory' Braverman (1958: 3) argued that "to defend Marx's description of conditions which brought this law brought about in his own day as true description of present conditions would be nothing less than dogmatism raised to frenzy". Braverman (1958) went further to argue that the trouble is not "original error but uncorrected obsolescence". This spoke directly to Altmann, Kohler and Meil's (1992) notion of the socio-cultural embedded nature of labour process in which different nations organise work differently, hence there is no 'universal labour process'. With an emphasis on an advanced economies labour process, Braverman never suggested the universalised notion of labour process. This is why Smith and Thompson (1998: 566) later cautioned against overstating national differences "where structural essentials, such as wage labour, unemployment, wage-effort bargaining and conflicts inscribe a limited repertoire of roles and parts for those on this particular stage". Finally they argued that both micro and macro analysis of work are dependent on the particular

researcher to make sure that international structural and localised specific forms of work organisation are coherent. Acknowledging the limitations of using the LPT only to study the current forms of work, Thompson and Smith (2009: 926) argued that this theoretical framework remains resilient in unpacking the capitalist labour dynamics and further welcomed the economic sociology perspectives to understand the multi-layered nature of work and employment relationships. LPT proves to be resilient in explaining the changes in the service and knowledge work (Warhurst, Thompson and Nickson, 2008; Thompson and Smith, 2009) but also requires corrections and additions to suit current working conditions. Braverman (1958: 5) has suggested the same to the critics of Marx's theory of wage by arguing "if the thought is right then the trouble lies not in original error but uncorrected obsolescence, then the job is not to see where Marx was wrong so much as to make fresh application of his theory to the world around us, as it is once was". This resonates with the understanding of the service work labour process which needs to be based on the movement of capitalist economy rather than re-emphasising the 'agency centred' labour process.

### **3.5 Braverman in South Africa**

The use of Harry Braverman's concepts needs to be contextualised and some (Glenn, 1992) have tended to apply them without properly understanding the thesis of LMC text or the South African context used in their analysis. Glenn (1992) tried to apply Braverman's thesis by solely focusing on technology as 'deskilling' and therefore proving Braverman 'wrong' when she found that few female workers from the bank she interviewed 'enjoyed' their work and found computers 'challenging' rather than 'deskilling'. I will not challenge Glenn (1992) here as I have argued above that Braverman's thesis was beyond 'deskilling' through technology. In Chapter 6 of LMC Braverman discussed the habituation of the worker beyond Taylorism. In her attempt to apply Braverman to South Africa one would have expected Glenn (1992) to describe the specific context in which 'degradation of work' was NOT taking place. As noted earlier in Chapter 1 of this thesis, class and race structures in South African are two 'evils' that cannot be separated (Magubane, 2000). The South African labour process has been characterised by its racial character which stems from the forced migrant labour system and transformation of the African peasants into wage workers during the discovery of diamonds and later gold in the 18<sup>th</sup> century around Johannesburg. The class

struggle in South African urban areas was promoted by the monopoly capital of the English and Dutch imperialist (Magubane, 2000: 469-472). The peculiar racial form of South African capitalism resulted from this social context. The sale of labour power was intrinsically linked to the colour of the labourer, not the skill. This racial character of the capitalist system meant African workers joined the labour market as the 'deskilled' performing routine and boring tasks at work. Conception as part of the labour process was never conceived by the racist and sexist capitalist system as part of the blacks and women labour process. It is this racial, class and gendered structure that shapes the experience of the labour process in South Africa, which means Braverman needs to be complemented by looking at the socio-historical context in its application to South Africa.

Edward Webster's book *Cast in a Racial Mould: Labour Process and Trade Unionism in the Foundries* (1985) was based on this racialised character of the South African workplace where division of labour was based on colour and therefore motivated 'agency' from the black workers to form their own trade unions. It was Karl Von Holdt's book *Transition from Below* (2003) that designed sociological theoretical concepts to analyse the racial character of power relations in the South African workplace through the concept of 'Apartheid Workplace Regime'. According to Von Holdt (2003) this regime was dominated by racial division of labour with monopolisation of skill and managerial positions by whites. This meant technical positions and skilled jobs were considered to be 'white' jobs. Black workers constituted the mass unskilled and held routinised jobs as labourers. Racial assaults were considered to be 'oil' in the machinery of the apartheid workplace. The second feature of the apartheid workplace was the racialised structures of power. This defined racial employment relations between the 'white supervisors' and 'black labourers' who were 'servants' of any white person, regardless of position in the hierarchy: "Not all whites were managers. However, any white had the right to issue instructions to any black" (Von Holdt, 2003: 31). This racial labour market meant that blacks and women were at the bottom of the ladder and thus experienced the worst forms of working conditions. As Kenny (2005) illustrated in the food retail sector, this 'baaskap' mentality has empowered the customer to shout insults at the frontline workers. It is these kind of working conditions that have shaped the labour process of the South African labour market. When blacks and women were joining the labour market, they performed mostly the dirty jobs without security or

skill apart from emotional labour. This was a skill required to survive racial insults given to domestic workers, gardeners, mineworkers, factory workers, clerks, and so forth.

### **3.6 Emotional labour and aesthetic labour**

Braverman (1974: 206) noted that "... not only the material and service needs (of the population) but even the emotional patterns of life must be channelled through the market". This refers to the services which were normally performed by "family, friends, community, elders, children" to amuse and care without any profit motive. Braverman noted that ultimately these will be paid for as their services will be commercialised to bring the 'heart' into the market. Though he never referred to emotional labour per se the above statement shows that he was aware of the 'body and the heart' being ultimately part of the production process.

The second wave of labour process writers including Warhurst and Thompson (1998: 10) have accepted the need to conceptualise the additional skills required within the (consumption) service sector (emotional and aesthetic labour) by the LPT in order to capture the service sector dynamics in its shift towards less technical skills. In the interactive service sector one central aspect is the emotional labour which clearly does not fit neatly into the classic manual/mental divide. This commercialisation and rationalisation of feelings extended the definition of skill in the service sector. The inclusion of the emotional labour concept from service interactive work has helped in moving the labour process debates from merely combining technology and old Taylorism. Although traditional clerical workers could do their job competently and hate their work and who they worked with, interactive work service workers have to pretend to at least care about and enjoy what they do (MacDonald and Sirriani, 1996). Smiles are part of the labour process, 'a part that requires her to coordinate self and feeling so that her work seems effortless' (Hochschild, 2003: 8). The focus on the "body control" through emotional labour and aesthetic labour seems to unveil the different practices of labour control beyond economic logic inscribed in capital accumulation (Lan, 2001: 85).

#### **3.6.1 Emotional labour**

Emotional labour refers to "the management of feeling to create publicly observable facial and bodily display; emotional labour is sold for wages and therefore has an exchange value" (Hochschild, 2003: 7). Emotional labour does not differentiate between the types of jobs as

secretaries, waiter/waitress, sales man, tour guide, politicians, social workers, receptionist, debt collectors etc. All are engaged in the emotional labour one way or the other. Emotional labour can be both stressful and satisfying at the same time, but organisations stress the positive expression of the emotional labour regardless of the worker's feelings for the day. Positive expression of emotional labour benefits the organisations as the customers will be happy and thus profit the organisation. Hochschild (1983[2003]) is undoubtedly the key figure behind the term 'emotional labour'. Studying flight attendants she argued that service work involved deep and surface acting, which simply means emotional management. Derived from Goffman's dramaturgy, Williams (2003) argued that emotional labour becomes the part of cultural performance. This means episodes through which members construct organisational reality. This performance includes both task (smiling, greeting, eye contact and thanking) and personal rituals (negotiation), which contribute to the behaviour of the abusive customer.

This commodification of human emotions goes beyond physical and mental harmfulness of work to accept that this emotional dissociation of workers from their work is 'alienating'. Referring to "man's estrangement from nature and from himself", Marx's concept has influenced Hochschild's concept of alienation. Though she referred only to two forms of alienation (self and product), Hochschild's thesis can be expanded to the rest of Marx's four dimensions of alienation – self, product, *species-being* and from other humans (Brook, 2009). Workers are not involved in directing the content, quantity and final product of their labour; this is determined by the need to accumulate more by the capitalist. According to Marx, work becomes a source of physical survival when workers are detached to meaning and purpose of work-self-estrangement. Hochschild argued that "when the product is a smile, a mood, a feeling or a relationship, it comes to belong more to the organisation and less to the self" (quoted in Brook, 2009: 15). This means, therefore, that workers give control of their feelings to the company which can produce 'surface and deep acting'. Through internalising the latter, workers become 'emotionally dissonant' when the act becomes real (Hochschild, 2003: 132).

Workers are alienated from the "production process as this does not offer any form of satisfaction to himself" (Meszaros, 2005: 15). Echoing Braverman (1974), Hochschild argued that the increasing rationalisation and standardisation of work tends to impersonalise and

deskill the labour process. Training on how to deal with irate customers undermines the ability of the worker to deal with an irate customer. This means there is no sense of self-expression and self-development at work.

Despite being labelled as offering a 'half-made theory of alienation', Brook (2009) argued that Hochschild's conceptualisation of emotions at an individual lens can be extended and integrated with Marx's remaining two dimensions of alienation (Brook, 2009: 18). Alienation from being a member of 'human species' simply refers to what distinguishes humans from animals, as human beings need to conceptualise and execute work and develop themselves and their communities. The fact that private and public emotions are being blurred by the commercialisation of feelings, Brook (2009) said, symbolises alienation from *species-being*. This is the result of the internalised 'deep acting' from work to home environment, hence Hochschild argued that emotional labour alienation is as harmful as physical and mental alienation as workers go beyond the workplace.

The final dimension of alienation for Marx refers to estrangement from the relationship with other human beings. "Individuals also relate to each other in society as objectified bearers of the commodities that they produce, possess and consume" (Brook, 2009: 20). These economic relations are now enhanced by the 'myth of the sovereign customer'. Though Hochschild does not refer to this form of alienation, Brook (2009) noted this in her observation of flight attendants as part of 'disposable things' if the company makes it irrelevant. Meszaros' (2005: 35) concept of "saleability – meaning the conversion of everything into things so they could appear as commodities on the market" is also useful in explaining 'production of customer service' where human beings relate to each other as isolated individuals based on economic possession.

This is the basis of the antagonistic nature of the work relationship which then divides society into classes based on different life chances and privileges. Through competition for labour market opportunities, workers themselves get to be divided according to sex, age, ethnicity and so forth. Ultimately alienation is not only about dissociation from product or society; it is about 'powerlessness' of the worker towards his/her life (Rinehart, 1993: 11-18).

Bolton (2005: 63) argued that “Hochschild fails to recognise the indeterminacy of labour, which is further exacerbated within the contested terrain of the emotional labour”. This means that workers in the interactive services have agency in ‘managing’ their emotional labour, thus she terms it ‘emotional management’. Frontline workers have proved to be more than mere passive service providers; with the manipulation of emotional labour they can influence the conversation and resist the control management imposed on them.

Hochschild (2003) has managed to link gender and emotional labour but argued less about the racialised nature of emotional labour. She exposed the sexual harassment suffered by mainly the female flight attendants rather than their male counterparts. The use of their femininity was a source of exploitation and harassment from rude customers. Choosing the term ‘labour’, Hochschild arguably brings in the subordination and exploitative nature of social relations within the commercialisation of feelings. These ‘cultural performances’ tend to be gendered as the sexuality tends to conform with societal “expected norms of acting” (Williams, 2003).

Emotional labour has been criticised for its racial silences and universalising ‘whiteness’ within the service work (Mirchandani, 2005). This was taken further by Chong (2009) who asked the question about who performs the emotional labour which has a bearing in the experience of work in itself. Social location within unequal power realities of each society affects how work is experienced. Using the interlocking concepts of race, class and gender, she argued for the hierarchies in the emotional labour performance. MacDonald and Merrill (2008) used the concept of ‘emotional proletariat’ to refer to service jobs (waitressing, hotel desk clerk, exercise instructor, child minder, etc.) occupied mainly by black women and Latino women in America. These jobs include inequality within the interactive service jobs (by voice or face to face). They discovered that mostly white women employed at the bottom of the interactive service industry are students; black women remain trapped here. Despite the educational differences, these authors also discovered in face-to-face interactions, white women occupied most interactive service jobs, especially in dental hygiene services. The interconnected nature of server and service makes the ‘personal qualities’ of the worker more important as constructed by the organisation and nature of service provided.

This means emotional labour cannot be evaluated only along economic lines but also cultural and ethnic lines (MacDonald and Merrill, 2008: 122). Ultimately, gender, class, race and age affect whether workers produce the expected emotional labour and how much of it. As part of her critique on the concept of emotional labour, Chong (2009) argued that the identity of customers or service workers influences the experience of the customer service, and thus the expression of the emotional labour. This was observed by Sallaz (2009) in his ethnographic study of the Post-Apartheid South African leisure resort workplace, where he noticed the racialised restrictions on the expression of emotional labour in an attempt to satisfy a customer. Management sought to remove black workers from the customer service equation by arguing for 'physical' representation of their organisation. Though some (Frenkel et al., 1999) have criticised Hochschild by arguing for the satisfaction and enjoyable nature of emotional labour, this important term will still be used throughout this study in understanding the emotional aspects of the call centre labour process.

Contrary to popular views about Braverman as focusing only on 'mental and physical alienation' of work, before he died in 1976, Braverman acknowledged that 'alienation of labour' has been misused to refer to "worker(s) who suffer from feelings of distress" without taking into context its use by Marx. This means the labourer as a whole becomes alienated rather than 'distressed' or 'dissatisfied' by a certain job. He argued that alienation refers to transfer of ownership of means of production, labour process and product from the labourer to owners of means of production. "In the end, everything about the productive process becomes alien to the worker in the sense that everything is outside his or her interests, claim, and control – the wage becomes the sole equity of the worker in the job" ([1975 in] 1998: 317). To separate emotions from the worker (being) creates a false and inappropriate division within the labourer's body. This means emotional alienation should not be separated from the totality of alienation as it is originally conceived by Marx.

### **3.6.2 Aesthetic labour**

Capitalist organisations do not only control the feelings of the employees but also their appearance. Though some have seen this as a new concept, 'aesthetic labour' was performed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by models. The commodification of 'looks' is not a new concept as McKinlay (2002) described in the 19<sup>th</sup> century banking industry in Scotland. Aesthetic labour was also defined in terms of class and gender as the banking industry

recruited according to “family background, character, ability, manners, education, appearance and general health” (McKinlay, 2002: 600). Recruited mainly from the middle class, self-discipline and appearance were the main reasons for promotion. Age forms part of aesthetic labour as the organisations in service work or manual work recruit a person ‘who looks the part’. This is found to be interconnected with race, class and gender as the customer ‘perceptions’ matter to the organisations for their profit. Both the identity of the worker and socially structured identities connect to produce an organisationally desired ‘look’ for profit motive.

Acknowledging the limitations of LPT in understanding the lived experiences of workers within the service work sector, Taylor (1998) argued that LPT continues to inform the structural analysis of the emotional labour as employer-employee relations still entail exploitation for surplus value because emotional exploitation comes from the intense competition within the service sector. Secondly, the logic of accumulation forces the capitalist production to revolutionise the production process. This means changes within the service sector that demands that emotional labour is part of the changes within the production process operating within the capitalist logic. Thirdly, the control imperative shapes the capital-labour relations, regardless of team work and ‘consent’ within the teams. This then leads to the ‘inherent’ antagonistic relations between capital and labour even though they might be concealed through individualised performance rewards. The indeterminacy of labour still pervades the emotional labour though employers have standardised work to do away with uncertainty of labourers. This means then that managerial control is not ‘total’ within the service sector, as the workers resist in different ways especially when they are not being supervised (Taylor, 1998).

The lack of total control over labour is a ‘double-edged sword’ for the profit motive, which gives workers too much power in the customer-worker contact rather than taking it away through high levels of surveillance. The major criticisms of the labour process theory came from the postmodern approach influenced by the works of Michael Foucault. David Knights and Hugh Willmott (1989) were the main proponents of this idea of work, which associated the workplace struggle with ‘identity’ not the capital-labour relations. This postmodern understanding argued for the demise in the collective resistance of work. The issues of

power, control and resistance were now located within the organisation rather than attached to the bigger political economy.

### **3.7 Surveillance and subjectivity: Michel Foucault**

In his monumental work *Discipline and Punish: The Rise of the Prison* (1977), Michel Foucault has contributed a different perspective on the organisation and control of work. Coming from his preoccupation with micropolitics of power and technologies of power in the workplace, this text embodies the question of how to organise movement, in space and through time. Though he never directly addressed the issues of production Foucault referred to disciplinary practices and how they created 'order and power effects' (Townley, 1993: 523). He argued for the exercise of power in various institutions which serves to measure, monitor, assess, contrasts and examines us as individuals. Through this process the individuals are rendered more accessible and calculable and thus manageable. Though he does not regard himself as a postmodern thinker, Foucault has, in the main, influenced the ideas and foundations of postmodern understanding of organisations and work. Burrell (2006) argued that postmodernism concerns itself less about 'organisation of production' and more with 'production of organisation'. 'What produces the organisation we witness every day?' is the question. Explaining how the body was disciplined from the seventeenth century to modern societies, Foucault argues that space partitioning and immobilisation of those with plague and isolation was the strategy in earlier times. This gave rise to modern disciplinary projects where power was invisible but effective through self-discipline. Using the metaphor of Jeremy Bentham's architectural design of a prison, Foucault described the 'perfect control' through all gazing surveillance and thus the concept of self-discipline of the prison.

According to Bentham the effectiveness of this design lay in the indivisibility and unverifiable nature of power. The panopticon is used to describe the organisation of space and how control is individualised through an 'unseen' gaze. Inducing constant fear of being seen without seeing, panopticon guarantees order in the prison, school, and hospital and at work. By the virtue of individualised cells, there is no collective action that can be planned to escape the institutions: "No chatter, no noise, no waste of time; if they are workers ... a collective effect is abolished and replaced by a collection of separated individualities" (Foucault, 1977: 201). The latter means the individualisation and partitioning of space so as

to supervise and control perfectly. The fragmentation of the collective into single and individualised cells makes it easier for close supervision.

This has been used to explain the organisational setting within the capitalist organisations by Sewell and Wilkinson (1992), Zuboff (1988), and others to render the machine the perfect capitalist eye that 'disempowers the worker resistance'. "Work has been organised in such a way that employees consent to be subject to a system of surveillance which they know will immediately identify their divergence from norms and automatically trigger sanction or approval" (Sewell and Wilkinson, 1992: 110). This has led to the intensification of labour process on the shopfloor, with "workers losing even the awareness of their own self-exploitation" (Bain and Taylor, 2000: 4).

McKinlay (2002) traced the power of self-discipline and adherence to organisational authority in the Victorian banking system in Scotland and argued that aesthetic labour was produced and cultured by the organisation as early as the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Using Foucault's concept of disciplinary regimes and dispersed power, he found that recruitment and promotion was based not only in technical understanding of the job but also appearance and 'self-discipline' imposed by unexpected inspectors and peer pressure. Quoting the previous bank directors, McKinlay noted "probity of character, urbanity, a refined and courteous bearing and speech, and a cultured mind, were the signs of ideal banker" (2002: 608). These characteristics were part of the 'bureaucratic gaze' which sought to discipline the employees within the organisation. This was instilled by the unexpected continuous and intimate forms of surveillance through inspectors. The emphasis on lack of 'direct control' but self-discipline by employees has been a centre of contention between the second wave LPT proponents and postmodern theorists. The 'lack' of resistance by the employees in this 'totalising self-surveillance system' was heavily contested by many LPT followers who argued for the 'indeterminacy of labour' even under surveillance (Taylor and Bain, 2000).

Sewell and Wilkinson (1992) elaborated on an electronic panopticon but Hyman (2006) saw this as an extension of Marx's analysis of capital labour relations, rather than something 'new'. In effect Bain and Taylor argued that "the organisation of labour process [in the call centre] reflects the very nature of the employment relationship under capitalism and cannot simply be treated as a site of disciplinary power" (2000: 5) as bodies are geared towards

profit maximising rather than discipline. The latter is said to be the means to an end rather than end in itself. This is supported by Thompson and Ackroyd (1995) when they argued that distinction between discipline and control needs to be clear. The former is said to be self-regulation despite the potential to resist. The panopticon is intended for greater productivity and does not necessarily translate into 'total control' as the workers resist through high turnover and absence. Workers can detect when they are under surveillance due to experience (Bain and Taylor, 2000).

Despite the labour process thinkers' accusation of being "haunted by dualism and polarising the individual and collective action", McCabe (2007) argued that both labour process and subjectivity need to be understood in relation to each other rather than as separate. He argued further that 'these mutually exclusive' categories impoverish the understanding of the labour process relations. Though Foucauldians seem to challenge the collective nature of the labour process and emphasis worker subjectivity and individualisation, some have asserted the 'co-existence' of the individual and collective. "Subjectivity is the way we understand and interpret the world and ourselves" (McCabe, 2007: 245). This, however, does not mean "individuals are separate from the groups, collective or society or one embraces individualisation". The effects of power tend to be individualising leading to workers turning back on themselves (Knights, 1990: 319). This is dependent on the labour market conditions as McCabe (2007) noticed when workers in 'Autocraft' faced redundancy they tended to assert their individual identity rather than a collective identity. "The ever present possibility of losing one's job is a significant discipline and disincentive to resist or challenge managerial practices" (Collinson, 1994: 57). Though these labour market pressures individualise workers, it does not mean that experiences and anxieties of job loss are not collectively shared but the fear of individualised punishment seems to promote compliance. Focusing on individual needs seem to limit resistance. This perspective seems to privilege the managerial discourse in shaping the workplace relations on the shopfloor while removing the possibility of worker 'agency' in constructing their own identities. The latter is perceived to be 'relational' rather than fixed as the critical theorists believe. Identity is not as indispensable component of the subject; it is constantly changing and in process. "Identities are not absolute but always relational; one can only ever be seen to be something in relation to something else" (Clegg, 1990: 159).

LPT proponents have countered the arguments by saying identity-based analysis is based on organisational theory rather than employment relationships which are rooted in classical sociology influenced by Marx and Weber. This attempt to individualise the labour process seems to neglect the 'embeddedness' of the production process in its social and political environment. The indeterminacy of labour forms the centre of workplace struggles which go beyond the 'dictatorship of (personal) needs'. Underlying this notion of resistance from LPT is the idea that workers are active, creative and conscious individuals who are able to subvert managerially defined discourses and thus challenge the totalising system of control. In fact Spencer (2000: 239) argued that "a preoccupation with the processes involved in the constitution of self not only individualises capitalist social relations, but also conceals the position of capital in the subordination and exploitation of collective labour".

The exercise of power by 'all for no one' dislocates power from the capitalism and continues to individualise the analysis of work to individual worksites and detaching it from the rest of capitalist mode of production (Spencer, 2000). This 'agency' centred approach offers no emancipatory politics beyond the capitalism mode of production and ignores its structural disadvantages towards the workers. This is why I argue that Braverman, still provides the most consistent understanding of the objective conditions by which subjective worker experiences are produced.

### **3.8 The information workers**

Braverman has analysed the service sector despite many other studies focusing on the manufacturing sector. He referred to the intermediate categories of work such as clerical, technical and managerial labour as enjoying a 'privileged market position' (1974: 407). These groups of workers cannot be categorised under senior managers who act as managers of capital or any other class whose labour they help "to control, command and organise" (405). Echoing the Communist Manifesto, he argued that this intermediate group will ultimately join the mass of the working class because of the 'degradation of work' by the system of capitalist production through separation of the mind and the hand. He was the first to note the increasing tendency of Taylorisation towards white collar jobs and thus degradation of service work skills. He argued that "this generation of computers would revolutionise secretarial work, destroying social office, specialise and sub-divide tasks into word processing and administrative roles" (1974: 344). In essence this was the core of his

argument, as he saw 'deskilling' as inevitable as it benefits the capitalist class. This was further noted up the hierarchy of the organisation making even the managers vulnerable to the degradation of work. In essence, Braverman saw the manual and mental labour under the 'curse' of the capitalist 'deskilling' production processes. Braverman was answering the bourgeoisie work sociology of Elton Mayo and others who sought to understand the dissatisfaction of work in isolation from the social relation in the process of production.

It was the optimism about the information economy that led many to believe in the notion of 'clean fulfilling jobs' with less physical intensification. This was first predicted by Daniel Bell in his book *The coming of the Post-Industrial society* (1973) predicting the predominance of 'information workers'. Manuel Castells, *The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture* (1996) made the same point when he argued that a whole new phase of 'global informational capitalism' is emerging, where bureaucratic principles of organising are being superseded by the flat and flexible networks. In this new information age the raw material is information hence the decline in the manufacturing jobs and rise in the service sector jobs.

Zuboff (1988) observed that 'informed work' would raise clerical labour to semi-professional status, drawing for example on knowledge and information management within the service jobs. On the other hand, predicting the disappearance of assembly line, Daniel Bell (1973) argued for the replacement of dirty and manufacturing jobs by clean information work. Though white collar jobs were celebrated as the new sanctuary of intellectual work, Gramsci (1971) criticised the division between 'mental and manual' work by arguing it diverted from real social functioning of life towards the 'technicalities' of work. "In any physical work, even the most degrading and mechanical there exists a minimum of intellectual activity". Simon Head (2003) has studied different sectors of the service economy and concluded that standardisation and control experienced in white collar work resembles what the factory workers had to live with for a century.

Du Gay (1996) argued that the separation between production and consumption has been blurred in the service work economy. Postmodern writers have sought to criticise LPT for its lack of 'customer presence' within the production process. "The central binary of worker versus management becomes destabilised by the addition of the third party" that exerts

pressure on the frontline to change their work behaviour (MacDonald and Sirianni, 1996: 5). Currently, meeting the needs of the 'sovereign' customer is the overriding institutional imperative. This 'customer presence' (Du Gay and Salaman, 1996) has been generalised under the term 'sovereign customer' who has become the moral centre of the enterprising universe and a sweeping force for restructuring organisations and changing employees' behaviour, especially that of the front-line service worker (Bolton and Houlihan, 2005).

Bauman (2005) has also sought to shift the focus from production to consumption and argued that 'the consumer society' has decentred work and 'identity' is no longer derived from what we produce but from what we buy. Identity is therefore influenced by the changes within the organisation and is thus fluid, influenced by history and cultural conditions. He went further to say, if service quality is defined by the interaction between frontline worker and the customer, then it means work can no longer be explained by economic determinism but also by cultural relations. This means work has to be analysed by a new 'identity' rather than economic essentialism. Workers have to assimilate to a 'customer' identity at work as well as outside the workplace, as different departments within organisations are organised through market logic.

However, Warhurst, Thompson and Nickson (2008) have argued that the dominance of consumption within the service work does not mean changes in the capitalist production system, because principles from the manufacturing sector apply to the service sector too, though these can be manifested in different ways. Consumption is the end product of the production process rather than displacing production. LPT does not deal with consumption directly but it addresses the structure under which consumption is premised. The service economy still consists of the "old practices of the old economy" (Head, 2003: 10). Programmers observe the workflows in detail, analyse time and motion of the workers and incorporate these details in the workflow software which will then govern the routines of the labour process. This is exactly what Taylor did in detailing his doctrine of scientific management. Taylor's principles of speed, predictability, calculability, standardisation and efficiency with the least mental consultation of the workers have been perfected by the algorithms operating within the service sector. Head (2003) argued then that the same principles of control and drudgery of work are still operational, only been made better by the omnipresent power of the technology.

This routinisation of tasks in clerical and white collar jobs was the focal point of Braverman's degradation thesis, which reduced worker control within the labour process that used to be the heavens of 'conceptualisation'. This has resulted in many arguing for the neo-Taylorisation of the service work, all in the quest to 'put the customer first' (Thompson and Warhurst, 1998). Normative control is mainly induced by the customer expectations. Through customer satisfaction surveys, customer service training and teamwork activities, management exerts control over employees (Du Gay and Salaman, 2000; Bolton and Houlihan, 2005). Putting themselves in the 'shoes' of the customer, operators are encouraged to understand customer behaviour. On the one hand, customers form the 'management's spy' by collecting and compiling information about the worker behaviour and reporting those who do not abide by the management's rules. So the customers join forces with the class of producers (management) to rule other producers (employees) (Rosenthal, Peccei and Hill, 2001: 27). This then instils a sense of constant surveillance not only through the algorithms but also through the customer. Striving to control the whole body of the worker, organisations through teamworking, corporate culture and customer care systems instill a new form of contested terrain within the service sector (emotional labour expenditure) mainly performed by female workers.

### **3.9 Gender and labour process**

According to radical feminists, labour should not be taken as a genderless category as female labour is viewed, treated and controlled differently by the hierarchy at work. As Braverman (1974) argued against the degradation of work, most women were already occupying the 'deskilled' and precarious segment of jobs in the labour market. It was a male job that was under threat to this 'deskilling'. Degradation of work simply means a switch to "female labour power" (Bradley, 1986: 56). Humphries (1983) noted that the process of degradation has long been part of the 'female proletarianisation'. The rejection of the capitalist production system as the cause behind 'deskilling' begs questions from radical feminists, who argued about the subordinate position of women within pre- and post-capitalist society. They argued that male occupation of better jobs in society is not a by-product of capital labour relations. The Marxist attempt to understand "the issues of labour power as capacity to produce" has limited the understanding of "liberation of workers to

male working class” (Fortunati, 1995: 27), while liberation of labour power does not affect men and women in the same way.

Radical feminists have argued that patriarchy existed before the capitalist system and is independent from it. They saw the sexualised bodies of women as a source of domination in society. The low status jobs and exploitation of women in the labour market is explained by women’s position in the household as they are involved in social reproduction of labour power (Hartman, 1979). This comes from the notion of waged work as a surplus value producing work in the public space while women perform reproductive jobs in the private households (Fortunati, 1995). This differentiation of reproduction as “natural production has enabled two workers to be exploited with one wage and the entire cost of reproduction to be unloaded onto the labour force” (Fortunati, 1995: 9). Fortunati insisted that “the reproduction of individuals is the reproduction of labour power” (9). It is this separation of reproduction and production that has paralysed Marxist analysis in understanding the other side of production by describing only one half (Fortunati, 1995: 10). Marxist feminists sought to bring in the structural analysis of the position of women through Marx, by arguing that the capitalist production system benefits from the economic exploitation of the working class which then determines the nature of gender relations (Hamilton, 1978). The use of two analytical concepts (patriarchy and capitalism) to understand the low status of women’s jobs cannot be viewed separately as they are linked in creating the gendered nature of labour process. This inherent separation between production and reproduction has sexual connotations: “The capacity to produce has been primarily developed in the male worker, while the capacity to reproduce has been primarily developed in female workers” (Fortunati, 1995: 13). On the other hand, black feminists argued that black women experiences of labour process have been shaped by the intersectionality of race, class and gender.

If the problems of Black women are only derivatives of a larger contradiction between capital and labor, then so is racism, and both must be fought by all of us. The capitalist structure is a many-headed monster. I might add here that in no socialist country that I have visited have I found an absence of racism or of sexism, so the eradication of both of these diseases seems to involve more than the abolition of capitalism as an institution. (Lorde, 2011 [1979]: 48)

The tendency to treat 'class' as a superstructure was directly challenged by the black feminist school of thought to argue for the connectedness of oppression of the black women workers. Both Bell Hooks (2000) and Patricia Hill Collins (2008) have challenged the white liberal feminist notion of 'work as liberation for women' which meant black women servitude under the white middle class female as low wage service workers. The meaning of work for black women according to this group of feminists needs to be rethought to capture the continuous degradation of black women's labour in the labour market.

In his response to his critics from the feminist movement, Braverman (1998, Appendix 1) argued that to reduce the study of capitalist labour process analysis into specific categories at given historical contexts reduces abstraction and generality to make the analysis useless to understanding of the system in itself. This means having to discuss the sexual division of labour of the gendered subject removes the objective conditions under which these are produced. Though sexual division of labour preceded capitalism, Braverman's (1974) analysis of detailed division of labour and social division of labour was situated within the capitalist society.

On the other hand, poststructuralist scholars have drawn on Michel Foucault in the use of power and body to understand aspects of women's oppression. Foucault's notion of the cultural construction of the body has enhanced feminist understanding of power over feminine sexuality. McNay (1995) has challenged the totalising forms of control by the institutions in the body of a prisoner by Foucault. Despite his contribution to the feminist theories, Foucault's neglect of the gendered nature of disciplinary techniques on the body seems to adhere to the norm of the male subject.

### **3.10 Public sector labour process**

Bob Carter (1997) was at the forefront of those who believed that Braverman (1974) neglected state employment in the degradation of work thesis. In as much as there are similarities between the state and capitalist labour process, the purpose of the former is the "fulfilment of need rather than the expansion of capital" (Carchedi in Carter, 1997: 67). The state forms the centre of political organisation of the labour processes within the labour market as the state regulates the conditions of employment through law and industrial relations structures. The political mediation of these structures and processes directly

affects the labour processes within the labour market. Carter (1997) then argues for the inadequate conceptualisation of the state labour process by ignoring its 'political mediation' within the labour process debates.

Despite this tendency to criticise Braverman on technical and specificities of different capitalist labour processes, one needs to note the 'logic and tendencies' of the capitalist labour process which Braverman was addressing (Tinker, 2002: 259). Braverman's (1974) Chapters 18 and 19 referred to the labour that 'produces services' which is mainly occupied by the teachers, clerks, social workers and so forth. This is where the state workforce comes into the labour process debates as the 'intermediate categories, sharing the characteristics of worker on the one side and manager on the other' (Braverman, 1974: 280).

The question of productive and unproductive labour has surrounded the public sector labour process analysis. According to Marx, state workers engage in unproductive labour as they are not directly involved in exchange with capital for additional surplus-value. In his comprehensive account of *Marx's Theory of Productive and Unproductive Labour* Ian Gough (1972) argued for the historical and context specific nature of Marx's definition of the two concepts. Marx acknowledged that "all labour is productive which produces any kind of result" but he made a distinction between productive labour under capitalism and productive labour in general. The latter refers to 'useful' labour which is necessary but not exchanged for surplus-value but 'revenue' (income). This means the definition of productive or unproductive labour does not depend on the useful nature of the labour process but on the exchange with capital for surplus-value. Braverman (1974, Chapter 19) makes use of the distinctions but also understands that the nature of the capitalist production changes allows even the unproductive labour to be absorbed under productive labour.

This is another way of saying what was pointed out earlier; that the capitalist mode of production has subordinated to itself all forms of work, and all labour processes now pass through the sieve of capital, leaving behind their tribute of surplus. (Braverman, 1974: 286)

However this does not automatically mean 'all labour is productive' labour in capitalist production, as productive labour has to contribute towards profit making and capitalist expansion. It is this understanding of all forms of work being subordinated under capitalist

production that makes Braverman's analysis of logic of capitalist production system relevant even after 40 years of *Labour and Monopoly Capital*. Despite the argument by Marx of state workers not being productive labourers due to their operation outside their ambits of capitalist production system, Gough (1972) has argued for the changing conditions in the political economy, though the mode of production still remains. He asserted that the growth in public enterprises "where labour is exchanged with capital to produce goods and services for sale, and where the enterprises usually aim to make enough surplus-value to cover the ongoing rate of interest on government obligations, then the workers are productive just as in private sector" (Gough, 1972: 62). The latter is the reason behind Savran and Tonak (1999) making a distinction between three categories of state employment. They argued that state employees can be differentiated between those who 'reproduce social order' (including military, administrators, courts, police, etc); those who work for state corporations (owned or partially owned by the state); and finally those who provide social services (including education, health, housing, etc.). The second type of employment within the state strives to produce surplus-value and operate under the auspices of capitalist production system regardless of the owner of surplus-value (Savran and Tonak, 1999: 139). This means state enterprise employees engage in productive labour while the privatised social services may be under the same umbrella because of the profit motive within that particular sector.

In his 1979 book, *The Political Economy of the Welfare State*, Gough passionately argued for the production of surplus value among the state workers though not public senior officials. Their experience of labour market pressures, including 'deskilling' and low wages, is very much part of the political economy that is at work. The worker experiences are shaped by the capital accumulation principles within and outside the state. Workers also sell their labour power to the state as an employer. Like the capitalist class, the state struggles to convert the labour power into labour, which means different sorts of control mechanisms will be put in place. This means the capitalist state is not neutral as the conditions of work are imposed by the capitalist system under which it operates.

The intensity in the application of New Public Management with its commercial principles within the public sector also affects the organisation of work in the public sector along the private sector lines of practices. Work intensification and increased workloads through

'managerialism' lead also to degradation of work within this sector. This was anticipated by Braverman (1974), as he argued that Marx did not anticipate the growth of unproductive workers who now share same characteristics of 'misfortune' as the productive workers. "When they were few they were unlike productive workers, and having become many they are like productive labour" (Braverman, 1974: 292). Braverman then argued that "eventually degradation of human labour becomes an underlying force governing all forms of work in capitalist society, no matter in what setting or at what hierarchical level" (1974: 57). This means the state labour process therefore does not escape 'Barbage's principle' in an attempt to reduce labour costs. The public sector was not going to escape the transformational tendency of the capitalist logic. NPM is simply an expression of the continuous capital logic that covers 'all sectors' of the global economy.

The application of NPM principles and the intensification of ICT use in the delivery of services by the government make the labour process approach more relevant than ever. Part of the modernising agenda of the government services is technological convenience and reorganisation of work cultures as the public sector now has to learn from private sector on how to do things 'better' (Coleman and Harris, 2008: 582) and this means "all forms of work are becoming productive" labour (Braverman, 1974: 292). These technological changes have broadened the meaning of control connecting the public labour process to self-control systems and values initially identified with the private sector's style of management. The link between service delivery technologies, customer culture, cost cutting, efficient management, individualised citizenship and so forth demands that we study the labour process in the public sector beyond copying from the private sector.

The South African labour process is not that different from any capitalist production system, but the history of racialised (and gendered) division of labour (Von Holdt, 2003) at the centre of production system requires that we conceptualise labour process theory to include race to extend it in a post-colonial setting.

### **3.11 Conclusion**

The dialectical nature of the capital-labour relationship still provides a basis for analysing the social relations at work. Under the current capitalist mode of production LPT remains functional in understanding the experiences of workers, worker-management relations and

the control of labour process. Despite criticisms from the post-structuralist approach on individualisation and totalising managerial control, LPT proponents have defended the approach and argued for a context specific relevance of the framework in order to capture the complexities of the service workplace labour processes. Foucault's notion of 'panoptic' control and resistance has been used to dissect and analyse the call centre work experiences. This was equally challenged by the neo-Weberian approach from Frenkel et al. (1999) and Korczynski et al. (2000) who argued that the focus on control in the service labour process is limiting because of the third party (customer) directly influencing the relations in the work processes. Both structure and agency continue to affect the experience of work on the shop floor. Too much emphasis on agency and neglect of structure of capitalist production system could stagnate the discussion around transformation of our society as this would provide no future beyond capitalism (Spencer, 2000: 238).

## **Chapter 4**

### **Methodology and the Case of a Single Call Centre**

#### **4.1 Introduction**

The chapter seeks to explain the where, why and how of this study. This includes the reasons behind choosing the City of Johannesburg, methods employed and challenges experienced in the field. The data was collected through semi-structured interviews, questionnaires and focus group discussions. More than 58 interviews were conducted with call centre operators, team leaders, trade union officials, activists, researchers and municipal officials. The field study was undertaken between 2011 and 2013, exploring the motivation behind call centre establishment, work organisation and subjective experiences of the operators. The chapter begins by describing the qualitative nature of the case and epistemologies behind it. In justifying the choice of study I briefly describe the City of Johannesburg's social, economic and political profile. The reader should note that a lengthier discussion on the history of Johannesburg, its transition, and relevant policies will be provided in Chapter Five. This provides the context of the issues shaping the labour process in the call centres that were studied. All the techniques employed to gather data are explained along with challenges of studying the local government environment. Consequently, the study draws mainly on ethnographic techniques to explain the call centre labour process in public sector.

Premised on the notion of *Verstehen* by Max Weber, this study uses an interpretivist paradigm with sprinkles of feminist epistemology to capture subjective meanings of work and experiences thereof. This is a result of the extremely limited knowledge on local government service work in South Africa. The call centre workplace within government is central to this thesis but in addition, what it means to be at the frontline within the post-apartheid public sector is discussed. The idea is to understand the complex labour process in local government especially within the changing workplace environment. These are relatively new workplaces within the municipalities. How they fit into the wider local government restructuring is important in understanding the desired worker under the new ethos.

The data was collected through several visits to the Johannesburg Municipality over three years. Though not confined to qualitative research, this study seeks to “describe and understand rather than explain and predict human behaviour” (Babbie and Mouton, 2001: 53). The balance between the objectivity and subjectivity of the researcher has always been a source of contention within the social sciences, because associations with positivism and interpretivism. The latter seeks to understand the subjective meanings of social behaviour in their own contexts. This informs most of the research’s ontological and epistemological understandings for this thesis. However, Bourdieu (1989: 14) argued that “there exists within the social system itself an objective structure independent of consciousness and will of agents, which is capable of guiding and constraining their practices or their representations”. This means, naturally these two positions have been used in conjunction with each other as they have rarely been used separately. In the study of work, as illustrated in the labour process debates the unnecessary divide between the ‘subject and objective conditions’ of work could reinforce the separation between these two approaches. In his Yorùbà inspired epistemological position Adesina (2002: 105) uses *Ti’bi-t’ire* logic (2002: 105) to argue for ‘complementarity’ rather than “difference in ways of knowing”. This logic is based on the local ontological narratives within Yorùbà language. The two approaches for this project are considered with this understanding of ‘co-existence’ of knowledge rather than emphasising the ‘difference’ in these approaches, making them complementary. There are challenges in using either approach as one finds that the “truth of interaction is never entirely to be found within the interaction as it avails itself for the observation’ (Bourdieu, 1989: 16).

#### **4.2 The case for a single case: Some epistemological and methodological issues**

Qualitative research means “researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret a phenomena in terms of meanings people bring to them” (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005: 3). Case study is used as a scientific approach to ‘ask what, why and how rather than who and not how many?’ (Kyburz-Graber, 2004: 54). Despite the association of the case study approach with qualitative research, case studies can use both qualitative and quantitative techniques to collect data. “The sometimes constructed bias of case study research as a typical, exclusively qualitative approach using grounded theory

methodology is therefore not adequate” (Kyburz-Graber, 2004: 54). The case study approach could include surveys, interviews and focus groups and to gather data. To define a case study as an “in depth, multifaceted investigation using qualitative research methods of a single social phenomenon” (Reagin, Orum and Sjoberg, 1991: 2) limits the case study approach to a qualitative research method. However, according to Reagin et al. (1991) case study research relies on great detail and the use of several data sources. The limited view of case study as an ‘instrument’ rather than an ‘approach’ has led to unnecessary discussion within qualitative research about generalisability. Flyvbjerg (2004: 420) argued that “it is not true that a case study cannot provide reliable information about the broader classes”. This is derived from the sampling and representation of the case. Qualitative researchers place more emphasis on the ‘social significance of the case’ rather than on statistical significance. This means as much as researcher seeks to generalise, improved understandings of a complex human issue is more important (Marshall, 1999: 380). Babbie and Mouton (2001: 274) concurred with this statement by arguing that “researchers within qualitative paradigm understand that the aim of their study is to provide an understanding of the meaning which one or two people attribute to a certain event and not to generalise”. To ensure reliability and credibility of qualitative research consistent, prolonged engagement and cross check proves helpful. Though some have argued for the ‘strong objectivity’ (Harding, 1993) within qualitative feminist research others have stressed researcher reflexivity in order to provide a ‘responsible and reliable’ knowledge. Validity in this account stems from the ‘fair and accurate descriptions’ of the experiences of those studied within a specific social context (Acker, Barry and Esseveld, 1983).

Despite a comprehensive and detailed defence of the single case by Reagin et al. (1991) for the indispensable nature of the case study method within the social science methodology, a case study method of inquiry has been under criticism as ‘unscientific’ because it does not produce ‘hard’ theory. Its methodological and epistemological grounds have been the source of contention rather than its ontological position (Harvey, 2009). This is derived from positivism which informed the birth of sociology from Auguste Comte. The ‘father’ of sociology believed that the scientific study of social phenomena was a necessary condition for the attainment of the ideal which is restructuring of society. Comte in his *The Positive Philosophy* (1893) believed that social sciences could use the same natural science principles

of investigation “to establish universal valid and causal laws of human behaviour” (Babbie and Mouton, 2001: 22). This meant observations, experiments and comparisons along with social history in order to discover statistical social laws. This ability to generalise has been the main criticism of context-dependent case studies, as the ability to generalise beyond the case seems limiting for research. Providing alternative issues of generalisation within a case study, Stake (1978) suggested ‘naturalistic generalisation’ where understanding and thorough knowledge of the particular provides generalisation. This form of generalisation “develops within a person as a product of experience” (Stake, 1978: 6). However, case study approach can be used for both qualitative and quantitative research, because its instruments cut across the unnecessary divisions.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) have defended the ‘scientific’ nature of qualitative research to the extent of showing disdain for the quantitative enquiry. Sometimes it is very hard to divide quantitative and qualitative research as the topic informs methods. This is described by Bart Kosko’s (1994) concept of *fuzzy thinking*. He believed that science is full of grey areas rather than black or white ones. This means social facts are a matter of degree rather than either/or. There is a continuum between zero to one, hence we cannot divide knowledge. Adesina (2002) argued that real life is full of contradictions which are not necessary opposite to each other. ‘Binary logic’ has influenced the Western epistemic discourse and thus there is a separation of qualitative from quantitative approaches (Adesina, 2002: 109). The researcher was flexible and agreed with Bourdieu and Wacquant’s (1992) concept of reflexivity. Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992: 227) cautioned us about the rigid exclusivity of data collection methods, believing that “we must try to mobilise all techniques that are relevant and practically usable, given the definition of the object and practical conditions of data collection”. In this thesis, this principle was followed leading to different and mixed instruments that were practical at the time in the field. Given the suspicions and surveillance in the call centre, some would have preferred a group interview though they had initially agreed to individual interviews.

### **4.3 The case of the call centre cases**

In the sociology discipline, the use of an in-depth case study to generalise about the social significance of the case is not new. Burawoy (1979) provided a classic study of the single ethnographic case to look at the macro and micro politics of production within a single

corporation. Oakley's (1974) case on the *Sociology of Housework* provided a comprehensive account of domestic work, shifting the understanding of 'work', with only forty interviews from the housewives. Within the sociology of work, studies of call centres have also followed the tradition of case study investigation influenced by the motive and lens of the researcher. Russell (2008: 18) argued that "it is important to distinguish between the work that is principally about call centres and that uses call centres as an avenue to study other things". This has influenced the work done in call centres from different disciplines.

From the first appearance of call centres as a 'unit of analysis', the use of qualitative in-depth case studies has been prevalent. Looking at the remuneration system in different cases, Fernie and Metcalf also used a case study approach to generalise about the tendency of these 'new organisations' to fulfil Foucault's (1977) prediction of total control in society. On the other hand, Phil Taylor and Peter Bain have (since 1999) studied call centres as sites of work with a labour process perspective using case study research which was complemented by questionnaires. Their qualitative focus has influenced methods utilised to study call centres today. Even those who sought to understand the call centres as customer oriented bureaucratic organisations have sought to use cross national cases in understanding the role of the customer in frontline work (Frenkel et al., 1999). The gap has been the study of the call centres in developing countries, except for India as it provides a destination for offshoring (Russell, 2008). Very few cases have provided details of the public sector labour processes of these workspaces, especially in South Africa. Given the socio-political context of the South African public sector workplace, one needs to study call centres as units of analysis in their own right. Contextualisation of the study is the key advantage of using an in-depth case approach which incorporates the socio-historical context that shapes the call centre labour process. Call centres are situated at the intersection of gender, class and race variables which makes the qualitative feminist approach suitable in explaining their defined experiences. I conducted the study with the belief that "ideas cannot be divorced from the individuals who create and share them" (Collins, 2009: 281).

Though Durkheim (1958) believed that we can 'take off' who we are in the field, it has been largely accepted that it is not feasible to keep the values that a researcher holds totally in check (Bryman, 2004: 21). Feminists bring in the view of 'emotionality of science', where a

researcher's fear and anger affects not only the choice of the question but also interaction between the participants and researcher (Campbell and Wasco, 2000). "Knowledge cannot be divorced from political and economic reality" (Collins, 2009: 269-274). This also includes the researcher's perspective as Douglas (1970: 199) has argued that a "sociologist depends on their own experience in society for the basic understanding they have of society ... first step remains firmly footed on common-sense experience". This means a complete detachment for the researcher is impossible but one needs to present the data in a 'representative manner' to capture different perspectives within the case in order to present a reliable source of knowledge. Some have termed this process 'triangulation' where multiple representations of 'reality' are identified for verification of data (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Gouldner (1962) completely dismissed the concept of value-free sociology, as he criticised Max Weber's separation of the heart and the head-objectivity founded on Comte's social physics values of knowledge.

Bourdieu (1989) recognised 'double structuring' which reinforces and reproduces perceptions (and common sense) through structures shaped by symbolic power. In the Johannesburg case, purposive sampling was used, expanded by the snowball effect as most participants were located through referrals. The case was not only chosen for its political and economic power within South Africa but also because it offers an opportunity to learn about the subject for researchers and other municipalities. This is why Stake (2005: 451) argued that "potential for learning is a different and sometimes superior criterion to representativeness".

#### **4.4 Data collection: Methods and methodology**

Braverman (1974: 21) has argued that

the interpretation of the opinions, feelings, sentiments, and changing moods of the working class is best accomplished by experienced and well-attuned observers and participants, who know the history of a particular group, are acquainted with its circumstances, background, and relation to other parts of the working class, and form their assessments from intimate contact and detailed information.

This was the reason behind eight months of fieldwork for this research in the City of Johannesburg. The study was based on consistent and repeated visits over three years

(2011-2013). This generated interesting interactions between the researcher and the participants. In the past few years I have managed to sit, listen and observe work directly while discussing the issues about work organisation and actual work performance. Connections were created over time to link the work organisation, employment relations and labour market. Though challenging at first, full access to the shopfloor was granted then a sense of trust with key informants developed (more details on these issues are discussed below).

#### **4.4.1 Access and trust**

At the height of the billing crisis and close attention by the media on the City of Johannesburg, I conducted my fieldwork. This was coincidental; I had recently finished my Masters dissertation on local government electronic service delivery channels. Fixation by the media on inaccurate billing and inflated bills for the COJ customers, affected the view of outsiders by the organisational gatekeepers. Evidence of this newspaper attention on COJ billing system is clear when one searches 'Joburg billing crisis' on the Google South Africa search engine. At the time of writing, this search yielded more than 19 000 search results within 0.32 seconds. The search results are for the period between 2010-2013, mostly coming from popular newspapers like Mail and Guardian, Sowetan Live, Fin24, Business Day Live, City Press, The Star, IT Web, and so forth. In order to elicit data from the City, I needed to build trust with managers and, subsequently, with the workers. This was relatively easy as the names of my friends and colleagues were used to elicit access. I needed to provide documentation including a revised version of my proposal which reassured there would not be an interrogation. After strings of emails to negotiate access I was allowed to speak to workers and managers in the call centre.

The process of negotiating access started in October 2007 when I first visited the city call centre to gauge its nature and size. This was initially facilitated by mentioning the name of our senior professor in the department. Following five emails sent to the secretary of the Customer and Revenue Management Director, I was granted an interview, provided I supplied proof of student status, my research proposal and the questions that would be asked.



*Picture 4-1: Joburg Connect at Roodepoort, Golf Club Terrace- Revenue Care 2011*

The Director referred me to the relevant managers and team leaders. I spent a week in Johannesburg, speaking to the call centre manager, a trade union official and a shop steward, two team leaders and a former call centre operator. During a walk around the call centre, several operators mumbled and offered to speak if I wanted to know how the call centre worked. This short visit was inspiration enough for a return visit later in 2010. As Miller and Bell (2002) have noted, consent and access negotiations are ongoing and never final. In August 2010, I experienced similar troubles in accessing workers as supervisors were happy to speak on behalf 'of the workers' but not willing to allow me to spend time with operators. Fortunately, four previous participants were still working within the City of Johannesburg and the trade union. I contacted two SAMWU officials who immediately allowed me into the SAMWU offices in the City Centre. When I contacted the manager of the call centre manager I was referred to a new manager who requested the same

documents (proposal, letter requesting access and proof of my student status). The second visit to the new manager of the call centre opened more doors as I was allowed to spend time in the call centre interviewing operators. This was during the period before the call centre house was moved to the city centre, which was followed by changes in management again. Physical access to the call centre was costly and inconvenient for me as I did not have transport to travel north of Johannesburg daily. Proton House in the Roodepoort proved to be a challenge as I was based in the city centre in order to be closer to Council House (Thuso House), Trade Union House and Customer Care Centres.

The call centre is strictly separated from the public and no members of the public are allowed in. This is due to the irate customers who might physically harm workers. This was given by workers, managers and trade unions as the main reason behind the 'no public' sign. Trade union officials were the key to access to the call centre operators who felt I was 'on their side' when their shop stewards and officials introduced them to me. When I went to speak to the new manager, I was with trade union officials who also introduced me to their members on the shopfloor. They introduced me and my topic requesting cooperation as I was doing 'academic research on call centres'.

The third round of interviews took place between July and September 2011. This was one of the most intensive and costly periods of the fieldwork. I made new contacts and followed up with previous participants. I met with many call centre operators and new supervisors in the call centre. Trade union officials were welcoming; we built on previous conversations and they treated me as a friend. After spending almost two months with the participants I was now recognised in the canteens and around Council's Thuso House by security personnel. I was now allowed to walk in by mentioning a name known to the security guards. In the 2012 and 2013 visits I was comfortable though remained cautious because of the change in leadership in the local government elections. During this time, it was not easy to speak to people, especially in top management, as the local government elections did not give indications about who would lead the City.

Due to their fear of the adverse consequences of the opinions they might express for their jobs, many, including the managers, refused to be taped or recorded. Many also claimed that 'we are politicians we can't be photographed'. Although the researcher assured the

participants confidentiality and anonymity in the interviews, it was not easy to convince them to be taped. This was countered by scheduling follow-up interviews without recording in order to get fuller details which could be restricted by the recorder. Only a few were angry arguing that 'we do not care whether they hear this' and let me record them. The research – its objective, use, and focus – was fully explained to the participants. At each stage of the interviews with individual participants, I asked for permission to record the interviews.

The study depended on verbal consent; for each interview following an explanation of the research project, participants were asked for permission to be interviewed. Here I learned about the "closeness of access and ethics" (Miller and Bell, 2002: 56) as I wanted access to this difficult space; sometimes full disclosure to gain access was the source of difficulty as some refused to participate. For example, managers asked for my proposal in order to decide whether they would allow me to access their call centre. I then adapted the introduction to this research. This provided me with easier access to the call centre and some managers would refer me to other managers. They would introduce me according to how they understood the purpose of my study. For instance, one manager introduced me as student 'interested in Phakama Project' and I did not contest this. I decided to change the way in which I introduced my topic in order to decrease suspicion of my research. Sjoberg and Miller (1973) argued for the secretive nature of public bureaucracies which could hinder sociologists from accessing information rather than public relations speeches from the organisational authorities.

By disregarding the secrecy-maintaining activities within a bureaucracy as well as between bureaucracy and its environment, sociologists, qua methodologists, often fail to understand when they are identified with an "economic competitor" or a "potential hostile polity" and consequently receive little or no significant information about facets of the system. (Sjoberg and Miller, 1973: 130)

When I first used my survey interview questionnaire, operators only answered the biographical section of the questionnaire. This could be attributed to the managers' involvement in the administration and distribution of the questionnaires. This was partly because the call centre was too big for one researcher to meet every operator and due to

the limited time was granted by the managers to complete the questionnaire. The managers introduced my project and I and then asked them to participate in the survey. After the poor response rate, I decided to administer the questionnaires myself and introduce myself to the new recruits at the call centre. I asked some workers why they did not complete the questionnaires. Their hesitation stemmed from not being certain if management was 'tricking' them. Workers gave consistent responses that they thought I was a consultant hired to 'assess their perceptions' and get them fired. Not surprisingly, this was based on the understanding of maintaining a 'good public relations' view for the 'outsider'. It was precisely this view that prompted me to visit the call centre again with more questionnaires for all 120 employees present in their workstations. Managers again sought to regulate and distribute the questionnaires, but I asked to self-administer them. As the visits to the call centre became more consistent and regular, more workers welcomed and trusted me despite managers continually limiting the conversations.

To gain more insight, I always finished by asking operators to include any subject they felt was relevant. This stage of the interview tended to evoke an emotional venting of frustrations. It also helped to bring more participants into the research project, as the workers would recommend people they felt were knowledgeable about the topic. The timing in contacting the referrals became crucial as they needed to be contacted within days or hours to maintain the access and relations in the field. These experiences all illustrated the snowball effect in sampling.

## **4.5 Research techniques**

### **4.5.1 Semi-structured interviews**

This study involved the collection of primary qualitative data through semi-structured in-depth individual and focus group interviews with call centre operators, trade unions officials, shop stewards, managers and municipal officials. The flexible nature of the semi-structured interviews allowed the workers to communicate the meaning of their work and articulate their own experiences. The nature of interview was guided by the ethic of an empathetic approach. As a researcher I tried to foster 'trust' which was difficult in the highly suspicious local government environment. "The method of friendship is a method of morality because it attempts to restore the sacredness of humans before addressing any theoretical or methodological concerns" (Fontana and Frey, 2005: 697). This is one of the

key values promoted by the feminist school of thought as they argue for the non-hierarchical relations between the researcher and the observed. Hierarchy does very little to facilitate trust, and in fact seriously undermines the building of an open relationship (Campbell and Wasco, 2000). However, as a researcher I was fully aware of the 'inherent hierarchy' between the researcher and researched. Adesina (1992: 27) argued that the "researcher must be aware of the class gap between himself/herself and the researched and strive to overcome it or at least be aware of its methodological implications. This is the beginning of learning process..." This is why interviews were flexible in nature, depending on the interviewee. For instance, different interview questions were designed for managers, supervisors and operators in order to encourage the conversation. The overarching aim of these interviews was to collect detailed data on the history, objectives, nature, development and outcomes of the local government call centres.

Interviews lasted for between 45 minutes to 2 hours. Semi-structured and informal interviews covered more than 21 call centre operators, ten top management officials (Directors and Managers), almost ten union officials, three researchers/activists and two supervisors out of three. The interviews for the call centre operators focused on subjective perceptions and experiences about the call centre workplace. This was supplemented by two focus group interviews with mostly female operators (one male participant in each group). The number of participants in a group varied between 5-7 members due to the demanding working environment. Due to the aforementioned media attention on the Johannesburg municipality and its call centre, workers interrogated the researcher before agreeing to the interview, often asking 'Are you a journalist?' or 'Did the managers send you?' Operators were visibly suspicious regardless of assurances about confidentiality and privacy. This also meant that some refused to be taped in the interview so as not to jeopardise their jobs. This suspiciousness was eventually overcome by the regular visits to the call centre and operators started to open up about their experiences. For example, one operator told me that they simply completed the questionnaire without paying attention because they thought it 'might be one of the manager's schemes to get them fired'.

The controlled environment and constant surveillance in this technologically induced 'panopticon' also played a part in the lack of trust between individual workers and the researcher. Some operators were very excited but only agreed to be interviewed as a group

to overcome fear and also to 'protect' themselves against being identified with specific opinions expressed in the interviews. This is why I included focus group discussion (FGDs) as part of my data collection. Confirming what feminists have argued about the benefits of focus group interviews "... the task of understanding women's lives may be achieved in a group settings" (Campbell and Wasco, 2000: 784). Despite the groups being mixed, women dominated the group composition and these interviews proved to connect the participants and open minds. Several participants said "I thought I was the only one". Groups can be criticised for creating problems regarding issues that the participants had previously regarded as 'normal'. But on the whole FGDs proved to be more beneficial as women shared and discussed learning from each other about the work issues. The FGDs also allowed me to maximise time and information gathered per session as the call centre work did not permit operators to be far from their desks for long periods. The groups allowed even those who were cynical at first to join in; some joined the group discussions without an invitation even. Those who refused to join the group made statements like "This is only academic work. So it's not going to change anything" (FGD, September 2012). Some of the group conversational interviews took place in the cafeteria over lunch time. The FGDs provided a chance for most to reflect on the survey questions, and provide clarity on some of the unclear questions. They also provided a space to talk freely without supervisors watching, though most of the time sitting with me one-on-one was avoided.

#### **4.5.2 Observations and documentary sources**

Given the centralised and individualistic nature of the call centre workspaces, observations and regular call centre visits, which included listening to the operator-customer interaction, were necessary as the operators were at their desks. These were accompanied by informal interviews with staff in canteens. Talking at work was more challenging as the workers had to log out from taking calls and attend to my questions. The system calculates the amount of time spent away from the calls and the supervisor and managers would then need to account to the city officials for this lost time. Therefore supervisors frequently came to check up on me and asking about the amount of time 'left' for interviews. My visits therefore had to be limited.

Observation was undertaken in call centres for more than eight months while talking to operators, supervisors, shop stewards and managers. The aim of the observations was to

capture the dynamic and interactive nature of the call centre labour process as it took place, to explore participants' responses, and to develop a detailed picture of the call centre labour process. Detailed field notes were taken during and after the observations, which were immediately transcribed. As I was scribbling down notes, call centre operators would ask me 'are you going to write everything we say?' This meant I could only write key words. Some were amazed at the speed of note taking; I tried to maintain eye contact take detailed notes at the same time. The intention was to keep interviewees interested but take detailed notes at the same time. Babbie and Mouton (2002: 282) noted that "to understand and interpret case studies, researchers describe the context in detail" to capture the context in which the behaviour is embedded.

In the field, the collection of organisational documents and policies relevant for the study proved to be helpful in supplementing interviews, focus groups and survey interviews. These documents provided a socio-economic background of the City of Johannesburg from which interview questions were based. From secondary literature, Johannesburg is one of the few cities studied in South Africa, especially with regard to urban planning, the history of capitalism, the migrant labour system, service delivery and privatisation, etc. The officials of the South African Municipal Workers Union (SAMWU) were also vital in accessing documents during this period as the trade union was at the forefront of the struggles against neoliberalism in the City of Johannesburg. Generic questions from the literature were included with some informed by analysis of the documentary evidence and piloted questionnaire which provided valuable insights into the processes and terminology of the call centre labour process. In observing the call centre and interviewing managers in their offices I came across a big file with all the documents pertaining to the restructuring of the city and Programme Phakama's history and outcomes. These documents were analysed along with the City of Johannesburg newsletter, policy documents and reports. These primary documents provided a background to the institutional culture and current performances of the city.

#### **4.5.3 Interview survey**

An interview survey simply means an "interview encounter with explicit purpose of one person obtaining information from another during a structured conversation based on prearranged set of questions" (Babbie and Mouton, 2001: 249). In this technique of

gathering data, the role of the interviewer is to record the responses on the questionnaire according to structured categories (Babbie and Mouton, 2001). The Customer Satisfaction Survey conducted every four years by COJ Municipality records some of the deep concerns about the call centre and service delivery at large. The latter produced experiences and perceptions of the customers about the customer service and service delivery within the COJ. I then focused on the workers who were required to complete a six-page questionnaire about their work, working conditions, experiences, and well-being. Survey research was used in the exploratory stage of the research, with more than 40 questions both open and closed ended. The pilot study instrument was tested in 2011, with 10 questionnaires for call centre worker operators. After this first stage, more questions were added and some were removed or made clearer.

The level of participation in the questionnaire was determined by the distributor. It became clear from the onset that whoever distributes the questionnaires affects the participation. An initial pilot study with ten operators provided key lessons about the language, themes and unforeseen challenges in data coding. The initial questionnaire was reworked and distributed to all the call centre operators available at the time of my visits. This self-administered survey was a mixture of both the closed and open ended questions, and the aim was to reach as many workers as possible during the short period I had in the City of Joburg. More than 100 survey questionnaires were distributed with 59 of them returned completed. The monitored self-completed questionnaires were distributed to the call centre operators in the call centre during my visits. The number of workers in the call centre is supposed to be 130, but at the time of the survey only 90 people were present. Considering many factors discussed later in the analysis chapters, the 59 who did get involved in the survey can be viewed as a substantial number. The combination of open and closed ended questions was challenging at first as the former was not easy to code. This was countered by looking at different responses from the respondents and later categorised into numbers. This meant browsing through the questionnaire responses to look for common themes in the open ended questions. For example when the respondents were asked to give examples of the situations where they felt angry towards a customer, many respondents would write a story with different sources of anger. This is when I scanned through the stories and coded

them into 6 themes. The numbers next to the themes were then entered into a spreadsheet which was imported to SPSS programme that only recognise numbers.

#### **4.6 Analysis of data: Tools of analysis**

The analysis stage of this survey proved to be challenging as the Statistical Programme for Social Sciences (SPSS) was not available in the Department of Sociology so I had to work on an Excel sheet which was later imported to the SPSS file. I used the Psychology Department to access the programme as the Sociology licence had not been renewed. At the beginning of my analysis I constructed a 'codebook' on a spreadsheet to give specific instructions to the SPSS programme from the questionnaire. This meant assigning numbers, defining and labelling each variable (Pallant, 2010: 11). This was saved in different places as it formed the key to my data analysis of the survey. The codebook was very useful in listing all my variables in the questionnaires including the abbreviations and numbers I used in the SPSS programme. In addition to the identification code of the questionnaire I ended up with 45 variables consisting of both closed and open-ended questions. For open-ended questions I needed to "scan through the questionnaires and looked for common themes" (Pallant, 2010: 13). For instance, the question on the examples of 'customer situations of anger' was then coded according to common responses from the pilot study to include five options: 1) Customer shouting insults; 2) Customer blaming agent for COJ problems; 3) Customer being racist; 4) Customer calling me stupid; 5) Customer providing incorrect details. This was made possible by the pilot study with a few employees.

The data capturing stage was tedious in the early stages of looking at frequencies within the data. Though I was tempted to ask for help from one of the departmental teaching assistants I later realised that this process was part of my analysis as I created notes and questions to be interrogated later during the basic statistical analysis. Data capturing took a week and after that I ran basic statistical analyses.

The analysis of the survey data included basic descriptive statistics, correlations (to explore relationships between certain variables) and T-tests (to compare between groups). Descriptive statistics complemented the interviews in terms of the what, who and how questions of the call centre labour process. These included age, gender, recruitment, number of calls per week, education levels in the call centre, etc. In terms of correlations, a

few examples included relationships between years in the call centre and satisfaction, anger and trust at work, and so forth. An independent-sample T-test was used to compare male and female groups. Most of the call centre employees belonged in the same race group so I decided to use gender as categorical independent variable to test job satisfaction in the call centre.

#### **4.6.1 Analysing qualitative data**

In the search for recurring themes, patterns and behaviours, the data was broken down according to the research objectives, in order to answer the research question. For instance, workers experiences were divided into two with work organisation and worker well-being. The former consisted of recruitment and selection, labour process, managerial control, technology and worker discretion, customer-worker interface, and so forth. Worker well-being was assessed using health and safety, training, career development, sick leave and shift work, commitment and morale and so forth. The analysis is presented in the last three chapters of this thesis.

Smit (2002) has noted that qualitative data analysis is a 'nonlinear and on-going' process which starts when collecting data. The first stage of analysing these field notes started during the interviews, as the repetition from the participants provided key words to use in the analysis. This was followed by transcriptions of interviews that had been taped. As more interviews were recorded each day it became clear that a single researcher could not transcribe all of them; therefore, I listened several times to some of the interviews, especially the ones which took more than two hours. Each interview was summarised according to its core themes and topics. For some of the interviews not taped, I had taken thick notes and transcribed them immediately to save the date in multiple storage places for safety reasons. As the data was transcribed and coded, it was also analysed. Themes were identified and differences within the interviews also noted as the beginning of the analysis of the worker's experiences within local government. This analysis was also used to reflect on concepts and to examine relationships between certain concepts within the study of the call centre labour process.

#### **4.7 Challenges of the study**

The primary limitation of the study was that it was mostly limited to the study of the call centres labour process, without looking at the local government customer relations in

general. This was a pragmatic decision because of time and resource constraints and also to enable deeper digging into the call centre setup. The customer is at the centre of the interaction between the state and frontline workers but the discussion focused on the perceptions and experiences of the workers. However, the discussion on customer interface can never be separated from the call centre work organisation within local government since they are found at the centre of the relationship between the citizen and government. Another limitation is that one in-depth case study of the organisation is cannot be representative of the whole local government environment. The case was chosen based on its structural and social significance rather than for generalisation. However, one needs to bear in mind that this case provides a historical picture and possible future model of the call centre labour processes within South Africa because of the political and economic power possessed by the City of Johannesburg. The archival documentation and accessible nature of information was another key justification for this choice.

The third limitation of the project was linked to the difficulty of establishing consistent relations to maintain accessibility in the volatile and dynamic City of Johannesburg. In the three years I visited Johannesburg, I established good friendships and working relations, but this was hindered by changes within the city: as an example, the call centre had five different managers in the space of four years. This meant introducing and re-introducing myself each time; the managers were suspicious already because of the loyalty politics at play in local government. Each manager required the same documents requested by the previous one and consulted the Directors before allowing me into the call centre. Lastly, based on the history with local government call centres, the researcher sought to expand the knowledge base due to sparse literature on the public sector call centres generally.

On the other hand, the researcher's age and background was a topic of great interest with operators. Many congratulated me and warning me "not to ever work in this environment". One operator enquired about career options as she was registered for a Bachelor of Commerce degree. My age and social background was an advantage as operators tended to feel comfortable with disclosing information. The researcher is an integral part of the process of the research and the conscious decision to investigate work in local government was motivated by myriad of things including public perceptions of frontline workers.

Similarities between the researcher and the workers seemed to provide comfort and friendships were easily established during the process.

A researcher's biography and social location have significant implications for the research process. As Burawoy (1990: 11) noted concerning his field experience:

... the data I gathered was very much contingent on who I was – a white male recently graduated from British University, with a degree in mathematics, a newcomer to colonialism, and an idealist to boot. Every one of these characteristics shaped my entry and performance in social situations and how people spoke to me of racial issues.

This was part of the challenge Jacklyn Cock experienced in studying black, working class women for her research on *Maids and Madams* (1984). These are important lessons: a researcher's identity can significantly affect the research process. Cock argued that being white and female investigating a sensitive topic (maids) and being a 'madam' in the context of Apartheid, provided a challenge in getting some of the participants to open up to her. This was addressed by recruiting black working class women as field assistants to interview the participants on her behalf. This illustration seeks to highlight the advantages of myself as researcher being young, black and female in an environment in which most of the research participants had similar demographic characteristics. This opened up conversations beyond the study at times; for instance, I received comments such as, "You are so young to be doing PhD? Wow this is inspiring" (CCA 3<sup>7</sup>, 04 July 2011). Because they felt comfortable, many of the research participants wanted to tell me about their educational backgrounds and the reasons why they had joined the call centre. Cock (1989) also expressed doubt regarding whether an 'outsider' would have achieved what she had achieved as a white female in interviewing 'madams'.

The 'class' dynamics of the case study have been mentioned earlier. Power relations between the researcher and researched were evident despite the efforts to remain non-hierarchical. Adesina (1992: 26) noted that "the researcher might be of peasant, artisan, or working class background. The embourgeoisment immanent in university education and

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<sup>7</sup> Call Centre Agent 3 was interviewed at Proton House in July 2011.

career, and the development of petty bourgeois instincts, easily put a gap between the researcher and his or her background". This is where a researcher needs to recognise the 'class gap' between himself or herself and the researched.

#### **4.7.1 Doing emotional work on emotional labour**

Feminist values of research encourage a researcher to express emotional motivation during the fieldwork. I was trying to 'eradicate the preconceptions' of the South African local government but was also influenced by what Adichie Chimamanda (2009) termed *The Danger of a Single Story*. In this context, this meant public servants who are lazy, disinterested, incompetent, working in good conditions and well paid within the corrupt public service discourse (Von Holdt, 2010; Edigheji, 2007). At the call centre, I saw a different side to the common story that the public hears regularly. Experience affords one a first-hand observation of the social phenomenon being investigated, and shapes the best way to understand a person's ideas and thus develop empathy through sharing the experiences that led to those ideas (Collins, 2009: 272).

This single story affected my emotions about the state of customer service in the call centre. "It makes you respectful of people ... The idea isn't everything. There is a person behind the idea; somebody speaking, and you respect their views and their right to speak, and there might be some truth in it ...; the right to be heard is very strong" (Callinicos, 1999: 144). This is an advantage and partly the challenge for the qualitative feminist paradigm, as some have argued that "experience is not a self-authenticating claim to knowledge" (O'Leary, 1997: 47). As with any other qualitative research, feminists also face this challenge of validity and representation of women's voices in an 'objective' scientific manner. Though the positivist perspective has argued for an objective reality in order to classify something as knowledge, feminists have argued that the universal comes from within. It comes from truthful identity of what is. The ethic of care and non-hierarchical group interviews were at the centre of this study, to access the hidden meanings of the worker's experiences as they sought to relate to the researcher's background.

It should be added, however, that where some sociologists have themselves gone to work in factories either as part of their professional training or out of necessity or where as sometimes happens they have put aside their questionnaires and listened

to workers with both ears, they have often established relationships of trust, learned to comprehend the milieu, and written creditable accounts (Braverman, 1998: 21).

Case study involves deep 'emotional work'; this means "attention to one's own behaviour and its possible effects on others" (Hartley, 2004: 332). The smile and friendliness from the researcher makes it easier to elicit personal relations among the participants. The researcher needs to be aware of this influence in affecting those who eventually become part of the study. It is this awareness about the position and social character of the researcher that needs to be recognised and its possible influence in the report writing.

#### **4.8 Conclusion**

The focus of this chapter was to provide a detail account of how the data was collected for this study. Using the single case study as a 'strategy', not as a method, provided flexibility in the field (Hartley, 2004: 323). Despite the qualitative nature of the study, I argued for the unnecessary divide between the different research methods. In this research I have mixed these two approaches (qualitative and quantitative) with feminist practices. The use of multiple research methods was part of the advantage in using a case study approach. This made triangulation automatic response and strengthened the study's validity and reliability. This meant flexibility and application of different techniques in collecting reliable data. Research methods included survey questionnaires, in-depth semi-structured interviews and focus group interviews. Anne Oakley observed that "important contributions to sociological knowledge have been made using data from small samples" (cited in Cock, 1989: 175). The use of a single case (Johannesburg) was justified by providing the socio-economic and political significance of Johannesburg.

Finally, challenges to this research were listed, including the suspicions and untrusting nature of local government environment regarding researchers, worsened by the 'billing crisis' in 2010/11. This certainly affected my fieldwork including time frames and access granted by authorities to conduct research. The big media interest in the municipality about inaccurate account bills also had an effect (this will be further discussed in the following chapter).

The following chapter provides the socio-economic and political context within which Joburg Connect was established. This helps in understanding the role of this call centre, the nature of work organisation and relations governing the labour process in Chapter 6 of this thesis.

## Chapter 5

# The (Dis)Connected City of Johannesburg: Neoliberalism, Work and Community Struggles

### 5.1 Introduction

This chapter moves from global to local as it seeks to situate work organisation and employment conditions of the Johannesburg Call Centre. Based on the neoliberal agenda, the New Public Management (NPM) discourse in South African local government has led to the implementation of a number of legal and fiscal restructuring tools to accommodate the macroeconomic changes within the public sector. The emphasis is on the impact of restructuring on organisation of work within the local government. The chapter deals with the city of Johannesburg as a '(dis)connected' city; this refers to its relations with citizens, workers, the continent and the world. The emphasis is on strengthening the 'connecting' interface between the workers and citizens. In this chapter I borrow the term –'Connected City' from Zachary P. Neal's book *The Connected City: How Networks are Shaping the Modern Metropolis* (2012). Although the book focuses on different levels of urban network connections (regional, national and global), I decided to use the concept to refer simply to city relations with citizens and workers.

The network relationships identified by Neal (2012) include city connections with other cities through the Internet, airlines, etc. Paul Thompson (2003b) has argued for a 'disconnected capitalism' which seems to be creating 'disunity' among different economic actors making it hard to make "connections between the objectives of work and employment and simultaneously employers to keep their side of the bargain with employees" (360). In this chapter I compress 'disunity' 'disruptions' or 'dissatisfaction' into disconnections as they will all be used to describe the disruptions and 'connecting' role of the City Call Centres in the City of Johannesburg. It is at this point where I bring in call centre history and a brief overview to argue that it 'connects' the citizens/customer and to the city. In spite of the intended connecting role of this call centre, the city remains disconnected from its citizens due to economic policies that have restructured the city to serve only the 'connected' few.

The precarious nature of the changes in the local government has produced more part-time, casualised and Taylorised work, contested by the community and labour organisations (Barchiesi, 2011). The disciplinary effect of these neoliberal changes in the public sector has been felt by individual citizens through customerisation of relations in the local government. The imagination and implications of this customer orientation has been well demonstrated in the City of Johannesburg in post-apartheid SA. Navigating through changes that influenced the current revenue management system (to which Joburg Connect belongs) I describe the background and implications of such changes on the customer call centre within City of Johannesburg (COJ).

With a population of 4.4 million and 36 per cent of the Gauteng population, the City of Johannesburg is the most populated and diverse city in South Africa (Statistics South Africa, Census 2011). The city's citizens are the most connected in the country, with more than 90 per cent having cell phones, with 71 per cent using radio as a source of information while 33 per cent have access to computers with mostly Internet from work (Statistics South Africa, Census 2011). It is the city with most 'smart citizens' as there are more than 1.8 million people on social networks with the city. Johannesburg citizens use their cell phones to access internet and social networks (mostly Facebook). The concept of 'Smart City' for Johannesburg was launched in 2011, with the city emphasising the use of call centres, social networks, emails, multimedia messages and the website to connect the citizens to the city (Mgingqi, 2011). The South African National Taxi Association (SANTACO) and Telkom (State Telephone Company) launched the Wi-Fi Taxi project to accommodate taxi commuters in Soweto within the City of Johannesburg promoting smart transporting (Bendile-Eye Witness News: 12 June, 2014). In his 2014 State of the City address, the Mayor, labelled Johannesburg as the 'smart city at work' with initiatives to promote a smart city within the COJ; as a result many public spaces are now fitted with broadband hot spots including bus stations, Park Station, Carlton Centre, Soccer City, libraries (State of the City Address, 2014).

The concept of 'Smart Cities' refers to the use of Information and Communication Technology 'to build and integrate critical infrastructures and services of a city' (Nam and Pardo, 2011: 284). At the centre of the concept lies 'smart customised interfaces' with the citizens. In the COJ, more than 42 000 smart meters are being installed to regulate the use of energy. Along with pre-paid water access, this has seen the city fighting with

'disconnected' citizens. Smart meters are designed to record and control electric energy usage from the citizens and promote 'efficient' billing, thus regulating the behaviour of the individual users (Mgingqi, 2011). Based on the inability to purchase or sometimes pay for these basic services, some citizens continue to be disconnected with cuts in the supply of water and electricity (this will be discussed below under the anti-privatisation community struggle). The interconnectedness of the city infrastructure and services delivered by the city is increasingly producing revenue mainly from selling electricity (COJ, 2014).

On the global level, Johannesburg is listed among many world cities in global city surveys with world city connections (McDonald, 2008: 2). This is a modern city in terms of technology, wealth, racial and cultural complexity, marked by a massive exchange of goods and consumption. Alongside this are decaying, congested and sometimes empty (largely office) spaces. Johannesburg is undergoing massive structural changes with the central business district displaying massive advertising billboards, enticing consumer labels and highways with massive traffic flows. Johannesburg's aesthetic culture has been the source of criticism, as the pursuit of money forms the centre of social relations for many (Simmel in Nuttall and Mbembe, 2008). Inspired by its vision to be the 'world class African city' Johannesburg seems to prioritise the investor with a "good business environment, international circulation of capital and conspicuous consumption based lifestyle appealing to post-industrial professional" (Bremner, 2004: 120).

## **5.2 The City of Johannesburg metropolitan area**

After the end of 'institutionalised apartheid' the City of Johannesburg had an opportunity to restructure its special and socio-economic conditions as the city had previously been divided along racial lines in service delivery and infrastructure development. At the time 24 per cent of its population lived in the informal dwelling, and 17 per cent were without basic service access. In 1948, more than 40 per cent of the population was white with the coloured and Indian community together making up 4 per cent of the population, and the rest being African. This changed radically from 1996 with the black community increasing to more than 70 per cent of the population (Crankshaw and Parnell, 2000). Currently the COJ consists of 4 million people, with 72 per cent being black, 17 per cent white, 6,5 per cent coloured and 3,7 per cent Asians (mainly Indians) (COJ, 2013a). In addition to these conditions, the city experiences high population growth rates (4,1 per cent per annum) due to urbanisation and

poorly developed rural areas. This increases the number of the informal settlements annually while at the same time increases the number of households not receiving the basic services.

The political transition has ushered in demographic transition within the Johannesburg area. These demographic changes have mirrored the South African political landscape. Johannesburg is representative of the South African population landscape both demographically and economically. The city's racialised inequality reflects the greater South African social problem, with the biggest low income formal townships, including Soweto, Alexandria, Diepsloot, Ivory Park and Orange Farm. The Northern suburbs are mainly occupied by white and affluent communities who have benefited from the apartheid government's services. The inner city is characterised by inner city decay. This is the city which serves as beacon of hope to many African immigrants, but also reflects the legacy of inequality in access to the services. Johannesburg reflects the current inter- and intra-racial inequalities that are increasing around the country, which means the study of Johannesburg offers a countrywide trajectory of structural changes (among the black urban population) in the rest of the country. This is why Murray (2011: 1) said "Johannesburg after apartheid is where the evolving story of the new South Africa is most fully played out ..." It serves as a role model given its political, economic and demographic landscape, displaying 'ostentatious wealth in the midst of deplorable impoverishment and deprivation, a genuinely resplendent playground for affluent white consumers' (Murray, 2011: 1).

Class inequalities are said to be replacing the race differentials as the size of one's cheque book increasingly measures the voice in the market place. The new commercial space and boundaries are based along class lines; Mbembe (2008: 61) made an example of Melrose Arch and Montecasino as a "spectacle of capital in the same way gold mines were in the twentieth century". These are interracial spaces are occupied by black and white middle class consumers who are preoccupied by their private and commercial interests. Very critical of such spaces, Bremner (2004: 46) argued for the exclusive nature of such spaces: "... the colour of one's money rapidly replaces skin colour as the currency of showy success ..." Despite the 'colourless' money seemingly portrayed by the Johannesburg urban culture in these privately owned commercial spaces, Johannesburg continues to symbolise the broader South African society. The Centre for Development and Enterprise (CDE) concurs

that it is the dominant class perspective that is shaping Johannesburg city: “The main reason why Johannesburg deracialisation has been so successful is that issues of race in the city have been subordinated to class interest” (CDE, 2002: 25).

“For many blacks who migrated there, Johannesburg offered a sense of cultural release, partial state of freedom, inebriation and ease” (Mbembe, 2008: 51). Egoli or City of Gold is one of the most liberal cities in the world, with the most linguistically diverse townships in South Africa. According to the Centre for Development and Enterprise (CDE, 2002). Johannesburg is the most diverse city in the continent providing a beacon of hope and sometimes a disappointment for many migrants: “Johannesburg is essentially a city of migrants – a tough, bustling, entrepreneurial place driven by thrusting new men in town eager to get rich” (CDE, 2002: 23). Despite this cosmopolitan culture portrayed by the Johannesburg landscape, the perceptions of crime is often cited as the detriment to the ‘prosperous future’ of the city (CDE, 2002: 26). Recently proven false by Mexican research group (Security, Justice and Peace) Johannesburg was not part of the top 50 World’s violent cities in 2013/14. Cape Town (20<sup>th</sup> in the world) proved to be the most violent city in South Africa, followed by Port Elizabeth (41 in the world) and Durban (48<sup>th</sup>)<sup>8</sup>.

### **5.2.1 Economic profile**

Portraying the double life visible in the rest of African continent, Johannesburg or Jozi, is the product of capitalism showing off the “first world glamour and excess alongside with third world degradation and poverty” (Mbembe, 2008). The Johannesburg industrial revolution gave it a unique identity in modern African cities where “capital, labour, and industry came together for the first time in the continent” (Mbembe, 2008). This gave birth to a modern city in Africa and ‘African modern’ which developed its aesthetic appeal to the migrants from all corners of the world.

Johannesburg is one of Africa’s few integrated financial-commercial-industrial-mining megapolies, and forms the first experiment of the New Public Management philosophy. This city receives more international flights than any African city in the continent and the

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<sup>8</sup> <http://businesstech.co.za/news/general/53824/south-africas-most-violent-city/> and <https://justiceinmexico.wordpress.com/2014/01/24/report-on-50-most-violent-cities-worldwide-includes-nine-mexican-cities/>

Johannesburg Stock Exchange is the 12th richest in world. The City of Johannesburg commands so much power in the southern African region that it contributes more than 35 per cent of the National GDP, 10 per cent of the GDP for the whole of the Southern African Development Community (SADC), and houses more than 74 per cent of private sector headquarters including major banks (COJ-IDP, 2014). It competes with Cape Town and Durban in South Africa as an economic and political powerhouse. The CBD is dominated by big banks and insurance companies who decided to stay in the city centre after the white investment fled the area (Tomlinson, Beauregard, Bremner and Mangcu, 2003: xiii). These major banks have designed “secured, self-sufficient cocoons” for their employees to shelter them from the surrounding chaotic city. They have also absorbed into their own premises coffee shops, magazine stands, bookstalls, chemists and hairdressers which would normally define the city (Bremner, 2004: 58).

Within South Africa, the dominance of the Johannesburg region is unquestionable. The city is “peopled not just by workers, the poor, criminals and illegal immigrants, but also by artists, playwrights, craftspeople, investigative journalists, poets, writers, musicians and civil-minded public intellectuals of all races as well as highly skilled migrants and jet setters” (Mbembe and Nuttall, 2008: 24). With a propertied, privileged and powerful middle class, the city seems to emulate others on the continent with its high walled gated communities, exclusive shopping malls adjacent to poverty and slums occupied by the poor. This creates ‘disconnected and disjointed’ urban spaces which include informal social networks for survival by the poor (Myers and Murray, 2006: 5).

Johannesburg has hosted one of the biggest successful events in the world – the FIFA Soccer World Cup 2010 (FIFA Financial report, 2011). The event recorded all time high profits in the city and promoted the city beyond the African continent. The FIFA World Cup was praised for the income generated of up to USD 631 million which increased FIFA’s reserve to USD 1,280 million (FIFA Financial Report, 2011). With world-class shopping malls, the city offers abundant opportunities for many ambitious and young ‘future’ successful Africans. From being a mining town in the 19th and 20th centuries Johannesburg now has the most diversified economy in South Africa (COJ, 2012a). It boasts accounting firms, media houses, entertainment industries, and information technology companies.

While privatisation of state assets began in the dying stages of apartheid, the World Bank has encouraged restructuring of the local municipality by commercialising the basic services (including water). The emphasis on efficiency by these international advisers led to equity being compromised. The World Bank stressed job creation by enhancing the business environment for private sector investment. This meant less investment in urban infrastructure and municipal services (Bond, 2004a). This was codified in the Egoli 2002 document which restructured the city by decentralisation, privatisation and agencification of municipal entities. These changes were applied in an attempt to increase efficiency in the service provision of basic needs. The council was perceived as unable to manage the city's services. This is the first post-apartheid city to 'corporatise' legally, devolving autonomy to the utilities (McDonald and Smith, 2002: 45). Though Durban and Cape Town have 'corporatised' within the municipalities, Johannesburg has completely separated the utilities operations from the city, although they are still owned by the city (Smith, 2006). This was applied regardless of the racial segregation history of the city where affluent areas were well serviced while the black townships often lacked basic services and infrastructure.

### **5.2.2 Political profile**

The City of Johannesburg is the most powerful and well-established municipal council within the Gauteng province (Smith, 2006; Beavon, 2004). Immediately after 1994 democratic elections, Johannesburg was the first city to be restructured along the lines of neoliberal ideology. The greater metropolitan City of Johannesburg was established under the Municipal Structures Act 117 of 1998. This is one of the 15 municipalities of the Gauteng region which was subdivided into 7 regions (see Figure 1-2 in Chapter 1). This was intended to deracialise and integrate the city so as to form one tax base for redistribution of funds to former disadvantaged areas. The city has been run by the ruling party, the African National Congress (ANC), since the first democratic municipal elections in 2000. The municipality is led by the Executive Mayor (Park Tau) and his Council which provides political and policy leadership for the city. The city governance is based on Egoli 2002 with a long-term development plan called Joburg 2040.

The City Manager is responsible for the finance and administration of the city. The City has some of "the most vocal and well-organised civil society organisations that are adamantly opposed to privatisation of essential services in the country" (Smith, 2006: 26). This city was

the centre of anti-privatisation campaigns by the South African Municipal Workers Union and the Anti-Privatisation Forum in the late 1990s. Community protests organised by the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee along with illegal electricity reconnections were part of the resistance to the neoliberal philosophy of running the municipality. This provides a critical and learning exercise for the labour movement and civil society on how to deal with this new local government agenda.

The city was at the forefront of urban struggles against the apartheid government with June 16 Soweto Uprising in 1976 marking the turning point of resistance against the segregationist apartheid system. Johannesburg is the role model for the metropolitan councils around the country but also faces the challenge of maximising efficiency along with equity in service provision. In late 2011, Manguang Metro and Zimbabwe's Bulawayo city ambassadors as well as the Pakistan local government Minister visited the COJ to study its operations on governance, call centre operations to consider what they could learn from them. The local government legislations promote revenue collection through cost recovery which tends to dominate the municipal agendas above equitable service provision. This is based on the national framework, which is committed to the universal provision of essential services with limited resources. This means regardless of its recent billing crisis, Johannesburg continues to command political and economic power locally and internationally, which could see the call centre model being exported to the rest of the continent. The Johannesburg Call Centre is situated in the centre of customer services issues faced by the City.

### **5.3 Restructuring of Johannesburg Metropolitan Municipality**

According to Bond (2004a) Johannesburg formed the laboratory for the experimenting of the New Public Management in South Africa, immediately after 1994. The Egoli 2002 strategy was prepared with the help of the international consultancies and funds from the World Bank. Some have labelled it as a 'single neo-liberal approach' with specific emphasis on downsizing, efficiency at any cost, and a direct parallel between public administration and business administration (Hall, 2000; Smith, 2006). In restructuring Johannesburg, the World Bank sought to promote privatisation and commercialisation of basic services throughout municipalities in the country (Chandra and Ahmad, 2000 in Barchiesi, 2001). As part of the spirit of unifying the city and utilities, agencies and corporatised entities were

formed as a result of Egoli 2002. This decentralisation of organisational functions meant certain municipality functions would now be provided along the private sector lines. The introduction of Utilities, Agencies and Corporatised entities (UAC) was seen as key in driving towards restoring and sustaining financial stability to the city, from the financial crisis in the 1990s due to integration of previously segregated local councils. It is well known that labour and community organisations were invited at the advanced stages of the Egoli plan (Barchiesi, 2001; Samson, 2008). This meant massive resistance which was ultimately superseded by the African National Congress government in the implementation phase in 2001. A number of non-core functions were privatised including Metro Gas, Rand Airport, housing stock, the Johannesburg stadium, Ellis Park, Orlando Stadium, the Fresh Produce Market, the Civic Theatre, and Kelvin Power Generation. Corporatisation included Waste Management, Water, Electricity, Roads, Parks, Johannesburg Zoo, city buses and the Storm Water Agency.

Though some have defended the Egoli 2002 as not 'privatisation' (in a narrow sense) but commercialisation of services, McDonald and Pape (2002) argued that partial or complete ownership of municipal entities; listing the entities according to Companies Act; leasing to private sector; and applying business principles in management and rendering of services (see Mojalefa, 2012) all constitute privatisation in one form or another. According to Greenberg (2006: 3) commercialisation puts a worth on state assets, thus making it a crucial step in preparing a state asset for sale. Together corporatisation and commercialisation "establish the profitability of an entity" (Greenberg, 2006: 3). Smith (2006) asserted that commercialisation of Joburg Water, Electricity and Waste Management was unique to Johannesburg as the municipality remains the sole shareholder of these entities. She went further to argue that commercialisation of services was 'thwarted' in its success by sharing billing, credit control and meter reading functions.

Corporatisation simply means introduction of market practices and market mechanisms in the operation of public owned organisation. McDonald (2008) believes that corporatisation is linked to privatisation. Through managerial styles that are profit driven, the use of outsourcing for cost efficiency ultimately promotes an opportunity for private companies to be attracted into public services provision. McDonald (2008: 178) warned that "it is a conceptual and political mistake to pose the market (private) and the state (public) as binary

opposites” as the public and private tend to mix and are varied in terms of involvement. This means privatisation can never be limited to state assets transfer but private sector can be involved in delivery of basic services. In a nutshell, Egoli 2002 sought to introduce the business motive behind provision of services in the Johannesburg Metropolitan Municipality. The plan focused on decentralisation and modernisation of the organisational structures. This meant separation of policymaking (by the City) and operations (by the UACs). This customer focus was said to be re-segregating the citizens according to race and class as the service delivery focuses on the few who can afford to pay (Ruiters, 2002). According to Egoli 2002, citizens were now entrenched as customers, naturalising the market logic in the heart of service delivery.

Egoli 2002 was informed by the boycotting of payment of services and rates in the 1980s which saw millions of Eskom bills not paid by communities. Through its emphasis on the commodification of basic services, Egoli 2002 ‘encouraged’ the communities to resume paying the services due to fiscal constraints and budget cuts from the national government. This process was met with resistance and tension in Johannesburg areas as the ‘poor’ sought to organise against commercialisation of ‘daily life’ (Naidoo, 2007). Some have argued for the individualising nature of the customer model, which seeks to privatise the community struggles in their homes through individualising technologies like prepaid meters (Naidoo, 2007; Harvey, 2005; Wainright, 2012).

It is worth noting the changes in the funding of local government since the new equitable share formula has been applied. The new equitable share formula attempts to deal with the small tax base in the rural areas by transferring 70 per cent of local government budget to rural poor municipalities. Taking into consideration the different abilities to raise funds, the National Treasury transfers funds to the local government based on ‘equitable share’ where demographics and developmental factors are taken into account when distributing grants to the local government. The national and local government provides free and subsidised services to cater for the poor citizens. This equitable share allocates R293 per month to subsidise the poor households of basic services (National Treasury, 2014: 100). This amount supports equitable shares of electricity, water, sanitation and refuse removal among 59 per cent of households earning less than R2300 per month. The eight big municipalities depend on their revenue base for 80 per cent of their income (National Treasury, 2014: 104).

## **5.4 South African local government context**

Local government services are part of the public service sector, with similar employment characteristics, serving the communities. They provide basic services for 'non-profit interest'; it is fair to classify them under the umbrella of the public service sector (Ramsay, Baldry, Connolly and Lockyer, 1991: 36). Restructuring within the South African public sector was introduced as early as the 1970s by the then Prime Minister P.W. Botha, in an attempt to curb the public service inefficiency and lure a talented workforce from the private sector. This meant a reduced size of the public sector and creating Director General Posts with salaries as exorbitant as those of the private sector (Posel, 1999). The employment conditions of the public sector were sheltered by the National Party government from as early as 1940s which saw an influx (of white Afrikaner population) and expansion of the civil service. This was the safe haven for the white Afrikaans speaking population as they were provided with job security and a lack of competition from blacks and sometimes the white English speaking population (Posel, 1999). Thus, public service jobs are considered to be secure, protected (by labour legislations), better paid and subject to normal benefits including annual leave and pension funds. In the absence of collective bargaining, organisational and labour relations rights in the Public Sector, black service workers had little protection linked to job security and unfair dismissals. In 1995, public sector employment accounted for 1,5 million workers in the formal sector making it the largest employer. Local government accounted for 12,4 per cent of the total number of the state employees. Standing, Sender and Weeks (2006: 92) argued that the public sector emerged from deeply 'Tayloristic and fragmented public sector jobs' with more than 49 occupational titles. Though the democratic government wanted to maintain the size of the public sector, fiscal constraints were limiting. In 1996 public sector cuts were initiated. Government announced that 100 000 public servants would be retrenched in 1996, due to mergers of different departments (Standing et al, 2006: 94). This was the first phase of public sector reforms, continuing from what Botha had left off.

These changes were influenced by a financial squeeze and international trends on the public sector. Centralised big bureaucracies seemed to be ill suited for the changing information-rich global society. This promoted notions of 'doing more with less', opening up debates about the supremacy of the private way of doing things. This model arose out of

Neoliberalism with an inherent hostility against the state monopoly in service provision. The lack of 'true market' meant internal restructuring within the state, to include marketisation, managerialism and consumerism. The commodification and marketisation of the public sector has led to a growing contingent of part-time and outsourced labour within the public sector. The application of scientific management in the public sector through detailed short contracts for the managers, changes the workplace environment within the state sector (Hughes, 1998).

This simply meant running government operations and administration along private business lines. The government now was obliged to do more with less, and promoting efficiency and value for money, citizens have become the 'individualised' customers who are entitled to courtesy, access to information, etc. Following the 'Third-Way' politics by Tony Blair and Bill Clinton (theorised by a sociologist, Anthony Giddens) these reforms emphasised individualisation, competition and reduced public spending. The latter regarded the monopoly of service provision by the state as inhibiting consumer choice. New Public Management seemed to promote a more service-led culture in the public service and also empowers the consumers to be active as opposed to passive and uninformed citizens (Clarke and Newman, 1997).

Criticized for the potential bias towards the 'haves', NPM fails to recognise the disparities between the citizens who are not customers. Those who are poor by the virtue of these principles will receive poor service. NPM underestimates the differences between the public and private sector. This is based on the common and accepted philosophy of 'private sector superiority' ignoring the distinct features of the public service in term of accountability and citizenship. The poor understanding of the difference between the customer and the citizens ignores the fact that citizens do not have a choice compared with clients (Dibben and Higgins, 2004). NPM's emphasis on the 'depoliticisation' of the public sector through managerialism meant that customer participation was influenced by power and knowledge of the consumer, which results in 'ladder of participation' (Dibben and Higgins, 2004: 34).

These changes and contradictions were felt in local government in South Africa, as the basic services continued being racialised. The introduction of neoliberal forms of service delivery individualised the communities and service rendered to them as customers. Promoted

through legal, fiscal and ideological reasons this increased privatisation or corporatisation has worsened inequalities within the local government service delivery. Stratifying the local government through 'affordability' has ensured that the stark service differential experiences under apartheid remain intact. It is well known that by the late 90s more than 74 per cent of black South Africans had to fetch water from long distances; only 14 per cent of black South Africans had access to telephones while 85 per cent of white households enjoyed this 'privilege' (Hirsch, 2005: 16). These conditions created a popular understanding that free basic services would be delivered equitably in the post-apartheid state (McDonald and Pape, 2002; Barchiesi, 1998).

### **5.5 Local government restructuring**

Stratified through the racial categories, the South African local government existed only in white areas as the black townships received little or no basic services. With citizenship defined mainly by race, apartheid created huge disparities between different racial groups in infrastructure development. The level of infrastructure development and service received in the white parts of the country were equivalent to those of Northern America or Western Europe (McDonald and Ruiters, 2005). These luxurious services were subsidised by the taxes generated at the expense of cheap black workers. Paid low salaries as migrants in white cities, black communities resisted the lack of service delivery or poor services, by boycotting the payment of services including rent. As the non-payment of services collectivised and intensified the struggle against the apartheid, the ANC used this to campaign for a single municipal tax base during their 1994 election campaign (Naidoo, 2007; McDonald, 2002). Upon its exit the National Party government used the 'tactic' of privatisation to ensure an economic footprint on the country's public facilities.

With the ultimate focus being the transformation of the national and provincial government, though neglected the local government was seen to be the third tier of government which would connect the citizens. The first structural change in the local government was facilitated by the Local Government Transition Act 1993 seeking to deracialise and unify the segregated 843 municipalities into 284. These meshed together the municipalities that were racially divided under apartheid and rural municipalities. The second part of changes in the local government was guided by the local government White Paper in 1998 to ask questions about the functions of the local government. 'What form

should our local government be like and what should local government do'? (Atkinson, 2003: 8). The White Paper envisioned a 'developmental local government' meaning that municipalities would work with citizens and the community to "meet their social, economic, and material needs and improve the quality of their lives" (RSA White Paper, 1998). This concept of community participation was encouraged by the massive movements against the appalling apartheid imposed conditions of black townships services. Seeking inclusive governance, citizens were now to be part of the non-racial municipalities in improving the quality of life. The third part of restructuring was more focused on the legislative frameworks to regulate the administration, planning, service delivery and finances of the local government. These included the passing of Municipal Systems Act (No. 32, 2000), Municipal Finance Management Act (No. 56, 2003), Municipal Property Rates Act (No. 6, 2004). During the first term of Thabo Mbeki's administration (1999-2004) South Africa saw a disciplined fiscal local government in line with macro-economic policies implemented in 1996. It was the passing of the Municipal Systems Act and Municipal Finance Management Act which saw closer relations between the public and private sectors and the latter providing more of the basic services under the logic of profit. This quickly stratified South African society beyond racial categories but according to the 'individual size of cheque books' with citizens as consumers. "Under this new logic, the responsibility for service provision became that of individual paying customer, portrayed as responsible citizen" (Naidoo, 2007: 60). It was during this period that the disciplining effects of neoliberalism were felt in local government by citizens and workers. Local government was now in charge of managing and delivering basic services such water, electricity, and sanitation as well as implementation of housing delivery and some health care functions. In addition, local government was in charge of parks and recreation activities, giving meaning to improving people's lives in the country as a whole.

Encouraging the 'culture of payment' for basic services, the ruling party launched the *Masakhane* (Building Together) campaign where citizens were now to partner with government to 'pay' for the services they had boycotted during the apartheid era. This campaign was launched with the belief that communities could afford to pay but were held back by the 'culture of non-payment' (McDonald and Pape, 2002). The inability to pay was not featured in the mainstream media, as the communities took to the streets against

the local municipalities. According to McDonald and Ruiters (2005) the financial squeeze after the introduction of GEAR (1996) was meant to encourage more privatisation within the municipalities. Local government was now to work with public-private partnership and outsource functions to cut costs. This culminated in an institutionalised structure to promote Public Private Partnerships (PPP) – the MIU (the Municipal Infrastructure Investment Unit). Through this unit, compulsory tendering and private sector involvement in the delivery of basic services was increased. Sometimes this meant privatisation or corporatisation of provision of basic services including water, sanitation, refuse removal, housing, and electricity. Harvey (2012) argued that municipalities were imposing prepaid meters on water and electricity to force citizens to shoulder the costs of delivery in the local government. This was part of the collective demands being reduced to individual depoliticised demands. Individuals were now disciplined through ‘affordability’ of services. McDonald (2008: 177) argued that privatisation resulted in a low standard of water and electricity provision especially to low income households. The fiscal constraints for the local government meant pressure to cut water and power services became formidable. Civic organisations were now up in arms due to water and electricity cuts. The Masakhane campaign was followed by a drop in the rate payments in 1996 by 15 per cent (Van Niekerk, 2001: 67). Since then, the money owed to the municipalities has been escalating to more than R76,5 billion by December 31, 2012 (National Treasury, 2012). More than 60 per cent of this debt is from households owing the municipality, especially in the Gauteng region and the Johannesburg Metropolitan Municipality. Metropolitan municipalities were owed by consumers (with households 61,5 per cent) up to R52,9 Billion by 30 June 2014. The City of Johannesburg is the largest owed at R17, 4 Billion metropolitan followed by Ekurhuleni Metro (R10.7 Billion) and City of Tshwane (R6.6 Billion) (National Treasury, 2014b: 3).

## **5.6 Anti-commodification struggles in the local government**

Commercialisation of basic service delivery was a contested political issue with COSATU (Congress of South Africa Trade Unions) and SAMWU (South African Municipal Workers Union) at the forefront of Anti-Privatisation Forum Campaigns. In 1997 COSATU warned the government against using private contracts in delivering public service as this was against the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) agenda. This emphasised more state driven delivery which would serve the interests of the citizens not only paying

customers. Quoted in Hemson (1998: 19) COSATU argued “the only real way to meet all elements of the RDP is to move away from the reliance on the private sector and to focus more strongly on state-based delivery system”. This has proved to be the challenge in the current local government service delivery system. The trade unions anticipated job losses and casualisation along with sub-contracting in a former protected workplace. The use of private sector services for service delivery was justified by ‘cost effectiveness, efficiency and competitiveness’ (McDonald, 2008). Soon after its inception in 1987, SAMWU launched a campaign against ‘privatisation’ initiated by the National Party, as the latter wanted to privatise certain utilities within the municipalities. This union was based on the premise of workers as citizens which meant a blend of community unionism and workplace demands. As soon as the ANC led government assumed power in 1994, SAMWU faced similar challenges as municipal restructuring was geared towards a neoliberal agenda. This was based on cost recovery and averting the ‘culture of non-payment’ (McDonald, 2002).

As SAMWU grew, most of their members were now based in Johannesburg which was to be restructured along new public management lines. Johannesburg Municipality’s Egoli 2002 was opposed fearlessly by the unions and civil organisations. This led to the Anti-Egoli Forum (2000) where it was eventually called the Anti-Privatisation Forum (APF). As SAMWU led the opposition to neoliberal policies in the city of Johannesburg, a series of strikes and demonstrations between November and December 2000 did not deter the ANC led government to unilaterally implement the Egoli 2002 policy to ‘deal with fiscal crisis’ of the City of Johannesburg. Barchiesi (2007, 2011) argued that COSATU’s alliance with the ruling party weakened SAMWU’s campaign against the neoliberal project as COSATU recruited voters for the ANC in the 2000 municipal elections which won with a resounding victory. Despite the social movement unionism stance, SAMWU was defeated by its own internal organisational problems along with leadership alliance with the ruling party. For example, in 1998 SAMWU in Nelspruit fought against the privatisation of water to the British transnational Biwater, but in the end the municipality won.

The widespread water and electricity cuts or disconnections accompanying the commercialisation of basic services were more prevalent in the former black townships. These are the areas mostly occupied by low-income customers who could not afford the payment for services. This is normally countered with pre-paid metering. This resistance to

paying for municipal services (or inability to pay) could be explained by the different waves of anti-privatisation campaigns hosted mainly by civic organizations, SAMWU, and COSATU in early 2000. Through illegal reconnections the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee (SECC) led the protests against Johannesburg Municipality, reversing individualisation of services through collective action and reconnecting electricity illegally. Operation Khanyisa (Operation Switch On) launched by SECC reconnected more than 3000 households within six months. This brought together Soweto residents against Eskom and City of Johannesburg as people demonstrated and marched against cost recovery (Naidoo and Veriava, 2009). This culminated in scrapping of arrears in townships in COJ up to R1,4 billion and the introduction of individualising prepaid meters. The latter involves payment before the use of service, thereby removing debt burden from the state to the citizens. This means citizens are now blamed for the lack of access to the basic services despite high unemployment and low household incomes in many South African townships.

Despite the opposition from Anti-Privatization Forum, Egoli 2002 was implemented in January 2001, dividing the workforce and increasing the number of casual and outsourced workers (Samson, 2003). Critical of the Egoli 2002 project, Barchiesi (2001, 2011) argued that this restructuring, by focusing on balancing the books rather than social justice, created precarious working conditions and reversed the gains won in the previous decade by the workers. The latter are also part of the communities who suffer from the 'privatisation' of the basic needs in the city. These are the result of "labour casualisation in trying to manage cost recovery thereby perpetuating apartheid urban legacies" (Miraftab, 2004: 878). Samson (2003; 2008) has also shown that women were the most affected by this precarious restructuring as households are mostly managed by women. The quality of working life in City of Johannesburg deteriorated as more casuals were replacing the permanent workers as the UACs sought to maximise profit.

Realising the failure of this neoliberal system in the local government, with citizens having lost confidence to the municipalities, the Department of the Cooperative Governance and Local Government launched 'Project Consolidate' to arrest the breakdown of service delivery in 2000. This project was soon followed by the introduction of the Turnaround Strategy (TAS) in 2009. TAS required municipalities to draw up Turnaround Strategy by the end of May 2010 in order to restore confidence of the people in the local government. TAS

pushed for the concept (from the World Bank) of New Public Management within the local government. Rocked by increasing 'service delivery' protest, Johannesburg City recorded more than 147 community protests about poor service or lack thereof in 2013 (COJ, 2013b).

### **5.7 Revenue and customer relations management**

Since the introduction of Egoli 2002 business model there has been a number of changes including the introduction of the Municipal Systems Act (2000) and Municipal Finance Management Act (2003). In pushing for 'resiliency in city finances' COJ's 2040 Growth and Development Strategy, seeks to integrate the service delivery along with revenue collection as the direct response to the fragmented services imposed by Egoli 2002. The (relatively) new legal framework detail how the local municipality should treat their residents as consumers. Under credit control and debt collection (Chapter 9, Section 95) of the Municipal Systems Act (2000) it is stated that the municipality must:

- a) Establish a sound customer management system that aims to create a positive and reciprocal relationship between persons liable for these payments and the municipality, and where applicable, a service provider;
- b) Establish mechanisms for users of services and ratepayers to give feedback to the municipality or other service provider regarding the quality of the services and the performance of the service provider;
- c) Take reasonable steps to ensure that users of services are informed of the costs involved in service provision, the reasons for the payment of service fees, and the manner in which monies raised from the service are utilised;
- d) Where the consumption of services has to be measured, take reasonable steps to ensure that the consumption by individual users of services is measured through accurate and verifiable metering systems;
- e) Ensure that persons liable for payments receive regular and accurate accounts that indicate the basis for calculating the amounts due;
- f) Provide accessible mechanisms for those persons to query or verify accounts and metered consumption, and appeal procedures which allow such persons to receive prompt redress for inaccurate accounts;

- g) Provide accessible mechanisms for dealing with complaints from such persons, together with prompt replies and corrective action by the municipality;
- h) Provide mechanisms to monitor the response time and efficiency in complying with paragraph (g); and
- i) Provide accessible pay points and other mechanisms for settling accounts or for making pre-payments for services.

In response to the Municipal Systems Act (2000), to provide a responsive municipality and poor payment of services in the city, COJ has responded by centralising the Revenue and Customer Relations Management. Despite customer care services being the peripheral municipal function, through this act, it has now become the core municipal function to deal with debt collection and to increase revenue. COJ decided to open people centres, introducing the interactive Joburg website and call centres to open dialogue about the relationship with citizens and customers. People centres are situated so that citizens can conveniently walk in and arrange payments on their accounts. COJ has more than 46 walk-in-centres across the city. Customers can walk in and “make payments, log account and billing queries, request meter reading and refunds and also apply for Expanded Social Packages (ESP) pensioner rebates, clearances and new connections” (COJ, IDP Plan, 2015/16: 58). Mostly, people centres allow people to visit them within convenient geographical areas, especially those who prefer not to call the city. Along with walk-in-centres, COJ provides a website for self-service and Joburg Connect to allow all citizens and customers regardless of their location to directly interact with the municipality about services offered in the people centres.

#### **5.7.1 Brief background to the City of Johannesburg Call Centre (Joburg Connect)**

Call handling has gone through various changes in terms of organisation, structure and process. Like many public sector call centres, COJ call centre started as help desk with each department having its own help desk assistant. Currently, Joburg Connect is the city’s contact centre for all city enquiries and complaints. It operates around the clock, seven days a week and 365 days a year. Its main purpose is to centralise access for customers and reduce the list of numbers customers need to use before being assisted.

This call centre is divided into two: Emergency Connect and Revenue Connect. In the former operators receive life threatening emergency calls and dispatch response vehicles like ambulance, police, fire engines and rescue vehicles. This study is more concerned with the latter- Revenue Customer Care, which deals with all general enquiries regarding the municipal revenue services. According to COJ IDP plan (2015/16: 58) any customer may contact the City call centre on 0860 JOBURG (56 28 74) or email [joburgconnect@joburg.co.za](mailto:joburgconnect@joburg.co.za) to:

- Request information about city's processes and procedures
- Request information on the city's various service offerings
- Log a service request
- Log a municipal account query
- Enquire on the status or progress of an existing query
- Register a complaint
- Record a compliment.

Joburg Connect was designed to attend to queries and complaints in a standard fashion through the integrated customer relations management technologies. It was now possible for the municipality to measure and quantify different kinds of complaints about their services. This was intended to improve customer satisfaction and ultimately change poor customer perceptions about the city. Call centre information was to contribute to the municipality business planning processes by quantifying the number of complaints about a certain subject, resulting in a 'responsive' municipality.



*Picture 5-1: Call Centre entrance – Proton House, Roodepoort*

Joburg Connect started before 2001 when the (former) Mayor (Amos Masondo) decided that the citizens had too many numbers to contact before actually connecting with the city. It was decided that one centralised access number would be better. According to one manager interviewed “We started this call centre in December 2001 and it was designed just to log on calls and send the customer to the right people in the right department, it was not meant to resolve any queries” (Top Manager 1, 20 September 2011).

Before (2006) Programme Phakama, there were many call centres running parallel with Joburg Connect. Each utility had its own call centre: for instance Joburg Water, City Power, Joburg Metro Police Department (JMPD), Pikitup had individual call centres connected through Joburg Connect via an IVR system. This meant a customer would dial the Joburg Connect number and then be transferred to a different geographical area to be attended by the utilities call centre agent. These call centres were separated by geographical distance and technological systems for their Customer Relations Management (CRM). Between the city and these utilities, two billing systems were used, Venus and SAP ERP. Joburg Connect

logged calls using Pega System which was not fully integrated with other utilities call centres. For example, Joburg Water used Hansen Electric Customer Relations Management (CRM) while City Power used e-Respond. Since customers were shared between the city and these UACs, the operators needed to work together with the utilities' back office to resolve customer queries.

This meant one household will received three sepeate billing statement for water, electricity and rates. The intergration internded to create a single bill which became a frustration to the customers who were not educated about these changes (Top Manager 8, 26 August 2013)

The fragmentation and decentralisation of the city revenue system was seen as a threat to the sustainability of the city. Recognising the challenges posed by the decentralisation model from Egoli 2002, the municipality decided to initiate a new business model that integrated the customer interface and revenue management services under Programme Phakama (2006). This programme was initiated by Parks Tau (the current mayor) when he was the Chairperson for Finance, Strategy and Economic Development under Mayor Amos Maseko. Focusing on Revenue Management and Customer Interface services, Programme Phakama sought to integrate the revenue generating services. The three key goals of the programme included:

Improving service delivery through improved customer relationship management; develop sustainable revenue base through improved billing and revenue management; and develop an integrated approach to service delivery. (COJ, 2006a: 13)

The integration of the customer service value chain was rationalised as directly linked to the revenue system of the city. This meant software applications used by the different UACs were to be discarded for a single software to ensure a single customer database. The city sought to integrate the revenue and billing services of Pikitup, City Power (electricity) and Joburg Water through SAP CRM. The shift to this software was intended to promote increased customer interface accountability within the city and its utilities. Through this system, anyone working in the customer interface services would be able to see the history of customers and their experiences with water, electricity, etc. as this would all be

integrated under one programme. According to the COJ Mayoral Committee Report (2005a:1) the city acknowledged the fragmented nature of the Revenue Management Unit which needs to be centralised for accountability and revenue collection purposes. “Revenue Management is a COJ accountability [sic]. Utilities are sources of revenue for COJ. UACs cannot deploy its revenue for its own purposes” (COJ, 2005a: 2)

It is clear that the city currently had to deal with considerable fragmentation with respect to procedures and information systems for revenue and customer interface. “It is also clear that this lead to the opportunity for departments to escape accountability. This fragmentation of services need is highlighted by increasing public concern around management of customer service, the delivery of services and billing and revenue collection processes” (COJ, 2005a: 3). It was this decentralization of billing system which was targeted by Phakama Programme in using the single IT system to streamline the customer relations management systems.

This fragmentation of services between the utilities and the COJ resulted in different working conditions, as the City was regulated by SALGA (South African Local Government Association) labour relations conditions while the entities and utilities set their own labour regulating conditions because of their boards. The UACs operate under the Companies Act (No. 71) 2008 but are fully owned by the City.

Between 2001-2003, [utilities] they were allowed to set their own salary scales, outside SALGA, which became a challenge when the workers were reintegrated to the city (Top Manager 8, 26 August 2013)

This reintegration of the revenue and retail services of the utilities back to the city forms part of the challenges faced by call centre agents after Programme Phakama was implemented. (This challenge is discussed in detail in Chapter 8 under trade unions and call centres).

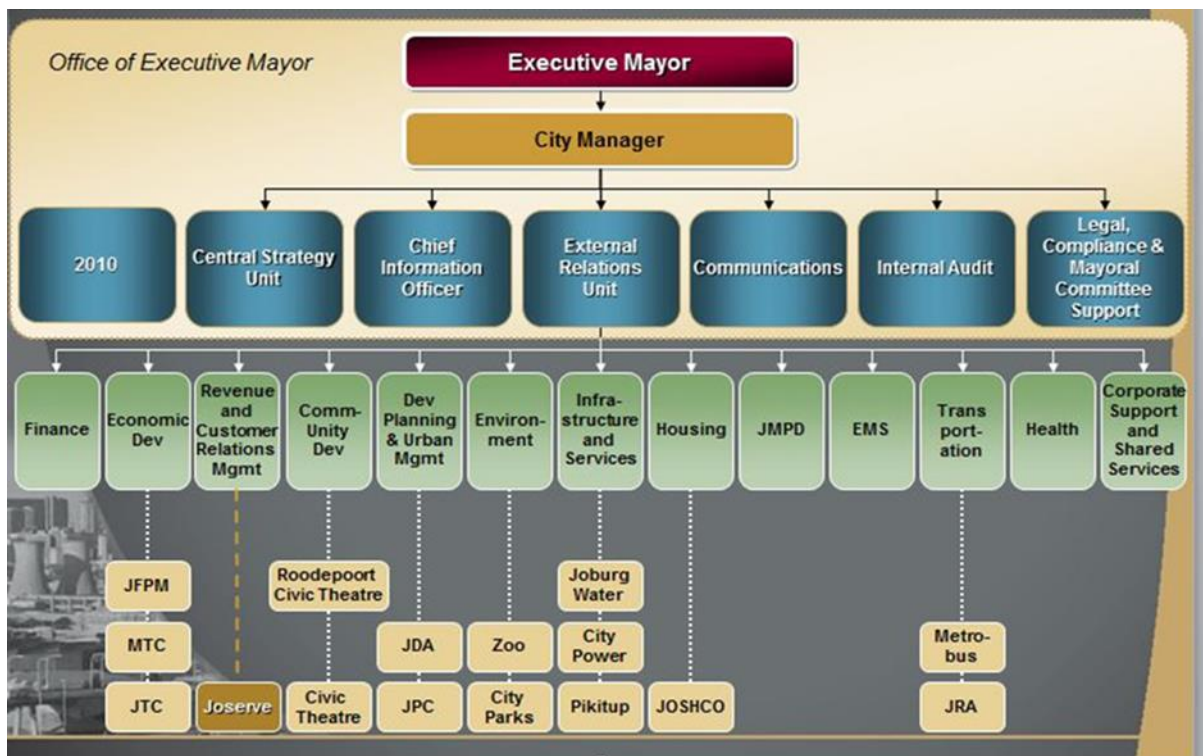
The main ambition Phakama Programme was to create one revenue management system operated with a single customer and revenue view. The Phakama Strategic plan was based on four principles: one billing database system; alignments of IT strategies (city and utilities); centralised customer database, and centralised customer practice. Justification for this

single customer value chain approach included “COJ was a brand and utilities a product” (COJ, 2005a: 2) meaning the service delivery failure of the utility means a COJ failure.

The city is the sole owner of the customer. The customer sees the city as one therefore the city needs to own all the customers of the city despite the entities having had their own customers in the past. Now the city is implementing a one stop shop integrating all the retail services of the entities under Programme Phakama (Top Manager 8, 26 August 2013)

It was then suggested that the JoServe Programme Office be set up to deal with this integration of Customer Interface value Chain and Retail services of the Utilities. This was initiated as a ‘single service utility’ to be at the forefront of COJ revenue management services. It would be housed in Juta Street outside the municipal house (Thuso House) in Jorissen Street. This service utility would take responsibility for overall customer interface management system. JoServe would administer and manage all the billing functions of the city (COJ, 2005b: 4). The desired structure (JoServe in the organogram below) was never fully implemented as its functions were taken over by the Directorate of the Customer Interface and Revenue Management Unit reporting to the Chief Operating Officer of the City (Mohlokwana, 2012: 49).

Figure 5-1: City of Johannesburg organogram showing JoServe utility



### 5.7.2 Programme Phakama and billing in the COJ

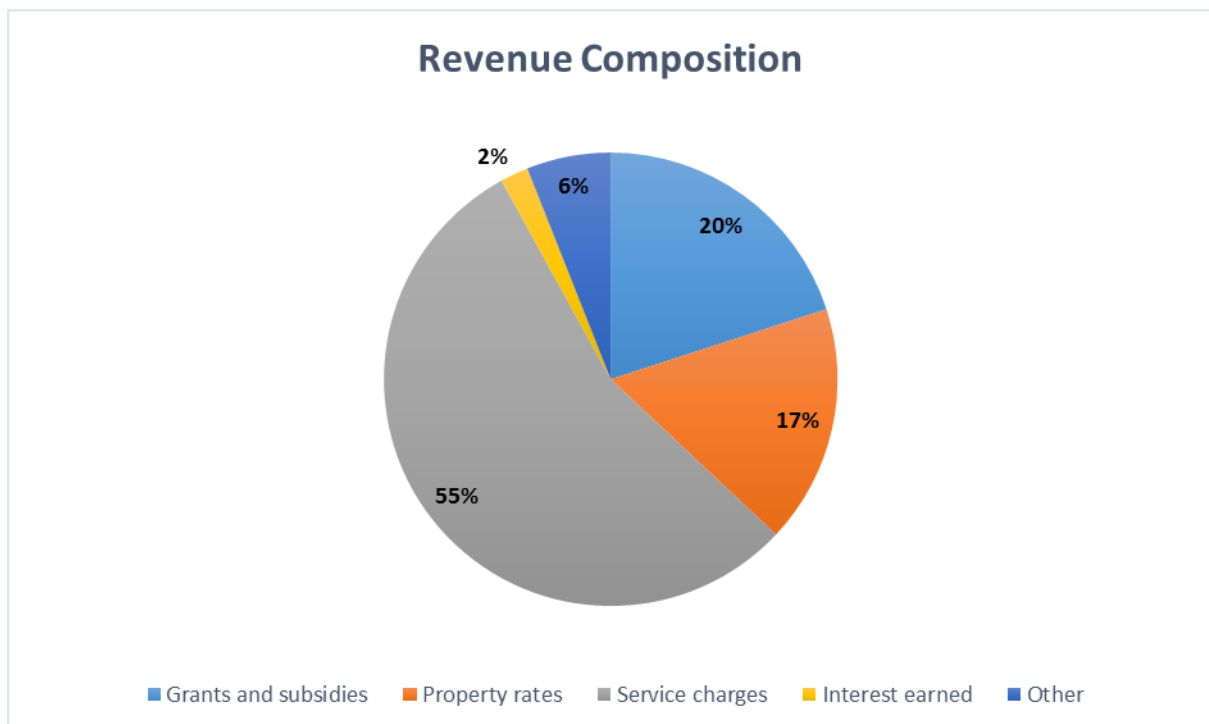
Arguing for the successful nature of Egoli 2002, Seedat and Van Rensburg (in Mojalefa, 2012) credited the financial stability of the City to the implementation of the project. Not all UACs have been prosperous as anticipated by Egoli 2002. For example, certain entities break even without making any profit for the city (e.g. Metro Bus). Smith (2006) believed that the autonomy and profitability of these entities depended on them being handed 100 per cent of the customers rather than 30 per cent of good ‘paying’ customers.

The latter has formed part of the reason behind jettisoning the decentralisation programme initiated by the Egoli 2002. Along with the single public sector vision from the national government, the current Mayor of the City (Parks Tau) seems to promote ‘re-centralisation’ of the city revenue generating services. Recently, the Mayoral Committee reintegrated four of the 15 municipal entities (COJ, 2013a). Justified by the institutional review which sought to recentralise some of the entities back to the city, the Mayoral Committee argued against the “fruitless wasteful expenditure” of the COJ Metropolitan Trading Company in charge of informal trading and public transport facilities in the city. This reintegration back to the city

was followed by the Johannesburg Tourism Company. Joburg Theatre absorbed the less profitable Roodepoort City Theatre. Johannesburg Zoo is also merging with another municipal entity not yet known. Reasons behind the reintegration were over expenditure: fruitless and wasteful expenditure, bailouts by the city, and accumulated deficit by the listed entities. All these institutional changes commenced on 1 November 2012 and were completed by 30 June 2013 (COJ, 2013b). Pikitup as the waste management company from COJ has also been experiencing massive media coverage due to strikes and tender irregularities which have meant losses to the company though it employs close to 5000 employees for semi-skilled work<sup>9</sup>.

Most of the city’s revenue comes from service charges and property rates that account for 70 per cent of the city’s revenue. Electricity (64 per cent) followed by water (21 per cent) remains the major source of revenue within the service charges.

Figure 5-2: Revenue Collection in COJ



Source: COJ Annual Report 2013b: 68

<sup>9</sup> See <http://mg.co.za/article/2010-07-09-joburg-fleeced-by-waste-contractor> and <http://www.bdlive.co.za/business/2013/09/01/pikitup-still-enmeshed-in-tender-riddles>

Cox, A. 2013. *Tender firm Paid out for Pikitup Party*. August 26, Page 1.

Despite the massive surplus incurred by City Power and Joburg Water which remain the 'milk cows' for the city, electricity and water also form the major sources of consumer debt (83 per cent) within the city. The inaccuracies in billing, cut offs and management within these entities remain the greatest concern for the city accompanied by unaccounted for water in Joburg Water.

Phakama Programme is part of this recentralization strategy to solve the revenue management challenges which could potentially cripple the municipal budget. Incorrect meter reading and errors in property information have affected the whole customer value chain; correct readings are needed to create rates accounts. The latter was labeled the billing crisis which saw increased call volumes from the dissatisfied customers (up to 54 152 in March 2004). This was followed by an increase in outstanding queries of over 49 945 in June 2004 (COJ, 2006b: 4). In 2009, COJ Finance Committee Report noted with concern the 350 000 customer accounts with incorrect information. It is in this report that the city starts to express concerns about the effect of the billing crisis. Inflated bills for water and electricity increased to thousands of rands with the change from IBM operating Venus Programme to Dimension Data (subcontracted by Masana Technologies) implementing German SAP software which caused a loss in the number of customers and their bills. According to Masana and COJ-IT statement of work dated 13 February 2006, Masana Technologies was supposed to provide the Phakama Programme IT infrastructure and its support systems when implemented. This included: data conversion templates; transformation server design; business process design; SAP ISU and CRM; contact centre design; establishment of software factory; purification of data; training of change agents; migration plan and procedures; and many other deliverables (Masana-COJ, 2005: 13-22). One of the top managers explained the crisis:

After the shift to this new software the city noticed that there were few customers in the system and thus those who did not pay were pressurised to pay and disconnections became the norm. You see not all the customers of the Metro were affected by this billing crisis but it is just that it was those who had access to the media who blew things out of proportion... (Top Manager 4, 8 July 2011)

This explanation was supported by the then mayor (Amos Masondo) in the Mail and Guardian (1 February 2011) who argued that “only 744 852 customers could be billed in the initial stages of the project. This meant that only 1 percent of the customers were not billed with an estimated cost of R320 million (USD 40.05 million) for the city”. This ‘small proportion’ according to the Mayor was disconnected, not the masses of Joburg customers, as the media seemed to claim. Despite the failure of Masana Technologies to deliver the project, the management of the city continued to blame employees for their resistance to change, and also denied the existence of the crisis.

It is not really accurate to say we have a billing crisis, but rather to say we have a customer-service challenge ... If you say billing crisis, you get the impression that we have a cash-flow problem, and that was never so ... until we re-establish our credibility with customers, that will remain a problem ... (Roland Hunter quoted from The Mail and Guardian, 3 February 2011)

Contrary to the above statement, in the Mail and Guardian- Faull and Rawoot (2011) reported that Masana Technologies which was tasked by the city to implement the German SAP Software was inexperienced and politically connected to the city’s leadership. Since then they argue that this company has been liquidated owing the city millions. Customers of the city have since protested against the inflated bills and blamed the call centre for not answering their calls (John, The Mail and Guardian, 18 February 2011). The crisis in customer service was acknowledged later by the mayor, promising a speedy change as this affected revenue collection for the city.

We acknowledge the billing and customer services remain source of frustration for many of our valued customers ... Therefore, billing and customer services remain one of our top focus areas in ensuring that we regain the trust and confidence of our residents. It is not acceptable for people to wait long periods of time to have calls answered, or have calls dropped when they eventually get through. The announced roadmap is designed to bring about a 'step-change' in Johannesburg's billing and revenue collection system and to improve the quality of the customers' interaction with the City. We are making steady progress in improving customer interface, in

strengthening our revenue collection service and restoring confidence in the integrity of our billing system (Tau, P. 2012: State of the City Address)

The above speech by the Mayor reflects a consistent concern of the city since 2004. The billing crisis in 2004 resulted in a sharp decline of 'satisfaction' of the COJ customer in their 2006/7 Customer Satisfaction Survey. The latter has shown a consistent decline from 2005-2007 in terms of household satisfaction with increased satisfaction to corporate customers. The Billing, Efficiency and Enquiry Index dropped from 64 per cent (2005) to 57 per cent (2007). According to the Customer Satisfaction Survey in 2010, customer dissatisfaction dropped further by 15 per cent due to the incorrect billing by the city. From 2010, this has been the focus of the city culminating in Programme Phakama's inspired Revenue Step Change initiatives.

McDonald and Pape (2002) recognised that poor services rendered to the townships are behind the so-called culture of non-payment. If these services were to improve, they believed that people would start paying for them. It is within this logic that Joburg 2040 centralised improved customer services to ensure financial sustainability through revenue collection. One of the ten priorities of the city between 2011 and 2016 is to increase revenue collection to 97 per cent. The emphasis on the debt collection through improved 'customer service' within the city seems to be dominant in the 2040 vision. Accurate billing and improved customer services is at the centre of revenue collection in the pursuit of the city's financial resilience. According to the city's annual 2012/13 report, the city collected 92 per cent of its revenue, generating 3.4 billion in surplus within that financial year.

Our positive financial performance was further supported by the significant progress we have made towards eliminating billing issues. Our commitment and efforts towards addressing billing challenges are yielding positive results. The 2012/13 customer satisfaction survey recorded significant improvement in efficiency in dealing with incorrect accounts, the highest improvement recorded over a six year period. The City is in an improved state of responsiveness to billing issues, as a result of open days and the Revenue Step Change Programme, both of which have led to a marked improvement in the resolution of queries (COJ Annual Report, 2013b: 10).

The emphasis on the customer relations by referring to 'resolution of queries; average waiting time for calls to be answered and abandonment rate of calls' by Joburg Connect attest to the centrality of Joburg Connect to the financial stability of the city (Tau, P. State of the City Address 2013).

The migration of staff from different utilities call centre into the city call centre has resulted in wage differentials (among other challenges) within the city call centre. According to Human Resource and Labour Representatives meeting minutes dated 16 September 2009, IMATU and SAMWU were 'consulted' before the implementation of this programme. In these minutes it is argued that the then City Manager Mr Pascal Moloï invited SAMWU and IMATU to introduce Phakama Programme and its implementation plans. It was in 27 November 2007 when the Organised Labour Technical Task Team (consisting of COJ, MOEs and Phakama Representatives) met to discuss:

The appropriate governance and legal route to effect staff migration from MOEs to COJ.

The appropriate mode of communications required to effect consultation with organized labour (COJ, 2009a: 4)

From the minutes it seems that labour (IMATU and SAMWU) sent each a letter to the COJ regarding the implementation of the programme its anticipated impact to their members. SAMWU sent the letter on the 14 November 2007 proposing that its City Power members should not be transferred to the COJ. Despite the concerns raised by SAMWU and IMATU regarding consultation process, the COJ went on to implement Phakama Programme with its intended migration of staff citing section 197 of the Labour Relations Act (1995). This meant that all impacted MOE employees would be transferred to COJ with their existing contracts and conditions of employment. These challenges of trade union in resisting Phakama Project is further discussed in chapter 8 of this study under collective resistance in the call centre.

## **5.8 Conclusion**

This chapter has sought to position call centre labour process in Joburg connect within the revenue and customer management services. The call centre labour process is at the centre of the billing and revenue management system of the City, which means any delays and perceived inefficiencies of this call centre affects the city budget. This is derived from the restructuring in the local government which emphasise that metropolitan municipalities

should source 80 per cent of their revenue from their own services. This then explains the continued concerns by the Mayor (and different documents of the city) throughout this chapter to improved COJ customer relations and thus revenue of this city.

In a series of newspaper articles between 2004 and 2011 frontline workers were at the centre of the attack as the city struggled to maintain good public relations because of the billing crisis. Customers received inflated bills, inaccurate account statements, incorrect meter reading, etc. This meant an increase in call volumes logged in the disconnected software by different utilities. The COJ has sought to improve the revenue administration by centralised IT services to coordinate the revenue collection and customer interface.

In this chapter, the restructuring of the COJ Metro was assessed in accordance with its impact on the Johannesburg communities and workers. Samson (2008; 2010) discussed in detail the state of workers in one of the utilities (waste management) with a gender bias towards women.

The next few chapters present the findings of the study based on the semi-structured interviews, survey questionnaires and focus group discussions on different themes pertaining to the call centre labour process. Chapter 6 continues from Chapter 5 in describing the call centre work environment before and after the integration of the call centre. This chapter seeks to detail the work organisation and the physical characteristics of Joburg Connect.

## **Chapter 6**

# **Work Organisation and Work Supervision: Working in the Municipal Call Centre**

### **6.1 Introduction**

This chapter includes the findings from in-depth individual interviews, focus group interviews, small survey questionnaire and observations from the field. It comes from many months spent in the field gathering data, from workers, researchers, trade unionists, and municipal officials. It seeks to bring to life the daily experiences in the local call centre workplace within the biggest call centre in South African municipalities. One of the key objectives for this part of the research was to illuminate the experiences of call centre workers and provide better understanding of what it means to work in the government frontline in post-apartheid South Africa.

In an attempt to protect identities of the respondents I have used numbered titles thereby adhering with ethical conduct of social research. Call centre operators are abbreviated as CCA (Call Centre Agent), middle managers refers to those who are below director level in the municipality, while top managers refers to director levels of leadership within the City of Johannesburg Municipality. Trade union officials are those within top leadership of the unions. Shop stewards have been numbered.

Call centres serve a different purpose to customer care centres. The call centre allows residents from 'anywhere' to call in, whereas the customer care centres are walk-in centres where COJ services are located in different parts of the metro for citizens and customers to visit. It was agreed that call centre performance measures would include "percentage of abandoned calls; average waiting period; average talk time and number of unresolved request logged" (COJ, 2006b: 12).

The introduction of the Joburg Connect was part of the Egoli 2002 strategy which introduced fundamental changes to the city's business model, in particular with the introduction of Utilities, Agencies and Corporatized entities (UACs). Joburg Connect is the city's Contact Centre for all city enquiries and complaints. It operates around the clock, seven days a week and 365 days a year. Joburg Connect's main purpose is the centralisation

of access for customers, reducing the list of numbers that each customer has to go through before s/he is assisted. Occupying three floors in Proton House (Roodepoort, Golf Club Terrace), the Joburg Connect is divided into Emergency Connect and Revenue Care Connect. In the former operators receive life threatening emergency calls and dispatch response vehicles like ambulance, police, fire engines and rescue vehicles. This section is on the third floor of the building and is mainly occupied by experienced call centre operators and technicians between the ages of 25-40 years of age. Their recruitment requires basic skills on CPR (Cardiovascular Resuscitation), a Grade 12 certificate and first aid level one. This call centre has relatively few workers (up to 50) and operates 24 hours a day. Callers are mainly citizens of the COJ. This call centre is not part of the revenue system of the COJ, as it deals with emergencies. On the first and second floors in Proton House there is Revenue Care Connect which deals with all general enquiries regarding the municipal services. This is what this research is interested in, in that it deals with customer not just citizens. This section of the call centre reports to the revenue department of the municipality, assisting customers enquiring about accounts, water and electricity, street lights, refuse collection, Pikitup, Metro bus, Joburg Zoo, etc. Almost all the surveyed and interviewed workers argued that in addition to answering calls they do faxing, filing and emailing. This is why some have termed it a contact centre because of different work activities although I have used 'call centre' throughout this thesis.



*Picture 6-1:  
Proton House  
Building, home  
of Joburg  
Connect  
(Roodepoort,  
Golf Club  
Terrace)*

## 6.2 Work organisation

Joburg Connect was designed to attend to queries and complaints in a standard fashion and quickly (over the telephone), linked to the back office situated in the Thuso House (61 Jorissen Street, Braamfontein) to resolve the queries entered by the first tier of the call centre workers in Proton House (initially in Roodepoort and now Harrison Street in Braamfontein). The business process operating in the call centre was changed from Venus to SAP Customer Relations Management (CRM) following the integration of different call centres from the utilities and the city (COJ, 2007: 21). After the establishment of the call centre it was now possible for the municipality to measure and quantify the kind of complaints about their services. It was believed that this would improve the customer satisfaction and ultimately improve the poor perceptions of the COJ by the customers. "Call centre information was going to feed into the municipality business planning processes by quantifying the number of complaints about a certain subject, which would result in a more 'responsive' municipality" (Top Manager 1, 4 July 2011<sup>10</sup>).

From less than eight operators to more than 120 workers, Joburg Connect has grown to be the largest call centre in local government. Operators occupy small blue-walled cubicle open plan offices. Each team leader is surrounded by several working stations giving him a perfect view of operators. Before the merger of different call centre and migration to the Harrison building in the City Centre, this call centre was divided to follow the previous model of each department helping its own customers, as a result each entity had its own small call centre. During the merger of the different revenue aspects of these different call centres, it was expected that 280 000 calls would be received per month with 20 000 faxes and 16 000 emails per month (COJ, 2007: 24). This volume of work was interrupted by the challenges faced by the city during the billing crisis during which operators noticed the skyrocketing of calls with a limited number of staff members. The director in the finance and budgeting unit estimated that "this call centre receives over a million of calls per year relating to water, refuse removal and power issues" (Top Manager 8, 1 July 2013). The latter will be discussed in the following chapter under worker well-being and subjective experience of work.

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<sup>10</sup> Top manager 1 was interviewed twice: in June/July 2011 research trip and on 26 June 2013. Both interviews took place in the Customer and Revenue Management Unit within Thuso House, Braamfontein. I will use the year to differentiate between the first and second interviews.

As with many public sector call centres, this call centre started as a help desk with each department having its own help desk assistant. This was pushed by the Egoli 2002 towards greater consistency and uniformity of standards through centralisation of customer care system. This was designed to facilitate easier contact with the COJ by its customers.

I came in this place in 1999 we worked in the help desk as it was formerly known; we were taking all sorts of calls. We worked with other service units and departments. We used to use the radios... there were only eight of us then in the Metro centre. So then they decided to open a bigger one in 2001 to bring all the services under one roof, customers would use one number for JPD, City Power, Joburg Water, Pikitup, etc. (Former CCA 1<sup>11</sup>, 25 August 2010)

The increase in the geographical limits of the municipality in 2001 meant more people to service. Some have attributed high call volume to growth in mobile phone ownership. Municipal restructuring also meant more people could communicate with the city and raise their voices when encountering problems in services in their community. As Edigheji (2007: 13) observed, the capacity of the public service to deliver services to the communities was also partly challenged by the expansion of services to all South Africans in the post-apartheid state. This meant more people could now contact the state in many different ways for different reasons.

....Yha! The difference is ... that time people were not committed to call centres. Call centres were not well known only today it is well known, when people call you we knew it was a serious problem. Today people can call because they have got spare time. You see previously we managed to control the call centre being 5 or 6 even 4 on a shift, if there is no burst pipe, no rain, and no power failure you could be in a call centre and not many calls would come. But today because they have added traffic fine accounts everybody is calling immediately if they see a traffic officer... You understand and those calls you cannot manage if you have 4 or 5 people today we need about 120 people in that call centre... But the thing is we have got different

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<sup>11</sup> Former CCA 1 was interviewed twice, in 2010 as part of the pilot and August 2013 as a SAMWU Shop Steward. The first interview took place in SAMWU House, 3<sup>rd</sup> Floor, while the second interview took place in Thuso house, Braamfontein.

call centres now which is making things easy you cannot manage that call centre alone. (Former CCA 1, 25 August 2010)

This speaker indicates that there is a larger use of call-centres by the public in Johannesburg. This also raises questions about the centralisation and quantification of municipal challenges through the call centre. This has been the result of the merger and expansion of the municipality through municipal demarcations. The speaker also makes the point that people who have nothing much to do now call for petty things. One significant change noted above is the change with regard to the size and growth of the call centre.

The introduction of technological facilities also contributed to the creation of a call centre rather than a help desk. This refers to the integration of telephone and the computer technologies which distribute and monitor calls, i.e. Interactive Voice Response and Automatic Caller Distribution. This is the symbolic shift then from the help desk to the call centre. The former still operate in many South African municipalities with the one stop shops and call centres mainly in metropolitan municipalities. One-stop shops are part of the Batho Pele drive to improve access to information by the citizens. This is where the citizens can access all the information about municipal services while physically receiving help from the frontline workers in requests that will not otherwise be attended over the phone-customer care centres. In the City of Johannesburg, the call centre's two sets of agents interact through this IVR system which directs callers to the suitable set of agents. A caller will be given an option by the IVR machine to choose the language of her/his choice and if possible the call gets resolved at the first point of call. This means there is no need to transfer the call to the back office as the customer would have been helped by the call centre agent in the general call centre. Some calls can be handled by the automatic voice services including requests for electronic statements or outstanding balances. These technological services are tied together by SAP-CRM, Automatic Caller Distribution (ACD) and Interactive Voice Response (IVR). The connecting nature of the two tiers of the call centre (back office and front office) depends on the interactions of these technologies.

A call centre without the technological system is just a simply help desk, technology ... that is what makes it a call centre. (Top Manager 3<sup>12</sup>, 2 August 2010)

It is these technologies that define the usefulness and could also disadvantage the call centre when not coordinated properly. A former call centre agent insists on the advantages of having this telephone service for the public as he says

... we are happy because more people were employed. In terms of the employer it is easy for the customers of the city. You see, back then you would find people travelling to town to query their accounts but now you can just call.... It's benefiting the community a lot, one might be disconnected today whilst you are overseas or in Africa and your kids are phoning you because you have not paid electricity you can transfer the amount due from overseas to our account then you email us the proof of payment and then we reconnect you immediately... (Former CCA 1, 25 August 2010)

It easy to see that these call centres are created for customer convenience with less and the cost of the service gives increased access to the public. The revenue services top manager also agreed that call centres are designed for the convenience of the company so that they can focus on core business. Telephones became a distraction from the back office which aims to perform its core business functions.

This manager also gave details on the purpose of Joburg Connect and how has it engages the citizen. It became clear that more and more people were contacting the call centre. This was partly due to the reduction of numbers required from citizens. This was initiated by the Mayor Amos Masondo who implemented the 'One Number, One City, One Strategy' for the city to be able scan the quality of advice given to the people of COJ. Call centres are providing opportunities for direct participation in the service delivery agenda of the Metro. This service allows the COJ to evaluate the various problem areas and make decisions on what to focus on in order to improve service delivery.

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<sup>12</sup> Top Manager 3 was interviewed twice, in August 2010 and July 2011 at Thuso House in the back office of the call centre.

Probably the first thing we've seen is accessibility for citizens. Previously you found and one example when we were running the utilities is that our number of calls that we got from customers started from about 13 000 per month, and after a while the customers started getting confidence and saying 'you know what the city is starting to answer the call' and this pipe that's leaking here and we reported it and somebody came by and actually did repair it. Before, the city was very anonymous. I would phone some department and hope that I would hit the right department out of the 50 numbers that they had. Now they've got one city, one phone number. If I log a query I get I reference number when I phone back that agent can check into that reference number and see what I've logged and when I see that happening, the 13 000 calls went up to 30 000 per month then citizens started playing their role as citizens... (Top Manager 1, 4 July 2010)

It is interesting to note that this manager uses 'citizens' to refer to customers (though not exclusively) who report 'burst pipes' rather than customers who complain about bills. This is part of the different understanding of the customer and citizen within the city. The City's Phakama Programme Blueprint (COJ, 2013b: 8) notes the different types of customers that the city call centre serves.

1. Citizens that non-billable who contact the city for general enquiries e.g. "What time does Joburg Zoo open?"
2. Billable Customers are citizens that will contact the city with specific requests or enquiries relating to services, accounts, etc.
3. Third parties, e.g. conveyancers and developers who may contact the city for clearance certificates.

Despite the manager mentioning the first type of customer, it is the second type of customer that the city seeks to care for in particular as this customer is central to revenue generating of the city. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the metropolitan municipalities depend on service charges and property rates taxes in order to be productive in service delivery goals.

The city is divided in terms of its customers, we have wealthy people from suburbs; these people have different demands. They want services to be working properly; their demands are not basic ones. These people pay their rates on time and expect services to be working properly. Then we have another group, the angry ones which is mainly black middle class. These are black aspirant and critical group. These are the ones that get disconnected the most. The other group is working class and the poor. The city needs to balance as 80 per cent of revenue comes from the business and wealthy customers. The last group is the indigent poor, who cannot afford to pay but they remain customers of the city. (Top Manager 8, 26 August 2013)

Designed for consumer convenience, the call centre provided a centralised channel through which the citizens/customer can contact the city. The different types of customers contribute differently to the city but all are citizens which need to be serviced by the city. According to the manager above, even though the poor do not pay, they are still customers of the city.

So call centre have ensured accessibility and changed the culture of citizens from being citizens to showing citizenry as part of their service to the city, not just asking what the city is doing for them but actually participating in making sure that there is service delivery. So call centres have done a lot in municipalities I think by way of that I think that's a big change. And the other thing it has done well is it has allowed cities and municipalities to quantify the amount of service required by citizens whereas previously you had separate systems separate contacts which meant that you couldn't control that, you didn't know how much people needed to use that channel it allowed city to also decide on how do we make cheaper channels available now that people are getting internet access I mean cell phones now everybody's got it sms now being used you're constantly finding cheaper and more convenient ways for customers to make contact with you... to identify the types of services people want and when they want them specifically and specifically what... It also allows you to do troubleshooting of problems, so if you're getting for example a hundred statement queries then you know that there is a problem with the delivery of statements. You can interrogate the problem. If you get hundred cash payment

queries then you know there's a problem with payments. (Top Manager 1, 4 July 2011)

The speaker above highlights many issues that will be interrogated throughout this thesis. These included the logic behind the setup of this call centre, work organisation, and both qualitative and quantitative advantages of having the call centre. Each Joburg Connect operator answers between 80-200 calls per shift. During the day shifts, there are 96 workers whereas in the night shift there are less than 20 operators. However, these figures have changed due to the inaccurate water and billing statements issued to customers. This will be discussed in Chapter 8, under causes of stress in the call centre.

In an attempt to improve call centre performance, in 2006 the Revenue and Customer Management unit of the municipality identified staff shortages, training, staff turnover and appropriate technology as the key 'concerns' in the Joburg Connect performance (COJ, 2006b: 12). These concerns remain an issue seven years later in the CRM business plan by the Revenue directorate of the municipality. Some of these concerns are discussed in detail in the following sections of this thesis.

### **6.2.1 Recruitment, selection and training**

According to Callaghan and Thompson (2002), recruitment and selection may be used to address the aspects of 'indeterminacy of labour' in the labour process. This means the persons recruited to the organisation have to possess the potential to reduce the gap between "labour power and actual expenditure of the labour power". Feminists have always argued about the gendered nature of definition of skill. The total reliance on emotions and social skills makes qualifications and experience less important in the call centre industry. "Personality is given priority in the recruitment process" (Callaghan and Thompson, 2002: 240). There are different levels of skills required in different call centres from low skilled, routine and standardised requiring matric up to complex and high skilled requiring degrees. A Communications Workers Union (CWU) official noted that "the call centres are not all the same, some are complex for example social workers as call centre operators in the Western Cape require a degree for entry" (CWU Official<sup>13</sup>, 23 August 2013). The focus on interpersonal skills was not different in the public sector call centre but the emphasis was

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<sup>13</sup> The CWU Official was interviewed at his office in 222 Smit Street Building on the 20<sup>th</sup> floor.

on the 'assertiveness' of the operators. How this translates to work practices is not clear, but their role in interfacing between government and customer demonstrates the need to go beyond emotional management to also 'controlling' the customer.

Coming mainly from the township areas of Johannesburg (57,6 per cent) and suburbs (31 per cent), a typical call centre agent in the COJ is black (81 per cent), female (63 per cent), between 18-35 years of age (86 per cent), with a matric certificate (37 per cent), and post-matric diploma (37 per cent) or degree (7 per cent). The variation in education seems to contradict the accepted view of call centre workers requiring a matric certificate (Benner et al, 2007), which was used as an argument to attract the BPO industry to South Africa. Some call centre operators had worked in the call centre for two years and more (38 per cent); while others had less than two years in the call centre (33,3 per cent). Half of the call centre staff surveyed had worked in private sector call centres before joining the City of Johannesburg call centre. Only 12,5 per cent had public sector call centre years of experience, while 25 per cent selected 'other' which they elaborated in the open ended questions as mainly retail service jobs.

Figure 6-1: Experience in Call Centres



Most of the call centre operators seemed to be moving from the private to the public sector. Banks and mobile telephone companies seemed to be the main feeder for Joburg Connect. This was explained in the focus group discussion as

Racism in the private sector and favouritism in promotion, when you have been there long enough you notice that it is the same as here ... instead I chose to leave because I noticed Indians and Coloureds were being promoted instead of blacks ... Favouritism happens here as well but at least here you can talk to your boss and vent when frustrated, though you know nothing will change you can still vent ... In the private sector you never even meet your boss. You last see him during induction when he appears on a recorded message. (FGD 2, 28 September 2012<sup>14</sup>)

Less than 5 of the interviewees said were unemployed before they joined the call centre. This questions the view of the call centre being created for the unemployed especially in the local government. Most of operators were recruited through a recruitment agency or by internal advertisements. The most consistent requirement of the job was a matric certificate, communication skills and experience in the call centre environment. Most the workers insisted on the personality aspects of the skills. They argued that the ability to cope with pressure and assertiveness is useful in the job: “Strong character and personality is key in this kind of job, you need to be able to adapt into different cultures easily” (CWU Official, 23 August 2013).

Many call centre operators float from one industry to another which indicates that more people are always ready to be employed. Two to three weeks of training in the call centre environment are deemed enough for performing the job competently. The call centre operators at Joburg Connect were mainly trained in-house with customer service and software familiarisation as the main focus. Most of the surveyed call centre agents (84 per cent) said they were trained in-house by learning on the job for two weeks or less. The Communications Workers Union (CWU) officer believed that call centre agents are rotated between different companies, as a result training is minimal.

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<sup>14</sup> This focus group discussion took place in Harrison House, CBD Call Centre.

Some of the utilities came to the call centre to demonstrate their operations. Since the integration of the revenue sections of call centres, more people needed to be 'cross skilled' as utilities were now directed to Joburg Connect. Before the merger, calls would be rerouted to different entities or the customer would call Joburg Water, for example, directly for queries regarding water. All the interviewed participants complained about insufficient training from the city during this merger of call centres.

One of the challenges of the move back to the city was multiskilling of the employees. In the old system, workers dealt with queries in silos[individually], so now a person is required to know about all services including metro bus, city power, refuse etc. (Top Manager 8, 26 August 2013)

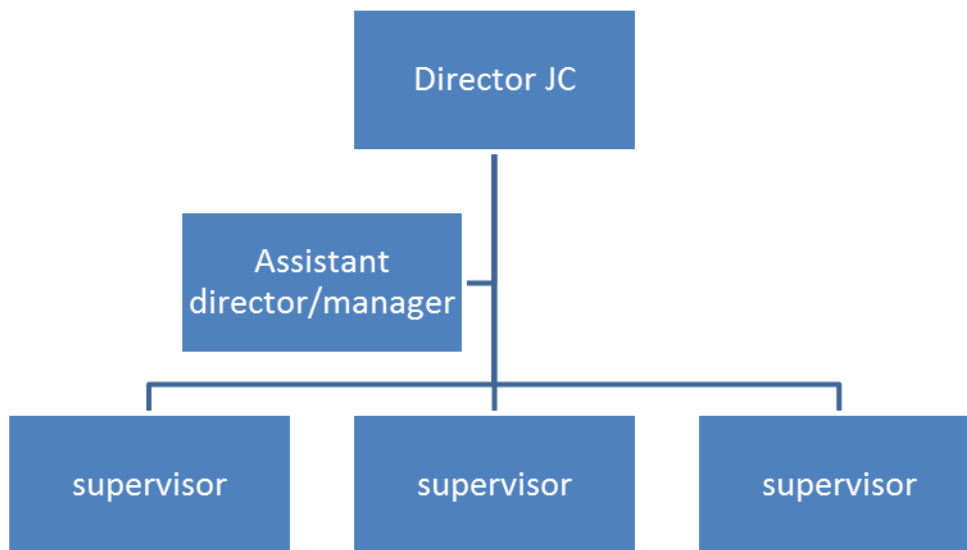
The combination of poor training and technological problems formed the centre of the operators' beliefs that "the city does not care about the customer" (FGD 2, 28 September 2012). Despite the experience acquired in the private sector call centres, some of the operators believed that there was insufficient training regarding the SAP software introduced by Phakama Programme.

The accepted short and horizontal call centre organogram proved to be challenging for the workers and managers at large. More than 70 per cent of the surveyed workers felt that the 'career growth options' within the call centre were 'not satisfactory at all'. Some of the supervisors believed that the horizontal nature of the call centre organogram makes it hard to invest in training as the operators usually work in the call centre for not more than two years.

Ideally, we don't want to keep them for longer than two years because this is a stressful environment ... when we started the call centre people were on two year contracts but the union took us to court to have the call centre workers employed permanently. A lot of them there want out of the call centre hence you will find a lot of them booked with EAP to see psychologists and doctors, we understand. When we recruit new workers we move the other ones into the city because ideally, two years is enough. (Top manager 8, 26 August 2013)

Within local government some of the workers from the call centres are rotated within the municipality. Workers in the call centre agreed with the manager but said this used to take place mainly in the former utilities call centres, where managers would openly encourage workers to move within the utility after gaining call centre experience. Call centre employees complained that this process was flawed and prone to nepotism.

Figure 6-2: Organisational organogram for City of Johannesburg Call Centre



All the workers interviewed mentioned the demotivating processes of promotions within the call centre.

If you're not a friend, girlfriend or sister ... then you must give up; you will not move from where you are. (FGD 2, 28 September 2012)

These sentiments were shared by both male and female operators who believed that hard work was not rewarded but favouritism and close relations to those at the top were the only way to be promoted. These perceptions stirred passion and despondence in the city call centre as some felt disempowered without choices regarding their work.

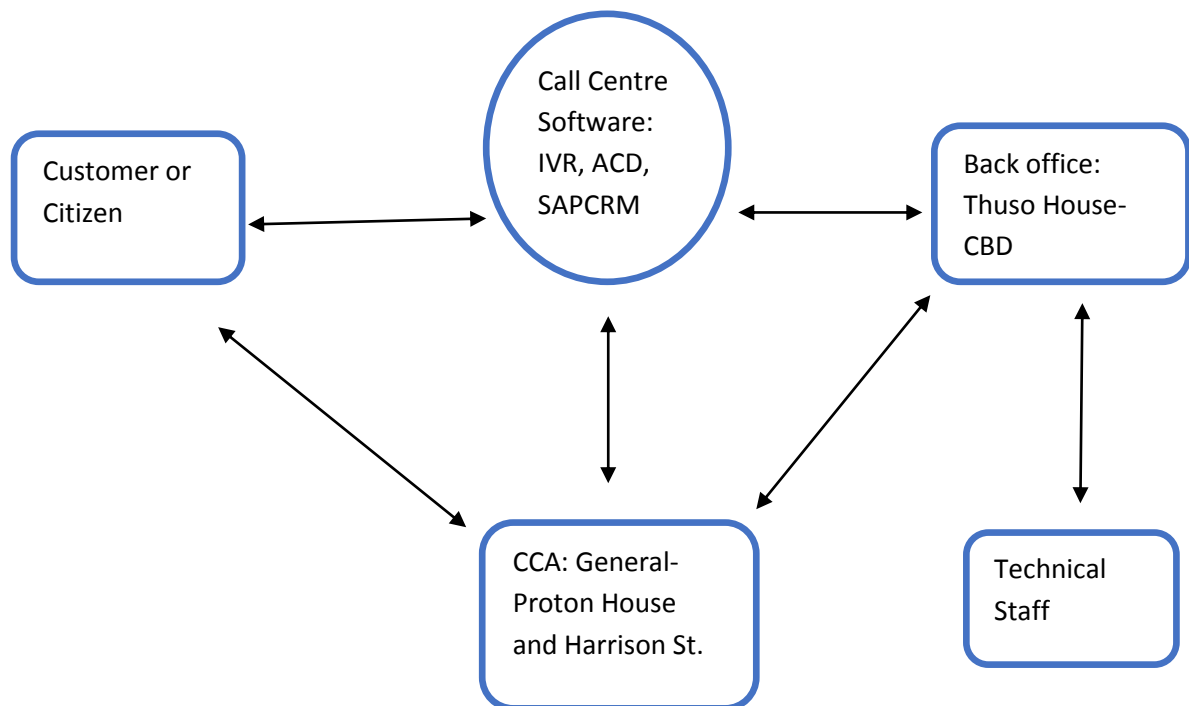
... Here, there are people who have been here since it started and they will say the old staff does not want to work... Managers of those entities open up doors for them and recommend their staff member... none of that happens, they reserve those jobs for their cousins from Transkei. (CCA 3, 04 July 2011)

This was one of the factors highlighted in the fight against call centre operators from these call centres to be integrated to the city call centre. The people who were moved to the city call centre felt that their growth would be hampered as the city did not reward effort. Those coming from the utilities felt that the city did not care about the customers as the technological infrastructure and incentives were poor or non-existent.

### **6.2.2 Deskilled but not disciplined?**

Taylorisation, routinisation, standardisation and 'deskilling' define the call centre labour process. This is facilitated by the technological equipment designed to facilitate discipline and ensure maximum control at work. The call centre worker is equipped with a headset, computer station and programmes to facilitate customer interaction. The computer software and ACD along with IVR facilitate the labour process; without them there would be no call centre. The software used in the call centre is coordinated with organisational information to give access to customer information and history of interactions with the organisation. Without the coordination between the back office and frontline through technological programmes, a call centre is non-existent. These technologies coordinate work processes with information flow. It is all about the flow of information as a product from the customer to the system and then back to the customer. The 'success' of this job depends on technological equipment and information sharing mechanisms in place. This means, call centre labour process is dependent on information flow facilitated by the technological softwares. This workflow is influenced by media and communication breakdowns in the city administration.

Figure 6-3: Nature of the Call Centre Workflows



This workflow is mediated by the computer technologies designed to facilitate the labour process. For example in the City of Johannesburg, call centres used the SAP programmes to facilitate interaction with the back office which is tasked to solve queries logged into the computer system by the agent. The back office is situated at the Central Business District (CBD) in an administrative building of the city (Thuso House). The back office was staffed by 56 employees all dedicated to solving the queries and complaints captured in the system. The call centre is designed to answer queries from the citizens about accounts, water bills, service cut-offs, disconnections and reconnections, using an Automatic Call Distributor (ACD) and Interactive Voice Response (IVR).

Due to organisational and structural socio-political transformation, COJ has experienced a shift from being a help desk to a fully-fledged call centre. The increased geographical structures of the city meant more people to serve and more staff members to occupy the help desk. The city serves more than two million customers (and four million citizens). A customer is anyone paying an account to the city whereas citizens are anyone residing within the territorial boundaries of the city. Both the citizens and customers make the use of the call centre to ask about basic services. This means call centre workers are catering for both the customer and citizen. The core function for these agents is to log in queries with

the relevant departments resolving them. In the group interview I conducted with some of the workers they clearly wanted to be heard as they seemed to be eager to express their frustration about their working conditions.

Yhu! Finally there is someone that can listen to us ... you know what, when I hear people on newspapers attacking us for not answering the calls I get very angry because no one knows what we go through here ... you know what choma (my friend) I always want to call even on these radio programmes and tell them exactly what's happening... They think that we supposed to resolve queries, but this is done at Thuso House in Braamfontein, our back office. (FGD 1, 03 August 2011)

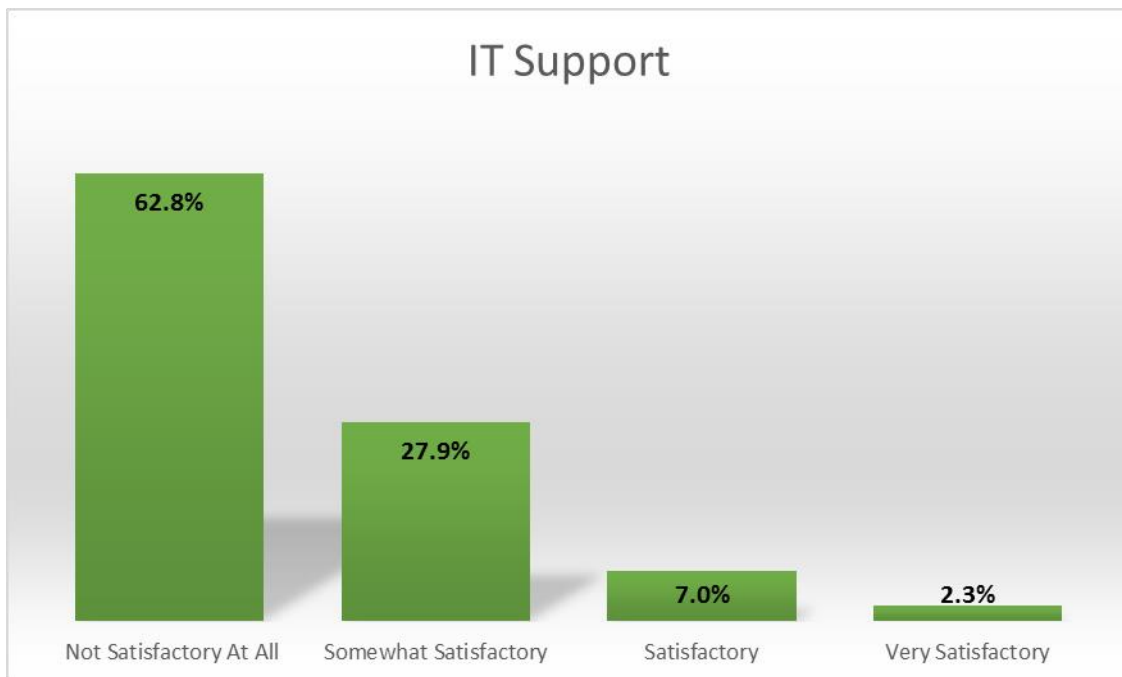
This appeared to be one of the key challenges that the agents are facing, as they are only expected to answer the calls and wait for the feedback from the back office which is located in another part of town.

You must understand the core function of this job is to log in queries for the whole city. We supposed to give feedback but we can't because you login a query when the customer gets back to you with the reference number; you can't provide her with nothing because nothing has been done about the query. 80% of the time there is no feedback that is why people will be so frustrated and say this call centre is useless. This is frustrating both to us and customers. The problem is that the other entities that are assigned to resolve the queries are simply not doing their job. (FGD 1, 03 August 2011)

The constant complaint about the back office's inefficiency in giving feedback to the agents formed part of the stressful aspect of the job. They seemed to understand the customers' frustrations and some even commended the customers for being supportive once they are aware of their work situation. The routine and 'brainless' nature of the job formed part of a bigger struggle against stress. "Answering calls is not a problem, but having not to resolve the query is just frustrating..." (CCA 5, 4 July 2011). This proved to be shared across by the call centre agents in the survey where more than 60 per cent of the agents agreed that the information technology they use was 'not satisfactory at all' while 28 per cent said it was 'somewhat satisfactory'. The poor information technology system (18,2 per cent) was one of the top two challenges facing the call centre after 'increased call volume' at the time of the

survey. These challenges at the call centre according to interviews and surveys reflect information technology, specifically software, as part of the cause of frustration, as it interfered directly with call centre labour process. This stems from the isolated nature of the call centre from the service departments they work with, which is exacerbated by the lack of synergy and communication amongst the customer interface departments. Computer technology “plays a critical role in the call centre labour process” (Deery and Kinnie, 2004:3). Without this technological support the call centre labour process becomes frustrating and challenging.

Figure 6-4: Information Technology Support for the Call Centre



### 6.2.3 Technology, control and discretion at work

Without technology, customer management software and telephony, a call centre is non-existent. This software is the source of information and communication between the call centre agent, back office and customer. The information entered into the software in the municipality is entered from the back office. Without proper recording and categorisation of information, the call centre will be inefficient as competence depends on communication with the software and relevant information about the customer. This was part of the cause of the billing crisis in the Joburg metro as the shift from Venus programme to SAP created a data mess.

... the problem is that the majority of accounts are given incorrect categories, for example, some of the accounts were categorised as business while they are residential ... so this means when you put in garbage, expect garbage out (Back Office Officer 3<sup>15</sup>, 26 August 2013)

The poor management of data contributed directly to the labour process challenges in the call centre. This poor data management resulted in bloated customer bills and incorrect statements. The incorrect customer account details saw the increase of calls from 30 000 per month to more than 140 000 per month (in 2010) with customers complaining about their bills. Call centre operators saw the present system as working against good customer service and frustrating. Another cause behind the technological challenges in the call centre was the lack of integrated and coordinated technology linking the different units of the COJ. As the municipality was moving from Venus to SAP Programmes many customers were lost along the way and customer history did not show. Programme Phakama was introduced to enhance coordination and communication between different call centres as this formed the cause of frustration. Before the integrated software Joburg Connect would log in queries to another relevant call centre (in the utilities Pikitup, Joburg Bus, City Power, Joburg Water, etc.) which would then dispatch the relevant technical staff to attend to the problem. This was critical in connecting the whole system of communication within these different call centres.

... you know what's interesting is that some of these utilities don't have the SAP system so when we send the query they never resolve because they simply can't see or can't even use the system or resolve the query. This was implemented from November 2009... (CCA 5, 4 July 2011)

This was dealt with by COJ by moving all the revenue sections of the different call centres under one roof to improve the communication between them. At the end of 2011 some of the call centres employees were moved to the city centre to help resolve the uncoordinated nature of these call centres. Though some of the operators were still pessimistic about the move they welcomed it because of the decreased geographical distance from their homes.

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<sup>15</sup> Back Office 3 interview took place in Thuso House in 26 August 2013

One telephone number for one system is what we want ... not routing to other departments, for example we have people from water, pickit-up, emergency, etc, under one roof not in other parts of the city. We are going to exchange skills and cross skill the workers to suit this process. (Top Manager 5<sup>16</sup>, 7 July 2013)

During the move from Proton to Harrison house, the technological glitches were felt by the workers many of whom opted to use the old system which did not show the history of the customer enquiries.

Another problem now is the new system we are using – SAP which simply means in my own term System Against People (everyone laughs). The thing is they did a pilot for this thing. We were the ones who used this thing and it was clearly not designed for the call centre as it provided problems from the onset. They never consulted us but they just went on to implement the system. My understanding of the pilot is that you look at both the strengths and weaknesses of the thing and if it does not work you never implement the damn thing. Even after the pilot we were never told; they just went to implement in the Western area. Piloting was supposed to be for the evaluation of the system not in all the areas. It was then implemented everywhere even though it clearly did not work out in the Joburg Westrand area. (FGD 1, 03 August 2011)

This speaker made it clear that the software never even worked in the initial stages when it was piloted in some of the Johannesburg areas. The lack of communication between the managers and directors and operators was apparent as the operators constantly complained about the lack of consultation and top-down approach in the implementation of the programme. Those who were tasked to try the programme felt it was not user friendly as it could not retrieve the history of the customer. Frustrated by the lack of coordination, operators seemed to think everything stemmed from poor communication between the leaders. When managers of the call centre were asked about the problem in the information technology software they agreed with the operators.

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<sup>16</sup> Top manager 5 was interviewed on the fifth floor of the Phakama CRM Training House. Juta Street , CBD Johannesburg

The major issue is that these contracts for the politicians they want to change everything instead of working with what they have. For example this SAP system is not working at all... that thing is meant for HR not in this environment but the problem is the lack of consultation. (Top Manager 2<sup>17</sup>, 04 August 2010)

This is part of the entrepreneurial government introduced by the new public management system, with each new manager coming in and proposing changes so as to contribute without checking his/her predecessor's plan of action. This also applied to the software system applied in the COJ, though the previous one (Venus) had proved problematic in terms of the billing system; this became worse when the Customer and Revenue Management Unit introduced SAP software without communicating with those who used the software.

The call centre script was limited to 'Frequently Asked Questions' to assist the workers in answering calls. Before the integration this included several numbers to transfer customers to and frequently interacting with Utilities and Back Office in order to assist customers. The complex natures of calls require operators to have a general understanding of the COJ environment. This gives the operators an opportunity to use their own discretion in helping the customers. It is this openness and lack of standardisation that operators saw as the problem as system does not provide enough information to assist the customers. The use of score cards and performance incentives were some of the measures used to supervise and increase productivity in the call centre.

In addition to the discretion of the call centre agents in answering the calls, there is the IVR system, ACD and interactive software helping the agent in dealing with the query. One of the managers of the call centre saw no need in meeting with call centres regularly as they 'see each other daily' unless there is a crisis. The combination of control mechanisms attests to Edwards (1979) (simple, technical and bureaucratic) forms of control. Calls are recorded but physical supervision seemed to be the preferred option, as the call centre desks are grouped around each team leader.

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<sup>17</sup> This manager was interviewed three times as she was directly involved with call centre management. The first interview was in August 2010, followed by July 2011 and July 2013 in Proton House.

We use the combination of the two ... technology (which is facilitated by the software called BSSC - business call centre system) and physical supervision, walking around the stations ... and also each group of workers are surrounding their team leader. (CC Team Leader 1<sup>18</sup>, 23 August 2010)

There was no evidence proving the punitive results of call recording, as the recording was used when there was a complaint.

The recorded calls are only used when there is a complaint, how to deal with the frequently asked questions, and any matter of dispute when arising, it tells us how many calls are made in a month. In terms of using these [IVR statistics] for discipline, it is impossible to discipline generally here, because you don't know how far you can go in disciplining the worker. The law favours them because I tried that once and that person was returned to work and had to be paid everything in full and no one wants to always use the city's money for such things and you then decide to let it go the next time. Basically you don't want to burn yourself again. (Top Manager 3, 2 August 2010)

Labour control through technology was justified by the notion of less call abandonment rate, which is targeted at 10 per cent and answering the call after 30 seconds of ringing. Contrary to popular views about the alienating and 'deskilling' nature of call centre's repetitive and monotonous labour process, the lack of standardisation and information to facilitate transfer of knowledge in this public sector call centre proved to disempowering and emotional draining as the workers were not able to assist the client with relevant information when needed.

#### **6.2.4 Alienating call centre labour process**

Alienation of the workforce defines the Marxist understanding of capitalist production system. It is this inherent estrangement from their geographical locations, accents, feelings, clients and 'truth' that makes call centre operators alienated from the labour process. Braverman's (1974) workers could be estranged from the product, labour process and society but still have the control of their own feelings. In the call centre industry, the

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<sup>18</sup> All three team leaders were interviewed in July-August 2010 in their different workstations within Proton House.

operator is estranged from the clients and service in itself as she has to portray a certain kind of emotion beneficial to the organisation. Even if the operator 'hates' her job, she has to show different emotions towards the clients as she is rewarded with recognition for 'good customer service' during the interaction with the customer.

Call centres are usually situated on the outskirts of the city, as clients do not need to walk in. This requires call centre operators to have their own transport due to the shift work in the evening and the non-availability of public transport. Even as a researcher, I found this difficult and I had to travel with metered taxis on a daily basis to visit the call centre in Proton House. This was interpreted differently by the union representative who introduced me in the initial phase of the call centre visits. "These people get paid lots of money ... you see most of them have got cars" (SAMWU Official 1<sup>19</sup>, 11 August 2010). Operators perceived the geographical distance as a mechanism to control their movements.

... I'm sure they don't want us to be in the city because when you are here (Proton House) you are forced to work you can't just leave to go to the shop when on break. (FGD 1, 03 August 2011)

Managers explained the geographical distance as part of cost saving and space requirements. This reasoning was countered by the rerouting of calls from the Proton House to other call centres scattered around the city, which makes connections poor. Interacting on the phone, clients can only speak to call centre operators not see them. Operators felt that they needed to understand the state of mind of the callers when talking to them. Most of them felt that their language mattered and they had to communicate with mostly clients from the suburbs. An acceptable level and accent in English seemed important.

... you have to speak English in a certain way here ... and also this funny way of speaking English can get you promotions ... We had a guy here who used 'big words'

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<sup>19</sup> SAMWU Officials were all interviewed in SAMWU Head Office at 84 Frederick Street (CBD). The mixture between those from the region (Gauteng) and branch (Johannesburg) comes from the housing of these two offices within this building though on different floors. On the third floor I interviewed the branch officials while on the second floor regional officials were interviewed. Given the few numbers of officials I have not separated the branch and region within the pseudonyms provided for their anonymity. Official number 1 was interviewed twice in August 2010 and July 2011; by 2013 he had moved to join the Waste Removal COJ utility called Pikitup.

when speaking English but knew nothing about the job, but he was promoted to supervisory role before the rest of us. (Former CCA 2<sup>20</sup>, 09 August 2010)

Emotional management has been highlighted by all the studies of the call centre labour process as the major source of alienation for the workers. One has to restrain emotions as customers become racist and sometimes personal in their insults. These insults and frustrations from the customer are embedded in the perceptions of the local government inefficiency. This means community members who contact the municipality are sometimes justified to be angry, which is understood by the workers. The fact that workers are not empowered with the information to assist the customer forms a source of estrangement to the organisation itself. All the workers felt that they lied when at work, because they did not have answers to the questions from the customers. The disempowering environment makes the labour process alienating as they have to be totally 'out of character' to create a different reality to the client. The lies to meet the expectations created by the political leadership among the customers are part of the cause of stress among the workers.

### **6.3 Conclusion**

The labour process in the public sector call centre proves to be different from the 'normal' call centres in the private sector. The labour process is affected not only by the managers but also the politicians' presence in the local government. The customer culture and its 'myth' of sovereignty are tested in the interaction where the frontline worker controls and disciplines the customer because of limited choice possessed by the customer. This 'dependent customer' proves to be irritated and infuriated by powerlessness in the face of frustrated call centre worker.

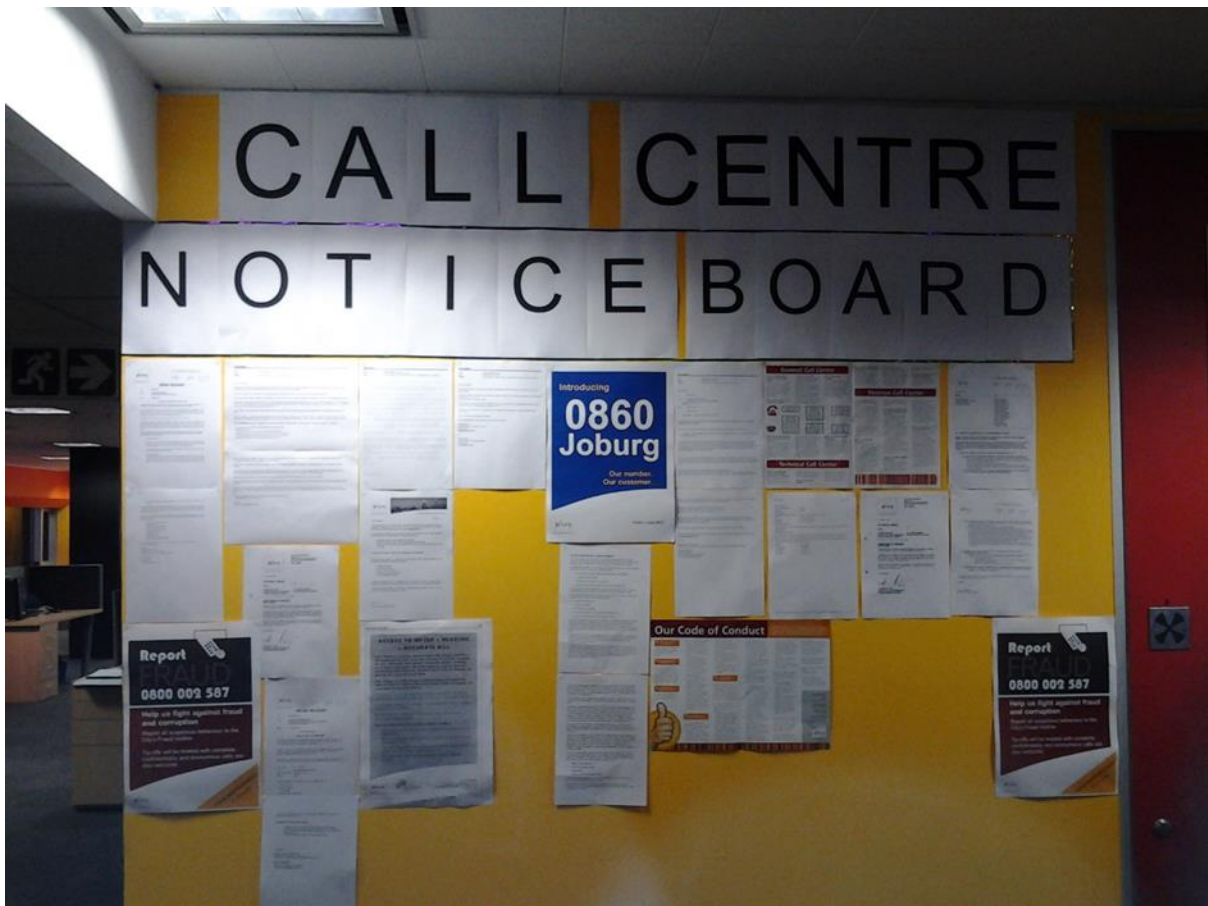
The nature of work is divided between the back office and front office which share the content of work through technological software. The detailed division of labour at the bottom of public sector labour process proves to be 'deskilling' despite the lack of 'total' control over the workforce. The workforce possesses space to resist as individuals and as a collective (Chapter 8 deals with resistance). Despite the minimal requirements of qualifications in the recruitment process, these call centre workers mostly have worked in this industry outside government.

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<sup>20</sup> Former CCA 2 interviewed at Proton House in August 2010

Control is facilitated through technical and physical mechanisms with managers and supervisors agreeing that there is a need to combine the two. Managerial control of the call centre is justified through statistical arguments as the abandonment rate measures productivity of the call centre. However this is countered by the poor technological system matched by the disintegrated nature of the labour process between different entities working with the call centre. In the absence of standardisation, workers tend to rely on their own experience of the call centre environment to help the customers, as the lack of information and poor communication in the municipality proves to be disempowering. This leads to workers feeling alienated from themselves as they create a façade though lies during the interaction with customers.

In this chapter I attempted to describe the nature of work and employment relations mediated by the technological software within the local government call centre. In the next chapter I focus less on work and more on subjective experiences and well-being of workers. This covers the issues of stress, sick leave, commitment and morale within the Joburg Connect. These subjective experiences both shape and are shaped by the work practices within the local government call centre.



Picture 6-2: Inside Harrison Street Call Centre, COJ CBD

## **Chapter 7**

# **The (Dis)Connecting Working Conditions: Worker Well-being and the Experience of Work in the Call Centre**

### **7.1 Introduction**

This chapter is based on the subjective experiences of the call centre workers in the Johannesburg Municipality. It seeks to provide a voice to the frontline to be heard so as to provide a holistic picture of the service delivery difficulties experienced by customers. Different issues pertaining to the well-being of the call centre operators come to the fore to explain the poor performance and despair evident in these state workers.

Call centre workers' experiences have concentrated on the issues of control and its effects, targets and performance based salaries, night shifts, low pay and low security. In a nutshell, through poor working conditions and the stressful nature of the job, call centre work is one of the precarious service jobs. Despite the similarities between the private and public sector call centres, the major difference is around detailed study of the public sector labour process and its experience for those who are customers, service providers and community members.

In addition to the stressful and repetitive nature of the job, call centre operators in Joburg Connect are carrying the burden of inefficient bureaucracy. It is in their interaction with this customer that the frontline worker realised that major stress does not come from the customer. The expectations and lack of communication to the customer makes the frontline staff suffer as the politicians sometimes override managers to create a false reality for customers. Poor state bureaucracy, accompanied by shortage of staff, high volume of calls, high turnover and absenteeism all contribute towards frustrating working conditions.

### **7.2 Health and well-being in the municipal call centre**

Current working conditions in the service sector can deceive those still occupied with Fordist kinds of health and occupational hazards. Physical accidents and ill health is not common in a call centre environment as workers are situated in a less 'physical' threatening environment. Taylor, Baldry, Bain and Ellis (2003) noticed the combination of social, physical and technological environment, which contribute towards healthy call centre workplace.

These working places are dependent on the industrial context in which they are operating, as the outsourced call centres tend to be worse off than their public sector counterparts who tend to be unionised and small (Benner et al., 2007). Issues of stress, voice loss, burn-out, pains, sickness and hearing difficulties tend to be less physical and easily ignored by the employers if the unions do not pick them up.

### 7.2.1 Stress from above

It is a well-known fact that the call centre industry is laden with stress and a high turnover rate all over the world, which is exacerbated within government by poor service delivery experienced at the local level. Joburg Connect call centre workers noted that they experience a considerable amount of stress. The table below presents the results from SPSS analysis of the 59 participants surveyed in Joburg Connect. Items listed under causes of stress included irate customers, managerial control, poor communication, time pressure, poor technological system. It should be noted that though the question asked for the biggest contributor to stress, some participants ticked more than one cause of stress in the survey. During the interviews it became clear that the causes of stress in the Joburg Connect were a combination of the listed items below which explains some of them listing more than one, though only having been asked for one.

**Table 7-1: Causes of Stress in Joburg Connect**

	<b>Participants</b>	<b>Percent</b>
1 Irate customer	19	34.5
2 Managerial control	3	5.5
3 Poor communication	3	5.5
4 Time pressure	7	12.7
5 Poor technological system	3	5.5
6 All of the above	20	36.4

This was due to the continuing shortage of staff in the call centre, technological software challenges, organisational miscommunication and so forth. In its Unified Communication Centre Proposal, the City of Johannesburg imagined a contact centre with 180 agents, 20 supervisors with a ten-seat training facility. When I visited the call centre, I found three

supervisors and less than 100 agents. Managers and supervisors agreed with this observation saying “the whole municipality is a mess; we are currently operating on less than 60 per cent capacity ... because the municipality refuses to replace those budgeted vacancies” (Top Manager 2, 04 August 2010 ). This was proved by the significant number (60.6 per cent) of participants who listed ‘increased call volume’ as the ‘current call centre challenge’ in the survey. This was followed by ‘poor technology’ (18.2 per cent) in the call centre as exacerbating the call centre challenges at the time of the survey. Many in focus group discussion (number 2) argued that

... frustrations from the customers would not be a problem if the system was working properly... In the private sector, the system will be down and within few minutes the system will be running again, here you come eager to help the customer and realise soon after, that circumstances do not allow you; you can’t even promise the customer that the query will be attended to by a certain time because when you go back to the query after two months you notice its sitting there. (FGD 2, 28 September 2012)

Joburg Connect has experienced a high staff turnover and some of the terminated contracts were not immediately replaced due to financial difficulties. This was noted by other managers and agents within the Joburg Connect and it was visible during visits to the call centre. Understaffing was a major challenge within the call centres as well as high absenteeism of the agents due to high levels of sick leave. The latter proved to be a tactic that operators used to relieve pressure and stress. Most admitted that they take sick leave not because they are sick, but because the work is too stressed. “People who take leave outnumber the ones at work. Some maybe are lazy, but most are bored; it’s not nice to come to work and call centre work is stressful.” (Former CCA 2, 09 August 2010)

This is partly the result of poor communication within the organisation. Working conditions have worsened due to service delivery expectations from the councils. Local government call centres, though (relatively) small and unionised, are stressful for operators because they are not seen as call handlers, but rather as the “face of inefficient service delivery”. The abuse from irate customers is not based only on ‘bad customer service’ but is also about service delivery itself, regardless of the smile and calming voice from the call centre agent. If

the electricity has been disconnected, the life of the customer is disrupted and no ‘smile can fix’ that. This is made worse by the lack of communication between the back office and the call centre. Call centre workers have to answer for things that they are not informed about, and so they sound ‘inefficient’ to members of the public.

Having to deal with irritated customers and protect the council’s decisions makes this job stressful for workers. One worker seemed to have accepted these relations with customers, saying “Threats and angry customers are part of our job” (CCA 1, 09 August 2010). Call-centre workers become associated with the public sector as a whole, not only the municipality. “When the council makes a decision that is very unpopular, we get more frustrated callers ... which we understand, but it’s not our fault” (Former CCA 2, 09 August 2010).

**Table 7-2: Situations of Anger in the Call Centre**

	<b>Number of participants</b>	<b>Per cent</b>
1 Customer shouting insults	15	34.1
2 Blamed for COJ problems	13	29.5
3 Customer calling me stupid	2	4.5
4 Customer being racist	5	11.4
5 Customer giving incorrect details	2	4.5
6 Other	7	15.9

The City is aware of the high volume of calls during certain periods, for example the Communication Officer noted that

An unusually high number of calls will be received when there is a major power failure. We all know that someone else has reported the problem, but we all need to talk to an agent ourselves, it’s normal behaviour. For this one might ask, why not have more staff on duty so unexpected high volumes of calls will be answered? The answer is staffing is planned around the history of number of calls, it varies daily, weekly and monthly. (Communication through Top Manager 9, 23 August 2013)

It is clear from the research that call centre workers are ‘not just answering the phone’: they have become ‘fire extinguishers’ or ‘shock absorbers’ who have to harmonise the relationship between the customer and the council. As customers call the municipality, angrily looking for answers and irritated about services, they are met with a voice that has to assure them that ‘all is going to be well’. Due to an inefficient billing system and Eskom power supply problems, these workers bear the brunt of customer dissatisfaction as ‘spokespersons’ for the municipality.

This was evident when Eskom (South African Energy Company) increased tariffs or cut power for citizens.

I remember in 2009, during Freedom Day, we had only seven operators in the call centre and there was a power cut for close to 60 townships in Gauteng and people were calling and we handled more than 44 000 calls and that was madness, the media nailed us demanding answers. (Top Manager 3, 2 August 2010)

High volumes of calls in the call centre were prevalent during the billing crisis. In 2011 the average number of calls received per month were more than 140 000 (Top Manager 9, 23 August 2013).

### **7.2.2 Communication at work: Connecting the un-connected**

The entire workforce in the Joburg Connect agreed that ‘lack of communication between management and staff’ was a key challenge in trying to improve the customer service. One common difficulty shared by the managers and operators was the poor communication all around, between managers and workers; council and managers; call centre and back office. This has been escalated by the current water and electricity billing crisis, where municipality releases inaccurate account statements because of disconnections with meter reading and accounts software. The disconnected nature of the organisational workflow has disconnected Joburg Connect from clients and citizens, leading to lies being fed to the latter. Mainly during the billing crisis period, call centre workers experienced a breakdown in communication flow which was supposed to be guided by the total integration of technological systems. This meant call centre workers did not have a single view of the customer as anticipated by the Phakama Programme. This fragmentation of the customer interface meant workers did not have full information about the customer accounts. Total

systems integration as part of Programme Phakama sought to establish this connection (which has taken longer) in moving one million accounts into a single SAP database.

“The major issue is the communication gap between the utilities we serve and the call centre” (Top Manager 7<sup>21</sup>, 5 July 2011). This statement represented a common trend amongst the participants from different organisational levels.

For example this was clear when one of the health officials went to the media to splash about cat licences and gave people the call centre number before he even went to us and informed about the ‘splash’. They don’t understand that to source that information from these utilities is stressful and workers are not informed about what is happening and get a lot grief from the clients... Working in the call centre is not a walk in the park! (Top Manager 3, 2 August 2010)

The speaker above clearly creates a link between the poor communications between the call centres and the well-being of the operators. Cat licences are regarded as a non-core function of the municipality and therefore operators in the Joburg Connect were not given information to respond to calls. This miscommunication creates unequal relations between the ‘informed customer and uninformed operator’, which perpetuates the negative perceptions about call centre operators’ lack of knowledge of their work.

Because of the nature of call centre jobs, collective meetings with managers are difficult. This was noted by supervisors and managers of the call centre.

Meetings are impossible in the call centre environment because you can’t move people from their workstations otherwise you’ll have more than 50% abandonment rate. (Top Manager 3, 2 August 2010)

Communication should be prioritised in a call centre environment to be able to address irate customers and safeguard operators from embarrassing and abusive call interactions. The operators are often insulted for their lack of knowledge and for being purely message-takers who cannot assist in anything. Poor communication in the organisation was not the only issue; it was reported as an issue with the union representatives, who were supposed to

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<sup>21</sup> Top Manager 7 was interviewed in Harrison House during the June/July research trip in 2011.

inform and protect the call centre operators. Some of the operators felt isolated and sometimes compromised by their union.

Every article in the newspaper blames the call centre without knowing that we don't resolve queries here, which forms part of the frustration when working at the call centre... Agents are frustrated because they can't resolve the queries, this is a big issue here. (FGD 1, 03 August 2011)

This was a concern shared by almost all the workers interviewed in this study. Workers seemed to lack the channels to voice their concerns. Interviews for this research seemed to provide some relief, as did focus group discussions as operators began to see that they were all experiencing the same challenges. The group above refers to what had become the norm in the Gauteng and national newspapers in the past three to four years. Call centre workers have become a source of attack in newspaper columns that criticise poor service delivery by the city municipality. Many articles were written by local journalist Anna Cox from *The Star* who went as far as saying "Joburg Connect is not connecting with its residents and it is failing the City of Joburg's standards miserably" (The Star, 18 August 2008: 3).

The assumption from the piece above is one of many articles written about the call centre without any investigation of the cause behind the poor service rendered by the workers. This is why many of the women in one group interview wanted to write to the newspapers and say "we do not resolve queries here, we simply log in the query and send it to the relevant department". This was highlighted as one of the major causes of stress and frustration by the Joburg Connect workers. From the managers' perspective this was explained by the lack of software coordination within the customer interface section of the municipality.

When asked about the customer being the source of pain, most said

Customers are the least of our problems. We sit here waiting for these entities to supply us with feedback so that we can be able to assist the customer, but this is impossible because you will go back to the system and find out the only information that is there it the one you logged in yourself two weeks back... In fact the customers are the ones that are more understanding, at times very rude of course, but when

you explain the situation to them they can be of great help as well. (FGD 2, 28 September 2012)

Working hard in trying to harmonise the relations between the customer and the council, the operators often simply smile and 'lie' to the customers to protect the disconnected and dysfunctional system of the municipality. "We are paid to lie" most of them said laughing, "because even the numbers we give to the customers we know that they won't work so we give them anyway" (FGD 2, 28 September 2012). Workers continued to talk amongst themselves, saying they do not feel good about it. They even went on to say they are ashamed of their occupation because of the bad publicity.

In the Joburg Connect call centre more operators were on sick leave than at work daily. This was due to high rates of sick leave absence, related to the high stress levels and helplessness amongst the operators.

I do sick leave audits here and it looks disastrous. People who take leave outnumber the ones at work, some maybe are lazy but most are bored ... it's not nice to come to work ... and call centre work is stressful on its own especially when there are no incentives, no motivation, no break always no teamwork games, most people are not at work not because they are sick. (Former CCA 2, 09 August 2010)

In other words the high sick leave rates are related to the pressure and stressful nature of the job. This is not unique to the city of Johannesburg as the call centre literature has detailed high absenteeism, turnover and sick leave as part of the resistance strategies to cope with stress (Taylor and Bain, 2004; Mulholland, 2004). It is worth noting that the speaker above refers to call centre work as stressful but seems to think it has been made worse by the environment. This is considerably different from what is implied by literature on call centres where stress is caused by the performance targets and commercial imperative. Leave is a cooling-off mechanism rather than actual sickness because of the nature of the job and its related stresses.

Acknowledged by the managers, the inaccurate statements given to customers have worsened the working conditions in the call centre and further increased the staff turnover. This is not only prevalent in the COJ, as the billing system is linked directly to what the call

centre operators do. The customers are infuriated by the inaccuracy of their statements or having their electricity cut off, which leads to insulting the first person they face representing the municipality.

The impact of billing, basically...call volume that has sky rocketed because of incorrect bills. This has frustrated the staff members, which results from a frustrated customer. This saw a backlog in our calls and increased abandonment rate. Response times have tended to be longer. (Top Manager 2, 06 August 2010)

This was supported by the Communications Department as they listed a number of problems experienced by the City during the implementation of Programme Phakama. This included “training of staff, physical migration of staff, billing, credit control, total systems integration and high call volumes” (Top manager 9, 23 August 2013). This major cost of these problems was communication as the systems were not integrated to assist the front and back office to have the same view of the customer.

### **7.2.3 Communication between the front and back offices**

It was mentioned earlier in chapter six that the back office in the City of Johannesburg has 56 people working eight hours a day to solve the queries from the call centre and walk-in centres logged into the system. This back office is also in charge of administrative side of revenue collection including preparing and issuing statements to customers. This is the department that defines call centre (in)competency according to the operators.

You will log in a query and when the customer comes back two weeks later asking about it you look on the system and the query has not been touched and you end up lying to the customer and say they are working on it. You then create a story to the customer just to calm her down, operators do their work. (Former CCA 1, 25 August 2010)

Poor communication between different departments of the municipalities and/or communications department has elicited this kind of behaviour by call centre operators. “Front-line office should work well with back-office but there is lack of communication between the two which makes call-centre work very difficult ... People work in silos here” (Top Manager 3, August 2010).

Managers are perceived as being ineffective in dealing with call centre challenges, though seemed to be controlling the call centre without being into the call centre.

Our managers are forever on our backs but they can't even communicate our problems even them. Shame man, they don't have no power; they get instructions from above from other departments, they get told what to do. (CCA 3, 04 July 2011).

These managers appeared to only receive commands without any power to change or effect any constructive contribution to the call centre. Some in FGD 2 argued that

Managers themselves feel disempowered by the system because when we report to them they tell us that they don't even know the direct person they can talk to when problems arise, because each will send you to the next person ... Managers themselves are despondent ... (FGD 2, 28 September 2012)

Managers themselves complained of being undermined by other department as the 'less important' service of the municipality: "My problem is that those who are in leadership don't understand the complexity of the call centre environment and they don't take the customer service seriously" (Top Manager 3, 2 August 2010).

Poor communication forms one of the sources of frustration and pressure in the call centre environment as staff members are primarily involved in the dispersal of information. The call centre labour process is about transfer of knowledge from the council to customers but when the chain (of communication) is broken the call centre malfunctions.

You know what is happening in the call centre, the customer teaches you lots of things. You then pretend as if you know because you are trying to cover up for the municipality, and then you run to the supervisor who knows nothing as well because there is no communication between the supervisors and the managers. (CCA 3, 04 July 2011)

These managers appeared to only receive commands without any power to change or effect any constructive contribution to the call centre. Managers complained of being undermined by other departments as the 'less important' service of the Metro. "My problem is that those who are in leadership don't understand the complexity of the call centre environment

and they don't take the customer service seriously" (Top Manager 3, August 2010). Managers are perceived to lack the knowledge of the call centre environment which is coming from the lack of interaction between the management of the city as a whole.

For me it seems as if there's no communication amongst the directors of these departments, I means what is it so difficult in calling a meeting and talking about what's going on in their own departments? (CCA 5<sup>22</sup>, 4 July 2011)

This apparent lack of communication amongst the managers themselves translates in the lack of monitoring and thus effectiveness of the customer-worker interaction. Workers were grouped in teams of eight competing against one another. When the new management came in after 2008, it was apparent that operators were becoming demoralised and they started to focus more on their work rather than teamwork. Workers complained about the demoralising nature of the environment which provided no incentives to 'come to work' on the daily basis.

#### **7.2.4 The customer as the 'teacher' (of the call centre agents)**

The issue of poor communication exists not only between the leaders and managers but also between the managers and call centre operators. Managers explained this by the nature of call centre work in itself.

... another challenge is the fact that it is operational for 24/7. You can't always be there even on weekends and then this results in the breakdown of communication and relations. Then one has to send memos which takes away the human element in communication with the workers. Meetings are impossible in the call centre environment because you can't move people from their workstations otherwise you'll have more than 50% abandonment rate. (Top Manager 3, August 2010)

Interviews even had to take place whilst they operators were seated in their stations. When the researcher asked about the use of intranet/internet in disseminating information operators simply said they have no access to the internet. They then went on to tell stories about how customers have become the source of information rather than their managers. Due to lack of communication, workers tend to be the last one in the communication chain

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<sup>22</sup> Call Centre Agent 5 was among the individuals interviewed in Proton House in July 2011.

even resorting to getting information from the customers. Contributing to what the literature termed as lack of knowledge amongst call centre operators, customers tend to be the first ones to know about the council decisions.

You know what is happening in the call centre, the customer teaches you lots of things. You then pretend as if you know because you are trying to cover up for the municipality, and then you run to the supervisor who knows nothing as well because there is no communication between the supervisors and the managers. (CCA 3, 04 July 2011)

Being the 'bosses' from outside the workplace, these customers, mainly from business sector and suburbs of Johannesburg, are informed by the COJ before the staff are informed about service issues. Bezuidenhout, Godfrey, Theron and Modishe's (2004) concept of 'basskap' mentality is applicable to a number of customers who regard themselves 'superior' in knowledge and skills about the metro. When the conditions allow, a customer can be supportive and offer advice to the uninformed frontline staff who will sometimes pretend to be aware of the problem. This dialogue is fostered by the Communications Department providing information to the outside customer without informing the inside operator first. One of the Communications top officers agreed with the customers and said "we don't even put the number of the call centre on our marketing tools no more, because it's useless" (top manager 9, 23 August 2013). The managers in the call centre blamed the communication department for "splashing information into the media without circulating it inside first" (top manager 7, 5 July 2011).

The racist insults about the 'black government's inefficiency' and stupidity of the call centre workers are part of the norm in daily interactions. These rate second after the municipal causes of stress; irate customers with their insults about 'useless' call centre operators are a major cause of frustration in the job.

It is important to note that even though many aspects of stress are presented separately, they are connected and workers experience them not as discrete sources of stress but holistically. Managers attest to the poor communication which also results in poor work relations within the call centre.

The communication department will start by announcing things on the media without satisfying the internal customer-employees or at least informing them. There are many instances where you find that customers know more and you know nothing. For example, a customer will tell you that tariffs have been increased but as an employee of the council one does not know. (Top Manager 7, 5 July 2011)

#### **7.2.5 Commitment and morale**

It is generally accepted amongst the studies conducted in the industry that call centre work is stress laden due to the nature of work and technology. Call centre literature highlights stress and pressure as the sources of low morale amongst the call centre workers. Joburg Connect experiences poor technological systems, poor communication and an uncoordinated software system; this forces many to take sick leave without being sick. Understaffing was also corroding the morale of the workforce reflected in the high rate of sick leave by most operators. As previously highlighted more and more people are absent resulting in fewer on the job. From managers to operators it was agreed that people were not motivated at all to be at work; mostly the technological challenges had encouraged them to lie to and be creative with customers.

The morale and commitment is very low because of the statements to the customers, billing system and software system (SAP) in place. To tell you the truth we have run out of lies, there is no drive at all and they have abandoned the Phakama group, problems are political influence, people don't want to work especially those that have been here since I got here because of this sense of entitlement both the front and the back office; they just sit there. (Top Manager 2, 3 July 2011)

From the customer being the source of information to giving the customer a long list of numbers, knowing they do not work, just to get them off their backs – both corrode the commitment and morale amongst the Joburg Connect operators. In addition there is poor feedback from the back office. It was apparent that though workers were keen to do their jobs (assisting the customer), circumstances made it difficult.

**Table 7-3: Causes of Job Satisfaction**

	<b>Number of Participants</b>	<b>Percent</b>
1 Job salary	10	18.5
2 Being of assistance to customer	20	37.0
3 Being a team member	4	7.4
4 Job control	2	3.7
5 All of the above	17	31.5
6 Other	1	1.9

The inability to assist the customer seems to be at the heart of job satisfaction and many operators feel all the factors in the table contribute to their job satisfaction. This is directly linked to the negativity experienced in situations of anger as most operators highlighted ‘customer insults’ and ‘poor technological system’ as issues. Communication gaps within the COJ lead to an inability to assist the customer who is mostly the cause of satisfaction which might explain the stress levels. Lying becomes part of the performance for which call centres are employed to be on stage and present a different ‘reality’ of the situation to the customers. This ‘deep acting’ is internalised: workers feel exploited and used after the lies (Hochschild, 1983).

We come here and lie for living ... seriously we lie and now we have run out of lies we just don’t answer the calls. (CCA 4<sup>23</sup>, 3 August 2011)

Some of the writers about call centres have aligned the call centre sense of pain and pleasure to the customer behaviour. Korczynski (2002) has argued for dialectic relations between the customer and worker satisfaction. He argued that if workers are happy they tend to transfer that into their customer service, which then results in customer satisfaction. As much as the customer becomes the source of stress in many private sector call centres, in the local government it becomes apparent that workers understand customer frustrations because they are also frustrated by the same system. However, the operator is

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<sup>23</sup> Call centre agent 4 was interviewed in Proton House in August 2011.

employed to represent the face of failure of the system so in the end she will 'act' her way out of the call.

Customers are suffering more than ever and they are so unhappy about the call centre ... as workers are also not happy, I don't blame the customer then. You are basically employed to cover up for the municipality ... and you need to lie, and you need to be very creative in the call centre ... (FGD 2, 28 September 2012)

To work to lie has been forced by the poor coordination within the technological and managerial poor communication. This is part of the call centre social skills that many have failed to recognise in this industry. Call centre operators are not only the polite spokespersons of the council but they also have to be 'creative' thinkers in order to preserve their jobs. One can never be trained in these skills as they are believed to be part of the call centre operator's personality. Managers agreed that when they recruit for the job they look for the attitude to serve rather than any specific skills. This 'false reality' sometimes contributes to the high turnover experienced in the metro call centre; as one manager said "we have run out of lies, these workers are tired" (Top Manager 2, 04 August 2010). These are some of the working conditions promoted by the poor technological and political atmosphere within the leadership of the COJ. The satisfaction derived from assisting the customer among other things was interrupted by the lack of trust and faith in the system by both workers and customers. The latter labelled the workers as 'stupid' on a daily basis which in turn pushed workers into a defensive mode.

#### **7.2.6 Sick leave and staff turnover**

Absence and sick leave are part of the coping strategies used in the call centre environment. In terms of retention of workers, the call centre also suffers from the lack of a retention strategy: workers come in for a year and leave the municipality and look for "greener pastures ... as you hit the ceiling here you tend to want to move on ... you can only do this for few years" (Supervisor 1, 4 July 2011). This was confirmed by supervisors who said "One year is enough and they are gone". Call centre work is famous for high attrition rates, with noticeably lower rates in unionised call centres. People were leaving every six months within the COJ which meant difficulties in keeping in touch with certain events and building consistent contacts at times. Only a few key participants were consistent in the study and

new faces during the many visits to the call centre were the norm. Both union and managerial turnover was high. Some of the managers (all females) who were transferred to the call centre never lasted more than a year while they had worked more than four years in other departments. This high turnover in the call centre was explained by many as the result of the work environment. Three of five managers from this call-centre worked in the private sector call centre before they joined Joburg Connect. However, such experience, they believe “could not have prepared them for city call centre” (Top Manager 7, 5 July 2011). The high attrition rates within the city call centre were causing staff shortages which in turn increased the volume of calls and thus stress among those left behind. Managers walked around the call centre showing me the empty desks that were supposed to be occupied by the operators. The call centre was operating at 60 per cent of its normal capacity because of budget constraints. Managers also identified challenges facing the call centre and the need to improve and keep up with the technology.

Call centre work is arguable one of the most ‘ruthless form of work’ (Head, 2003: 71) to human health. One of the managers in the COJ argued for the deeply unhealthy environment of the call centre due to stress:

A lot of them there want out of the call centre hence you will find a lot of them booked with EAP to see Psychologists and Doctors, we understand. When we recruit new workers we move the other ones into the city because ideally, two years is enough. (Top manager 8, 26 August 2013)

Most of the workers interviewed and surveyed (48.9 per cent) for this project identified hearing problems and stress as major health risks on this job. This grouping of the different health risks experienced by the agents was compiled from a pilot study where workers chose stress and hearing problems as the top two health risks at work. A significant number (29.6 per cent) also see most of the items in the table that follows as health risks.

**Table 7-4: Health Risks in Joburg Connect Call Centre**

	<b>Number of Participants</b>	<b>Percent</b>
1 Stress and voice loss	1	1.9
2 Voice loss and hearing problems	2	3.7
3 Hearing problems and stress	26	48.9
4 All of the above	16	29.6
5 None of the above	1	1.6
6 Other	8	14.8

### **7.2.7 Lack of trust and recognition**

Part of the causes of stress in local government was the ‘toxic’ environment and poor institutional culture defined by the poor levels of trusts. Some of the participants interviewed said this about the city:

Most people [workers] are not satisfied, there is no retention strategy and qualifications are not recognised. Too much political interference in recruitment and selection... (back office 3, 26 August 2013)

There is no institutional culture, the issue of loyalty is meaningless, it’s a money-driven council, company culture has disappeared and no pride. The City is a bully-boy... (IMATU official, 21 August 2013)

The city does not care about the consumers. (Ratepayers Association Representative, <sup>24</sup>21 August 2013)

In political terms this is a confirmation of a state losing touch with community, it’s an arrogant city and only responsible to big business and the rich. (APF activist, 20 August 2013)

These are all different perspectives of the institutional culture of a city that does not adequately recognize its citizens, community and employees. It is the ‘arrogance’ and

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<sup>24</sup> This one and half hour interview took place in a salon in Hyde Park Mall while the interviewee was waiting to get her hair done.

'bullying' that was consistent in many interviewees' perceptions of the city. The heavily politicised environment which tends to favour the elite is highlighted here:

Lots of councillors are not paying the service charges but will force the credit control department to reconnect them, actually 90 per cent of the councillors. (back office 3, 26 August 2013)

Most of the participants interviewed for this project clearly said that trust was the problem in the workplace. From the survey conducted with 59 workers it became clear that trust was a problem in the workplace, as more than 67 per cent of the participants argued for unsatisfactory levels of trust. On the Pearson correlation analysis trust and communication by management had a positive correlation ( $r=.775$ ,  $n=59$  and  $p=.000$ ). This means less trust in the workplace comes from less communication by management. The low levels of trust were not only experienced by the agents from their managers, but also the managers themselves did not feel trusted by the political leadership of the COJ. A more regulated and strict environment was pushed from above resulting in a manager's lack of ability to make any fundamental change in the call centre.

And this is precisely the reason behind the lack of synergy within these different departments. People work in isolation here they don't trust their employees to implement policies. There is a lack of trust, communication is non-existent because people are just scared, they don't want to be exposed that they are not doing their jobs. They watch you like a hawk ... all your moves are under surveillance ... and the major one is communication. (Top Manager 2, 4 August 2010)

The manager above noted her racial identity as a possible explanation of why 'she is not trusted to run the call centre'. However, interestingly there is the mention of surveillance that she is operating under which is not limited to her agents but to managers themselves. This confirms what Prichard et al. (2014: 2) said: "trust is said to be operating alongside control and surveillance in the call centre". However these 'unsatisfactory' low levels of trust did not match the control that these workers possessed on the job. The question was asked whether the call centre agent felt they were in control of their job (worker autonomy and discretion). Some felt 'sometimes' (39,4 per cent) they feel in control of their job. A significant number felt in control of their job 'all the time' (27,3 per cent) while 33,3 per

cent felt they were 'never' in control of their job process. This complicated relationship between trust and employee autonomy/discretion does not necessarily fit into the positive relationship between worker discretion/autonomy and trust by Taylor and Bain (2007). This complicated and multi-layered dynamic of trust in the workplace was not limited to manager/worker or politicians /managers but also to workers/technology. The workers felt that they could not trust their back office to attend to logged queries timeously. Some also highlighted a lack of faith in their technological system as they did not know whether the logged query went through or not (group interview 2).

Workers felt they knew the causes of the problems in the call centre could never be solved by political leaders. One manager felt that her race was an issue: the fact she was a woman and white, she felt was a source of her exclusion in call centre changes. This was exacerbated by the lack of consultation whenever there are call centre changes (technologically or otherwise). Most workers believed that recognition on the job was for friends and family members. The workplace provided few incentives for them to be productive. It was based on 'nepotism' that saw some of the operators moving to higher level jobs or becoming part of the supervisory teams.

### **7.3 Conclusion**

When Joburg municipality does not replace the staff leaving the call centre in order to maintain costs, this adds pressure to the remaining 60 per cent of the workers who have to cope under increasing call volumes due to technological inefficiencies. This means worker stress is not only customer imposed but embedded in the neoliberal agenda pursued to save costs at the expense of the citizens and workers. Poor communication, technological problems, staff shortages, lack of trust defined the bureaucracy that is held together by 'make believe' attitudes from the call centre. This is why all workers in the call centre did not want to be associated with the organisation they work in because of shame and incompetence defining their employer.

The relationship between work and subjective worker experiences is shaped by political and economic structures. The interests and difficulties experienced under 'imposed' conditions of work by a capitalist state produces the same conditions among the working poor. As the capitalist labour process extends its tentacles to the public sector, Braverman (1974)

observed that the logic of capitalist production which is sustained by continual destruction of work skills does not spare any occupation. The structure of work beyond the capital accumulation logic continues to be shaped by the relations between capital and state as the state seeks to minimise costs through cost recovery embedded in the Egoli 2002 logic.

In resisting these conditions workers apply individual and collective techniques as the managers seek to control their behaviour. Dropping the call from an irate customer, putting it on loudspeaker and letting the customer talk unattended are the most common forms of resistance. These form the content of the following chapter.

## Chapter 8<sup>25</sup>

# Worker-Responses, Acquiescence and Resistance: Customer-Worker Interface

### 8.1 Introduction

This chapter seeks to contribute to the debate about the decollectivised or individualised nature of call centre employment relations. Forming the centre of the current job creation solutions, call centres promise access to wage income for those who have matric and post matric qualifications. Resembling the ‘contestation’ of COSATU (Buhlungu and Tshoedi, 2012) at a national level, SAMWU as the majority union in this call centre seems to be lacking strategies or awareness of the impact of this relatively new segment of their members. Very limited South African literature is available on the study of trade unions and call centres especially in the local government sector, this chapter will explore some of the fundamental issues confronting call centre unions in South Africa, especially at local government level. SAMWU as the majority union in the City of Johannesburg is entangled in political battles that seem to be compromising operations while some of the leaders move into municipal jobs. Call centre workers seem to be employing individual techniques rather than collective forms of resistance to counter the stressful working conditions.

### 8.2 Individual forms of resistance

The ability of workers to manoeuvre and shape their own work surroundings in the face of despotic managerial control has been a source of great debate in the labour process (see Chapter 3). As the workers in the call centre work under intense pressure and stress, workers use different ways to ‘cope or resist’ the conditions. One consistent universal form of individualised resistance by the workers has been the ‘high turnover’ in this industry all over the world. This was not different in the local government workplace, as the call centre was functioning with ‘skeletal’ staff most of the time. The managers and team leaders

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<sup>25</sup> Parts of this chapter were published in a book chapter by Magoqwana, B. and Matatu, S. ‘Local Government Call centre: Challenge or Opportunity for South African Labour?’ In Mosoetsa, S. and Williams, M. (eds.)(2012) *Labour in the Global South: Challenges and Alternatives for Workers*. International Labour Organisation Publications.

admitted that two years was more than enough in this environment and people treated the call centre as a 'job entry' to the labour market.

Turnover is big in the city generally not only in the call centre ... In the call centre the problem is, this is a 24/7 environment, there are certain times where absenteeism's peaks up. I can't tell you how many sick leaves I have processed in the last few months, it's ridiculous. (Top Manager 3, 2 August 2012)

It was also evident that most recruits from this call centre had moved from the private sector call centres (mostly outsourced) to this municipal one. The reasons stated were more related to benefits and stability. But the contradictions came with the constant complaint about difficult working conditions and poor management practices.

I'll give anything to go back to the private sector call centre, I cried when I joined the call centre environment but now looking at this one ... that was the best ... In the private sector you know exactly what you're employed to do... In that environment the system would work the whole day and there are technicians walking around to assist just in case there is a technical problem. You will get your PC immediately when you get to work not this thing of not having a computer for months after employment. (FGD 1, 03 August 2011)

Half of this group members worked for banking call centres previously and all seemed to agree that this was a hard introduction to call centre jobs. There is a willingness to work but poor working conditions are among the causes of stress in local government. The poor management-staff relations are worsened by low trust levels. Despite not giving the actual numbers of turnover and absenteeism those who were interviewed agreed that it was very high along with high rate of sick leave.

I have divided these different coping mechanisms with the local government working conditions into two broad themes: work and personal techniques. The former involves the strategies applied by the workers in relations to work stress and the latter refers to those resulting from personal attacks from the irate customers.

### 8.2.1 Personal techniques

As I participated in the call centre by listening to the conversations between the customer and the agents, one of the callers was put on hold by the agent indefinitely as the caller expressed anger towards the agent. She answered the call in front of me and demonstrated how they let the customer speak without being heard by the agent, thinking that his insults are going through. She then turned to me and said

... we put them on hold, once they start doing that (shouting and swearing) until they keep calm and then attend to them. (FGD 1, 03 August 2011)

This was shown to be a consistent strategy as the rest of the group concurred that they used similar strategies to deal with irate customers. This strategy is costly for the customer who remains online, shouting and thinking that she is being heard, while the call is not free. One operator would sometimes put the customers on hold until the customer hung up; she would then turn to her colleagues and share how she had 'disciplined' the irate customer.

The managers seemed to understand the stressful and frustrating environment in the call centre as they agreed that "no one can work more than two years in that environment". In training the workers to deal with angry customers, managers said

We simply tell them that they must treat customers like madman because you don't answer to a madman ... but this is human being. You get tired of absorbing the hurt, but I tell you after working in the call centre environment one is able to handle any form of relations in life, working in a call centre is not easy. (Top Manager 3, 2 August 2010)

Only one male call centre agent within the survey seemed to deal with racist and abusive customer more aggressively: "I swear back at them, as they bring my family into Joburg City affairs". The last popular strategy was to provide a long list of numbers to the customer in order to dismiss the customer and divert problems to other departments. Almost all the workers interviewed at the height of billing crisis between 2010-2012 admitted they did not have answers for the questions asked by the customers. This was countered by the provision of a long list of numbers in order to get the customer off their backs, but it was difficult when the customer called again with the list.

We give the customers wrong numbers and you'll find that the customer has all the numbers in your list and you pray that she does not have the next one on your list.... [One of them narrates her story] I remember there was this guy who called in looking for some director's number when I gave him this number he was like don't even try giving me that number again... What do you do? You end up lying; giving him the Arts and Culture number... (Group laughs). (FGD 1, 03 August 2011)

These are some of the responses given by the frontline workers in order to cope with poor communication and bad working conditions within the local government call centre. They admit that at times they are required to lie and portray a different organisational reality to the customer. This was also admitted by the manager who claimed "they have run out of lies" because of increased call volume during the billing crisis in the COJ. The surveyed group of workers (59) argued that "they let them (customer) vent [air their frustration and anger] and help afterwards". Over 66 per cent of those who participated in the survey argued that they "listen and let the customer vent and then attend to her". This was followed by 24.5 per cent of the workers who dealt with customer irritation through "sharing with colleagues". Some operators felt 'empathy' for the customers. One of the FGD members said:

I used to work at WesBank in the petrol card section and the customer will call being stuck in a garage and you will be able to say they must swipe their card and reconnect them. In here, it's different! You cannot reconnect the customer even though you feel sorry for the customer, you can try and help but it's difficult here. (FGD 2, 28 September 2012)

This inability to help the customer creates a sense of helplessness that sometimes translates into customer aggression towards the agents. Under these conditions call centre agents have created their own 'resistance techniques' to cope with work frustrations.

### **8.2.2 Work techniques**

Call avoidance has increased by more than 60 per cent during the time of COJ billing crisis which has been the focus of the Mayor and the Revenue Services for the past 9 years. Many calls are not answered daily by the City of Johannesburg. This 'mess and catastrophe' in the call centre (as one manager puts it) was the result of poor communication along with

problematic technological packages used in the call centre. Call avoidance and call dropping were also acknowledged by the City Mayor (Parks Tau) in his State of the City Address (2013) which resulted in increased customer dissatisfaction by 15 per cent at the time.

Our customer relations are very bad, actually [the relationship] it is non-existent! Everyone is trying to save their own skin by pointing fingers to others. (Top manager 4, 8 July 2011).

The high number of unanswered calls reflects badly on customer service; the city's service delivery priorities focuses on this issue to gain confidence of the customer. It was this call avoidance by the call centre which led to some of the persistent negative headlines in the press: "Joburg Connect is not connecting with its residents and it is failing the City of Joburg's standards miserably" (The Star, 18 August 2008); "No Connection to Joburg Connect a Glitch" (The Star, 28 August 2008). In the latter article The Star reporter Anna Cox, reported on her experience of the call centre. She called the call centre and the phone 'went dead after it rang'. Despite the monitoring mechanisms to record and monitor performance in the call centre, there was no proven record on their use to discipline the agents. Boasting about the reduced call waiting time, the acting manager reported to the researcher that more than 80 per cent of calls were now answered by the call centre workers which was still far below the industry standard of 6 per cent call abandonment rates (Top manager 7, 5 July 2011).

To refresh themselves and to continue working, many call centre workers apply for sick leave even when they are not sick (this issue is discussed in Chapter 7 of this thesis). In times of increased call volume, many calls are abandoned as the workers deal with only those calls they can manage given the high number of those on sick leave daily. The number of calls, along with few agents to take calls, result in longer call waiting periods which leads to high abandonment rates and thus bad customer service. Despite the workers and documents of the city arguing that "calls have to be answered within 20 seconds" this was not possible given the number of workers present each day. The international trend of 10-15 per cent everyday absence in the call centre attest to the stressful nature of the job as the workers seek to rejuvenate themselves by taking sick leave (Benner et al., 2007). Almost all workers interviewed in this research admitted to taking sick leave without being sick. One of the

Human Resources managers told the researcher that “people who are on leave outnumber those at work daily” (Former CCA 2, 09 August 2010).

This high rate of sick leave applications has a double impact: on the employees and the call centre performance. This means more work is created for those who are at work for the day and more calls being abandoned. It is then a cycle of stress to the agents and managers who seek to manage the statistics for the municipality as they reflect poor customer service from the City’s perspective. These forms of resistance attest to the micro-politics of work within the local government call centre. The idea of ‘totalising’ control is far removed from the truth despite the all-seeing eye of the technology. The customer-worker interaction provides a space for resistance, as the interaction is not scripted. The power displayed by the frontline workers speaks to the dependent nature of the so-called sovereign customer in the public sector. There is limited power which the customer can use to persuade the call centre agent to adhere to the ‘customer is king’ principle. The frontline forms of resistance place the pressure back on the managers who have to account to politicians and media for the poor service delivery. This means control is contested in the public sector call centres despite the high demands of the job. When the managers answered the question on discipline, they pointed to heavy involvement of trade unions in the performance of the call centre.

Labour intervention is ridiculous in the local government. It’s like unions are trained to fight against management all the time, but they are supposed to be my eyes. Shop stewards are supposed to be assisting me, I personally think that unions don’t understand their role, for example when I hired temporary workers there was so much productivity in the call centre, they performed because they got paid according to their performance. (Top manager 3, 2 August 2010)

Unions are terrible. This management is so weak, they have allowed the union to take over, they are running this place. (Top manager 2, 3 July 2011)

As noted under supervision in the previous chapter, the use of an electronic monitoring system to discipline the workers seems to be ineffective in countering these productivity countering forms of resistance. Later in this chapter, workers seem to argue that SAMWU, as the majority union in the call centre, is part of the problem in this politicised local

government environment. Despite the individualised forms of resistance, trade union presence in the call centre should be noted, as the South African Municipal Workers Union (SAMWU) dominated the call centre presence and only one Independent Municipal and Allied Trade Union (IMATU) member was identified. This was verified by the IMATU official interviewed on the question of their presence in the call centre. As noted in Chapter 2, call centres are present in every industry which makes them difficult to organise based on the occupation itself. It should be noted that SAMWU organises the local government segment of call centre works force while nationally, CWU is recognised as the ICT sector union.

### **8.3 Trade unions in the call centre**

Communications Workers Union (CWU) represents the Information and Communication Technology sector in South Africa under the federation of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU). Despite the increasing number of call centre jobs in the South African labour market this precarious industry is proving to be a challenge for the unions locally but an opportunity for international solidarity against this footloose industry. The Secretary General of the CWU explained some of the challenges faced by the union in this South African labour market:

You walk into a call centre with 500 people and try and organise a meeting with them, it's very hard. These people are given two hours for union meetings per month. You then speak to people during their lunch hour which is all in different times; you find no interest at all in mostly young people. Those who are interested are identified by managers and sent into another company (by the labour broker) so that we do not get the numbers to be recognised as a union ... It is very hard to recruit call centre workers; they are in and out of call centre ... this is based on the indefinite nature of the contracts and outsourcing. For example, a lady was dismissed at Vodacom and we took the matter to CCMA and the company said, we do not know why CWU brought us here because the lady has not been dismissed by Vodacom as we have hired an outsourced company ... These companies are all heading towards outsourcing and they divide and rule the workers imposing competition among staff members through performance contracts. In a nutshell, we have not done well in organising this industry, we have close to 10 000 unaccounted members and only 2100 on the books ... another challenge is that call centres are set

up in discrete geographical places which are not easily accessible to people ... (CWU official, 23 August 2013)

The CWU challenges are reflective of union challenges in organising this relatively new set of workers. The official interviewed mentioned individualisation, age, geographical distance, flexible contracts, and the unaccountable nature of labour brokers. At the end of the a three-hour interview, he mentioned the difference between public and outsourced call centres, by arguing that state companies are much better and more union friendly when compared to footloose labour brokers.

Call centres are found in different industries but are very prevalent in finance, communications and hospitality and tourism industry. This means they have one foot in two places, which is why it has been a challenge to categorise them as an 'industry'. The presence of call centres in the public sector provide a similar challenge to the unions, as SAMWU organises the local government while CWU organises the ICT sector. This becomes a challenge when one needs to consolidate the statistics about the number of workers in this 'industry' as they fall under different jurisdictions.

### **8.3.1 SAMWU in call centres**

SAMWU dominates the South African local government and Joburg Connect is not different. Most of the workers interviewed identified 'loyalty' and job protection as the major reasons for joining the union. Despite these reasons, the union was deemed invisible in the call centres. Although many operators wanted to participate in union activities, the nature of their jobs and time constraints affected their participation. Though call centre workers can participate in the strike by picketing during lunch hour (as they shown by participating in a strike organised by SAMWU in October 2007, leaving the call centre operating with 50 per cent of the staff), it is generally hard for the workers to see the impact of the strike as the calls can be re-routed to another relevant call centre.

Call centre workers have been largely ignored as they do not exist in every municipality. They are treated as the frontline desks or receptions; the only difference is that they are specialised in dealing with telephone enquiries (SAMWU Official 2, 05 July 2011).

The new customer-centred workplace within local government seems to present new mobilisation challenges and opportunities. Despite the fight against Egoli 2002, SAMWU seems to be lacking imaginative ways to deal with the local government environment. When asked about the role of call centres in the COJ with regard to service delivery, the SAMWU official said

Call centres are just message takers who cannot help you or provide any feedback. They are just glorified PAs of other departments; there is no link between call centres and the other municipal entities. They just register a query and you will never even get feedback or someone who was attending to you [as a customer]. (SAMWU official 3, 04 July 2011)

These two respondents point to the 'useless' nature of call centres not only to the public, but also to the workers themselves as they lack any capacity to be of assistance to the public. Though SAMWU officials appeared to lack knowledge of the call centre work environment in the local government, it would be useful if they were to conduct research about the number of call centre workers within their union.

This statement was echoed by another union official when trying to explain the new customer-centred workplace in the local government. It implies that this section of workers has never been part of the union mandate as it has historically organised mostly the blue-collar workers within the municipality.

Maybe this is the start of the conversation about this section of workers. We need to set up a national approach and put it in our agenda, even in the bargaining council. They are a unique section of workers within SAMWU. Maybe they have been overlooked; nothing much has been done by the union. (SAMWU official 4, 11 August 2010)

Despite the generalised acceptance of union disfavour among the members, when I asked the question of the first point of call when they experience problems, more than 90 per cent indicated the union. It was only one person who said they would rather report problems to the management or sort it out by themselves. It was evident that members have been losing faith in their union but it still seems it is the most obvious point of call during a crisis, and

most stated union protection against dismissals as key. One of the managers blamed the unions for the lack of discipline among the call centre workers.

Managers identified political interference within the local government as the source of the problems that see many calls being abandoned without any power to discipline the staff involved. One of the managers once tried to discipline poorly performing workers. She was then taken to the CCMA by the union and regarded as costly for the municipality. All the managers felt that local government poor service delivery and customer care was partly caused by the tight controls that labour has on the council.

... the difference between private and public call centres is that the latter is more labour intensive, lots of consultation with the unions. You cannot move without talking to the union [here]... (Top manager 7, 5 July 2011)

This was shared by workers and managers at large as they believed the heavy politicised environment affects how work is done and managed.

Everything in the public sector is always problematic, even SAMWU is part of the problem, there is too much political interference. Too much focus on politics rather than communication. (FGD 1, 03 August 2011)

The union is facing a number of challenges with regard to the reforms in local government as defined by Egoli 2002. The poor relations between the union and the managers of the utilities were frequently mentioned by the union officials. This was observed by Barchiesi (2007: 64) as he argued that utility managers tend to be ambivalent towards collective bargaining and unions in general. This attitude might also lead to unintended 'inter-union' conflicts and competition as the utilities attract unions from outside local government boundaries. For example, SATAWU (South African Transport and Allied Workers Unions) also recruits bus drivers in local government though they are supposed to belong to SAMWU.

SATAWU and SAMWU ... though we are under COSATU, these unclear jurisdictions affect the strength of union organisations as we now fight for members ourselves ... We have a court case tomorrow directly linked to this issue. (SAMWU official 1, 11 August 2010)

Communication Workers Union organises the workers in the communication industry, but since the call centres are under local government they fall under SAMWU. One of the senior SAMWU officials was very confident of SAMWU presence in local government, arguing against the threat from other unions:

SATAWU and CWU can never take over from our jurisdiction because each union has its own constitution stipulating exactly where it will start in terms of the jurisdiction ... For example, there are police in local government, but that is POPCRU's territory. We can't go just because they are on local government ... The scope for each union is defined – whether public or private – call centre is the function of local government, so they will need to prove a demarcation dispute at the CCMA to prove that it is their jurisdiction (SAMWU Official 1, 11 August 2010)

This is against the COSATU principle of 'one union, one industry' but this is an opportunity for the federation to go beyond their normal strategies of organising principles. Inter-union conflicts are not peculiar to the South African labour environment as this industry overlaps with different sectors. It is part of the challenge posed to the general federation of the COSATU allies to see strategies to tighten communication and solidarity in organising and fighting for decent jobs. The precariousness of these jobs will test the strength of the South African labour movement, providing an opportunity to re-invent their strategies and relations with the state on labour market issues.

### **8.3.2 SAMWU and Phakama Programme in COJ**

With the noticeable deterioration in employment conditions of the formerly 'secured and fair employer', SAMWU needs to move beyond bread-and-butter issues and pay attention to the growing number of socio-political questions which have strengthened its course in history. Barchiesi (2007) and Von Holdt (2002) however seemed pessimistic about the Social Movement Unionism within the democratic dispensation buttressed by labour alliance with the ruling party. The radical and militant nature of SAMWU in tackling anti-privatisation seemed to have disappeared with democratic South Africa. Masondo (2012: 121) argued that "the one problem with the phenomenon of shop stewards [moving] into management is that the union loses well-trained and seasoned unionists ... It has somewhat tamed the unions' militancy in his workplace". This confirms what Buhlungu (1994, 1999, 2002) has

argued about union positions being used as a springboard for government and sometimes corporate jobs. Masondo (2012: 122) also noted the continuous 'social upward mobility' of SAMWU shop stewards into local government jobs as councillors have a "potential risk of political dishonesty and job insecurity".

The silence of SAMWU throughout the billing crisis was heavily criticised by both shop stewards and operators. They cited the close relations of SAMWU and municipal officials as the source of 'compromise' on workers' issues. Close political ties with the ruling party were then cited by the some SAMWU officials as the diluting force in their struggle for the workers. For example, during the implementation of Programme Phakama, SAMWU resisted at first but later accepted the decision by the council to implement the project. This is where operators expressed considerable disappointment in the union, arguing for the self-interest that has separated the leadership from the rank and file.

The workers were seriously compromised in this whole period ... SAMWU never tried enough to stop the implementation of the Phakama Project. (Shop steward 1<sup>26</sup>, 09 August 2010)

The union does not represent employees properly; they seem to value their relations with management more than their task of representing employees. (CCA 10<sup>27</sup>, 28 September 2012)

Referring to the billing crisis, SAMWU official 3 claimed "SAMWU refused to participate in that process, but this was a political game for them, they tricked us. It was agreed in higher political structures that we should not get involved" (04 July 2011). This confirmed what Barchiesi (2007) observed regarding the weakening nature of the union through "its alliance with the ruling party-ANC (COSATU partner), casualisation, and fragmented collective bargaining" due to municipal restructuring. Though regulated at the national level under the South African Local Government Association (SALGA) bargaining council, the wages of the call centre workers in Joburg Metro have been noted as unequal, with Utilities paying more

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<sup>26</sup> Shop steward 1 was interviewed twice in August 2010 at the SAMWU House and July 2011 in Thuso House, Jorissen Street. Shop steward 2 and 3 were interviewed at their place of work in Harrison House in July 2011.

<sup>27</sup> Call centre agent 10 was interviewed in Harrison House in September 2012.

and offering better working conditions and benefits. After the implementation of Phakama, this meant call centre workers performing the same tasks in the same building were paid differently because they were coming from different utilities. This affects the moral around the call centre workers and collective solidarity among SAMWU members within this workplace.

We had a strike for two weeks last month because of pay disparities during this transfer. You see Egoli 2002 divided the city into Utilities ... they [management of the city] used section 197 of the LRA to move the workers unilaterally back to the city and centralising the billing and revenue of the city. The strike was about unilateral implementation of change in working conditions which were determined by City Power. In the UACs they have money so they introduced 13th cheque and performance bonus thinking staff will be motivated. The problem is now people are back to the City and we can be working under the same roof and doing the same job but earning between R12 000 and R22 000. (IMATU official, 21 August 2013)

The major challenges, as I have mentioned, it's salaries. The city pays less than these utilities, and the terms of employment and conditions of work are completely different. For example, they enjoy the 13th cheque and paid maternity leave, but the union can't do anything at this level; such things need to be addressed at the national bargaining council. (SAMWU Official 1, 11 August 2011)

This was also confirmed by COJ agents, who argued for career opportunities in the utilities, which are different in the city call centre. Joburg Connect operators envied the utilities agents who enjoyed more benefits and better pay.

The [Utilities] employees get paid more than the city employees. There is growth there; not more than two years in call centre. Here, there are people who have been here since it started and they will say the old staff does not want to work ... Managers of those entities open up doors for them and recommend their staff members. (CCA 3, 04 July 2011)

Succumbing to the demands of the COJ Council, SAMWU seems to be the vehicle through which former union members gain employment within the municipality. The career-

oriented nature of the SAMWU officials was evident as many office bearers were now negotiating from the side of the employer. These close relations between union and the city are part of the comprise experienced by the rank and file and one of the Phakama Project Managers admitted that

My labour background gave me an edge in negotiating for the migration of the workers from Proton to Harrison. We devised a strategy. By the time SAMWU noticed we had achieved our plan in terms of incentives and salaries for the move.  
(Top manager 5, 7 July 2011)

The career progression from being a unionist to being part of the council feeds on the SAMWU debilitating state in representing worker interests in the fight against neoliberal policies. The alliance with the ruling party during the Egoli 2002 implementation was identified by some of the activists interviewed for this research as part of the downfall of the opposition to privatisation.

Part of the causes of the downfall to the opposition of the Egoli 2002, was the offering of jobs to certain APF leaders. (APF Activist 1<sup>28</sup>, 20 August 2013)

Promotions and appointments for unionists to the municipality will continue to weaken the collective militant power that once defined SAMWU but the shared working conditions among the call centres provides a new niche to strength the ties between COSATU allies who share these workers in different industries. This means dialogue between CWU and SAMWU would increase their bargaining power and improve the call centre working conditions.

#### **8. 4 Conclusion**

The call centre workplace is a contested terrain. Workers seek to utilise the individualised and collective forms of resistance within the local government. Despite different mechanisms used to lessen the pressure on individual workers, it seems the trade unions representing them are faced with challenges in the industry. The apparent lack of knowledge of the number of workers working in the call centre and their issues reflected the union's disregard for this emerging customer centred workplace. SAMWU as the

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<sup>28</sup> APF Activist 1 was interviewed in Melville, 7<sup>th</sup> Street in a restaurant in August 2013.

majority union, with its advantage of politicised nature of workplaces in South Africa, seems to be complacent.

Gains were made by SAMWU in 2007 in pushing for absorption of the two-year contract workers into permanent jobs in 2007. This is a significant step towards increasing the number of union members. In the COJ, it was apparent that call centre operators from the utilities refused to be part of the Joburg City call centre due to better working conditions and wages. This needs to be levelled as all these operators belong to the same union; this will increase a sense of unity amongst SAMWU members in the same or similar jobs.

The union should work on its image by conveying a message relevant to the needs of the call centre workers. This is linked to the allegations of corruption and mismanagement of funds resulting in the Johannesburg branch not participating in the strike (2011). SAMWU's challenge in "representing the changing municipal workforce" was also noted by Barchiesi (2007: 71). Many have confirmed the growing representation of managers within the union which may challenge the union's resources and 'loyalties'. "SAMWU has neglected its duties; unions want to retain members and not to expose them ... nepotism, bedroom promotions are all part of the frustration here" (Shop steward 3, 5 July 2011). The feeling of being compromised for the union's political gains further spreads these negative sentiments among the rank and file.

Call centre workers are situated at the intersection of customer, council, citizens and service delivery which means union's campaigns have to link this chain. Some of the issues highlighted above relate to technical issues whilst socio-political issues seem to be underlying the discontent among this section of workers. It is this intersectionality of municipal workers that should be the basis of union power but SAMWU, like many COSATU allies, is entangled in political battles facing the federation. SAMWU could further engage the municipality over securing better working conditions for call centre workers.

## **Chapter 9**

# **Discussion and Conclusion: Disconnected Local Government Labour Process**

### **9.1 Introduction**

This chapter provides a summary of the key findings from the data provided. It seeks to challenge and contribute towards the local government labour process by looking at work and worker experience within the Johannesburg Council Call Centre (Joburg Connect). I argue that despite the call centre labour process having been defined as the assembly line of the digital era or the pinnacle of the panopticon by Foucault, the public sector call centre labour process is largely mediated by political authority which influences the employment relations and work organisation. As Hoggett (1994) predicted, public sector forms of technological control are part of the individualisation processes of the neoliberal agenda, both for the worker and citizen. The City of Johannesburg seems to resemble an organisation with low-commitment culture, low customer satisfaction levels, high political interference in administration and low trust matched with increasing forms of bureaucratic control.

The call centre labour process is shaped not only by these changes in administration but also by the socio-economic and political environment of the city. This comes from its position as the public face of service delivery, seeking to open and centralise access to basic service provision. This labour process appears to be designed for cost recovery and increased revenue, which is central to NPM and the call centre labour processes. This provides an opportunity to study 'work and worker experience' as the latter tends to show signs of the trajectory of work in a capitalist society.

Contrary to the popular belief, people who occupy call centre positions in the City of Johannesburg are young and tend to have moved from private sector call centres rather than from being unemployed. They have post-matric diplomas and some have degrees. Their move from a private to a public sector call centre seems to indicate that there are still benefits to working for state.

The objective labour process conditions continue to shape the subjective experiences of work within local government. This is why Marxist Labour Process theory still provides a useful explanation for the working conditions within a neoliberal state. The labour process perspective provides basic concepts for interpreting and analysing the mass production process but is not sufficient to cover the complexity and dynamic environment in which public sector call centres are based. The emphasis is on the political hierarchy shaping work organisations through policies and bureaucratic forms of control. The economic value (cost cutting) of call centres within the private sector tends to be less emphasised in public sector. Research into the call centres in the private sector has often neglected the unique aspects of public sector call centres. Hence this research attempted to consider a public sector call centre and its issues.

The public sector call centre labour process needs to be considered within its particular socio-political context rather simply 'fitting it in' with mass production or mass bureaucratic approaches. Isolating call centres from the bigger socio-political context by merely describing them as part of accumulation processes does not help in explaining the causes of stress beyond the actual nature of work. For instance, the local government frontline worker might be angered by a customer but at the same time she feels helpless when the customer talks about the systematic bureaucratic failures of the system and community as whole. In this context, the call centre experience is influenced by the bureaucratic organisation, community struggles and the operator's position as a citizen and service user. The complexity of the Joburg Connect call centre can be considered within the Ti'bi-t'ire epistemic position with its idiographic orientation which provides value in understanding social reality "as multi-layered, contradictory and context-situated..." (Adesina, 2002: 108).

## **9.2 Call centre – a factory of lies?**

As much as the factory worker used to be able to hate the capitalist and walk away feeling alienated from the product, labour process and society, he was still able to carry on with his life. The current call centre worker seems to identify with the organisation and is employed to turn her frustration into a smile, thus creating a different organisational reality and carrying the 'deep acting' outside the workplace (Hochschild, 2003). Based on the 'economy of lies' which is propagated by the neoliberal ideology, call centres form a centre of manipulation and operators need to convince customers of their sovereignty while

admitting this is a 'lie'. The situation at Joburg Connect during the billing crisis is the case in point. The call centre agents needed to lie to the customers because of the breakdown in communication within the COJ and fragmented IT systems that did not provide required information for the customers.

The myth of the sovereign customer is taken to public sector spaces creating expectations for individual citizens and customers who are supposed to be met by the frontline worker. It is this individualising nature of state operations that has seen customers differentiated according to their abilities to pay. This in turn has been received with high expectations and anger which sometimes becomes abusive towards the frontline worker. The language of markets and efficiency has shifted the risks from government and corporations onto individuals (Gall, Wilkinson and Hurd, 2011). This leads to the frontline taking the blame for the organisational failures. It is this false sense of reality that produces anger and a perception of the 'useless' nature of call centre work. The operators are then accused of being incompetent in conducting their tasks by customers (Korczynski, 2002a).

### **9.3 Public sector call centres as politicised labour processes**

The concept of a 'customer' in the public sector inherently excludes the masses who are unable to pay for services, especially in the developing world (Hague, 2001: 69). This means the creation of public sector call centres has a class bias towards those who can afford to be customers. Customer participation is affected by (symbolic) power and knowledge of the consumer, which results in a 'ladder of participation' (Dibben and Higgins, 2004: 34). This means the less one possesses, the lower the participation, which is summarised by Parkin's (1979) "a shift from collective to individual exclusion".

Call centres are physically removed from the citizen to take advantage of cheaper space costs outside the city centres at times. The call centres take up big office space which means locating them outside the city saves costs. These call centres could arguably also be 'masks' for political leadership that seeks to remove the masses from face-to-face interaction in dealing with basic services. The customer model operates for the affording few and tends to exclude the poor masses based on the capacity to pay. An advantage of call centres is the savings for both customers and citizens in terms of travel costs to the municipality. The huge

increase in the number of telephones within the country and COJ in particular makes calling a better option than travelling to a municipal office in the city.

Customer satisfaction through good customer service is at the core of the call centre labour process, though this is hardly ever the case in reality (Frenkel et al., 1999). Customer service within frontline work can be seen as a field of power and resistance in which broader societal hierarchical relations are reflected. As Mirchandani (2005) asked in the Indian transnational call centres, who is the customer? And the type of service matters, in the customer service. A comprehensive challenge to the criticism of the customer model in the public sector is provided by Alford's (2002) notion of 'social exchange'. He argued that the customer model promotes responsiveness from government agencies to the public, which is not limited to the economic transactions, but extends to information, co-operation, compliance and co-production, which ultimately encourage 'active inclusive' citizenship.

Despite the City of Johannesburg attempting to make everyone believe that customer relations were the problem rather than service delivery and its policies, the call centre experience shows that 'disconnections' within the city result in poor customer satisfaction. The type of service rendered in the public sector call centres is not only about 'good dialogue' between the operators and customers; this goes beyond the customer-worker interaction: customers need 'things to be done' in their households, electricity and water running smoothly. This then questions the homogeneity of call centre customer service putting an emphasis on emotional labour. A smile and polite voice does not 'fix' the basic provisions of services within the household. The efficiency of running a private sector call centre might not be enough in the public sector call centres, as inefficiency can be life threatening. The great customer service counts less when the customer is not quickly connected to water and electricity. The functional nature of bureaucracy facilitates the labour process of the call centre as it depends on the flow of information and standardisation of work processes. This means to only apply Taylorism to capture the call centre labour process misses the embedded nature of the public sector call centre labour process in functional bureaucratic processes.

There is a need to go beyond descriptions of managerial control and examine the underlying power relations in the political context of these call centres. The public sector call centre

labour process is embedded in the socio-political context, characterised by power relations and bureaucratic control. The pre-occupation with efficiency in both perspectives has underplayed the importance of politics, power and control within the public sphere. Political systems have always had and still retain power to shape the economic structure. The focus on technology or global economics has a tendency to reduce the role played by the political relations within the workplace. This poor examination of political mediation in call centre labour process renders the analysis of the state labour process incomplete. As much as public sector call centres transfer knowledge and empower the customer, this production process is mediated by political interference. The public sector call centres are not merely created for the reduction of costs but to serve a community with required information. In other words call centres are created for political reasons, to include the 'the geographically disadvantaged' and control access to the basic services provided by the local government without the need to travel to the municipality

The limited examination of power relations between the 'dependent' customer and a frontline worker is different from the private sector call centre worker who wants to satisfy a customer for 'economic' reasons. The latter means that if the customer is not satisfied with the service s/he will seek alternative service providers, which is different to the public sector client without choice. How does this 'power' from the call centre operator translate in the labour process experiences for the worker? This stems from the nature of services provided (basic services without any choice from the customer) and political reasons. This is why Roper (2004: 123) argued that "the demand for public goods is inherently political". The latter seeks to reduce the number of calls rather than receive more, because for public sector call centres 'less is good'. If the number of calls increase in the public sector call centres it means there is a crisis, which is not good for the political environment. This means that politicians then interfere with the labour process and how it is experienced, affect the power relations in the workplace and sometimes disempower the bureaucrats (or managers) (Du Gay, 2000). These unequal relations between frontline worker and the customer, are structured by race, class and gender as the middle class customer tends to feel more 'knowledgeable' than the frontline staff. On the other hand, political interference adds another aspect to labour control. Whether managers are disempowered in the public sector call centre through politics it is not clear, as studies have sought to eliminate the

political leadership from the sources of control. The description of diverse control mechanisms in the public sector is not limited to labour process control, bureaucracy and panopticon.

Call centre labour process studies have assumed the 'homogeneity' of experiences based on class and gender without much attention to race as another social factor affecting work organisation. Though Mirchandani (2004) briefly addressed the racist American customers in their interaction with Indian operators, this issue is more central in other spaces, like South Africa. The concept of gender and class are limiting in explaining the experiences of women workers in the developing world. This is why Acker (2002) argued that industrial capitalism including its neo-liberal form is organised to perpetuate gendered and racialised class inequalities. South Africa is a case in point, where class and race tend to shape authority and status within the workplace. This supports what Huws (2009: 7) observed "despite many similarities between call centres around the world, their specific location still does make a difference". This is why I suggest that, South African call centre labour process needs to be studied within a specific socio-political and historical context rather than by drawing on studies from elsewhere.

Public sector call centres are situated at a delicate position non-profit service, which is loaded with stereotypes and poor customer stigma. They may be interpreted as part of the lies and deceit defining the political spaces rather than as part of the solution. These call centres are situated in a delicate position as they fall under the umbrella of perceived 'bad customer service' anchored in corrupt public service discourse (White, 2006) which stigmatises the workers before customers share any experience with them. When looking at the public sector call centre environment one needs to go beyond the concept of control and emotional labour and focus on the sites of work as a microcosm of that particular society, where capital (economic, cultural and symbolic by Bourdieu, 1984) is used to influence the call centre labour process, shaping the experiences of the call centre work (and service) on the shop floor. Thus "the organisation of work itself is constructed around identity and relationships of privilege and subordination" (Chong, 2009: 179).

Prichard, Turnbull, Halford and Pope (2014) have examined how trust influences work relations in the technological ever-changing call centre. They argued that trust affects how

actors are connected together in a network of activities. This means trust can hold actors together towards effective communication and coordinated organisational activities (Prichard et al., 2014: 5). The apparent lack of trust in the call centre mentioned by the 59 workers surveyed attests to the organisational challenges not only for the outsiders (researchers as mentioned in Chapter 4) but also workers. Trust as a big part of the organisational design in the public sector needs to be explored beyond the management and staff relations; other stakeholders like the customer/citizens, trade unions and sometimes researchers need to be considered. This could help us understand the discretion (or lack of it) in the frontline of the public sector given to the employees. This is interlinked to the trust in the public in turn by the organisation as the research conducted in the public organisation tends to be affected by this trust. Trust as a concept in explaining the state of labour process in the South African public sector still needs to be interrogated as part of the organisational culture.

Braverman (1984) has consistently argued for an objective understanding of work, but it is also important to note his critics from the Foucauldian post-structuralist perspective that have emphasised the subjective worker experiences. Despite the latter's inability to explain the collective nature of call centre experience and complex control mechanisms, these two perspectives complement each other within the call centre environment as the conditions under which labour process are pre-determined for cost recovery despite differential individual and collective worker experiences.

The distinction between the 'subject and the object' in labour process debates influenced the polarisation within the call centre understanding of the labour process. The focus on the either 'subject or object' in the call centre labour process debates perpetuates what Adesina (2002) and Mafeje (1981) argued against in reference to knowledge. They both agreed on the 'complementarity' of the two. This means that "subject and object are moments in the same dialectical unity" (Mafeje, 1981: 138). This understanding of the complex, multi-layered and contradictory public service labour process does not necessarily fit the debates in which it was structured. The prominence of 'economic rationale' behind the setup of call centre does not hold sway in South African local government context as the 'political mediation' of the state seems to define the purpose and processes of the call centre. It is this balance between the economic and political motivation which defines the local

government labour process, as these two form the centre behind the control and experience of the workers. This is why I argue that the local government call centre performs a 'politicised labour process' where political control, panopticon and Taylorism complement one another. To focus on the economic rationale (cost cutting) in the public service call centre would be too simplistic as the issue is to open access to services that were sometimes previously not provided to citizens. Both economic and political factors seem to influence the shape and organisation of call centre labour process in this space.

#### **9.4 Deskilled and disciplined public sector call centre?**

This provides a challenge to the two dominant perspectives of the call centre labour process that see this space as deskilled or totally controlled. I argue that call centres in this space perform more than a job for accumulation purposes. As part of the 'disciplinary state' call centres do not only control and discipline but also connect the customer. The false sense of empowerment of the customer creates frustrations which are based on the inherent political fallacies associated with public sector image in South Africa. This is part of the politicised labour process which is shaped and managed through political motives. Poor communication and poor technological resources, apart from the routinised nature of the call centre labour process, should be counted as the major causes of 'deskilling' especially in an emotionally demanding and stressful local government workplace. To label the call centre workers in the public sector with the same term of 'deskilling' as the private sector is to discount the high skills demanded by the public and politicians to represent the organisation under media scrutiny. Public sector call centre jobs are not as scripted as private sector call centres; they require experience of the general local government environment to cope. With minimal training from the city, these call centre workers devise strategies to build relations and empathise with customers in the middle of chaotic interactions. A different set of skills has to be emphasised in the public sector as compassion and care tends to be associated with justice and fairness. Emotions are not simply 'exploited' for profit as many have argued but they have always been there for political gains and winning of public favour. 'Deskilling' is associated with inefficiency of the state bureaucracy. This means the labour process understanding within the call centre debates needs to detail the differences of terminology by empirically studying the public sector call centre labour process.

Total discipline of the workers is impossible when the bureaucracy itself is malfunctioning. Surveillance and supervisory control have shown to be interdependent but the main source of control comes from the bureaucratic structures in the hands of the political representatives. Call centre workers tend to be disciplined based on the ability of the managers to be disciplined by the politicians. Public sector call centres are tied to the general structure of the local government that cannot to be separated from politics. Call centres are part of the 'disciplining state' through technology and individualised communication methods. This is why I argue that Marx, Foucault and Weber complement each other in explaining the conditions of the public sector call centres and their role. The technological power defining the call centre labour process reinforces the bureaucratic control which in turn tends to control and discipline the citizen. Public sector call centres seem to be attempting to connect the local state to the citizens and customers. This connection needs coordinated technology with the required information to assist in the call centre labour process. The use of technology and bureaucratic control within the call centre shows the link between Weber and Foucault's work on routine, standardisation and discipline which defines the service workplace today.

Public sector call centre workers are designed to discipline and control customer emotions. In as much as much standardisation is deemed routine and monotonous in other call centres, this was needed by the call centre workers in the COJ as this would have contributed to productivity through access to information and workflow processes. The façade created to be a customer in the local government proves to be costly to the frontline as they are required to meet the elevated customer expectations. This means new concepts need to be fashioned to describe the 'paying citizen' as the term 'customer' creates more pressure from the side of the customer. I termed this 'dependent customer' to highlight the limited power possessed on the frontline by the 'customer'. The inability of the customer to choose their service provider limits their movement and therefore they sometimes have to obey the frontline worker's rules. Workers have found that when they explain their position to the customers, the latter begins to feel empathy and share information while 'teaching' the 'deskilled' frontline worker about certain information received in the media but not communicated within the organisation. This sometimes changes aggressive customer behaviour and the customer-worker interaction then becomes empowering to both the

customer and the frontline. This dialogue between the customer and frontline staff re-humanises the frontline work as they acknowledge their common interest in the face of failed bureaucracy.

### **9.5 Disconnected state of call centre labour process**

Despite being the central access point to facilitate communication between the state and the citizens/customers, the Joburg Connect call centre seems to resemble the South African state, where discontent and disconnections prevail between the citizen and bureaucratic, political elite. It is this position of bringing the citizens to the fore in their interaction with the frontline that proves to be full of frustration and stress in the City of Johannesburg. This interaction tends to define the broader interactions of the citizen and state in South Africa. The increasing number of 'service delivery protests' attest to the disconnected nature of our local government politics. This disconnection translates into difficult and stressful working conditions for those who occupy the 'frontline seats'. The high turnover of both managers and workers in Joburg Connect showed increasing work dissatisfaction in the face of increasing managerial pressures to abide by cost recovery plans. The links between local government policies, technology and work within post-apartheid South Africa needs more discussion beyond the scope of this thesis. The increasing disconnection within Joburg Connect due to technological challenges which in turn shaped the working conditions of the call centre operators is a case in point. To pursue cost recovery in cities with a smaller revenue generating customer base, along with pre-paid technologies, will serve to increase the gap between the state and the citizens.

Public sector call centres are developed from within the bureaucratic administration of the local government. They are part of the objective to centralise and modernise government service delivery. This means management and work organisation of these call centres is different from those in the private sector. The emphasis is not on cost cutting and efficiency but centralisation of access and opening up of government information to many. Efficiency in public offices depends on the smooth operation of the bureaucracy and information management. The poor administration in South Africa demands that we link the labour process and administration of the service delivery channels. Weber's notion of efficiency's 'ideal type' means different things to workers in the private sector, where the profit logic drives work for routine and standardisation. The lack of standardisation and routine was at

the centre of workers' complaints about 'poor service delivery' which means efficiency means different things for private and public sector employees. For instance, in the public sector call centre to have many calls per hour means trouble, while more calls in the private sector means more money. This economic rationality cannot be used to explain the public sector call centres and their labour process. The management is multi-layered, reporting to the managers, politicians and the public. The deep-seated resistance of customers who act like 'bass' from the outside the local government, see these workers as the representative of poor bureaucracy that has failed to deliver without knowledge. This is not the case in the private sector call centres, where customers will undermine the workers in the call centres based on the 'routine and scripted' nature of their jobs. This is made complicated by the power differences between the private sector workers compared to the political powers within the public sector call centres. The latter are aware of the 'myth of sovereignty of the public customer' and therefore discipline their customers in different ways.

The basis of capital-labour relations continues to shape social relations at work, regardless of the private and public divide. This means the changing nature of work discussed by Braverman in the 20<sup>th</sup> century is still relevant with changes to suit the time and place of the public sector call centres. It is the limited understanding of the differential power relations between the customer and frontline worker which needs to be interrogated further, as the customer is not recognised as sovereign in the public sector. This means Korczynski's notion of customer oriented bureaucracy (2003) fails to explain the public sector bureaucracy as the workers tend to possess the 'necessary' information to control and discipline the customer if the need arises. The nature of services provided in the call centre demands that we go beyond an economic narrow perspective of explaining call centres in public sector. The presence of the customer does not alter the 'objective' workplace relations but influences the subjective well-being of the worker. It is therefore questionable to include the 'customer sovereignty' in understanding the labour process in the point of production.

Degradation has always defined black women's jobs in South Africa. This is why it is not surprising that insecure despotic work will be dominated by this segment in the labour market. To argue that call centres are 'introducing' insecure work and threaten the established standard work, is to create a sense that work was previously secure and humane for this segments of workers. This does not mean that black women never occupied decent

jobs though they did tend to dominate poor and dirty jobs. This confirms what Humphries (1983, quoted in Bradley, 1986) observed about technology and its long term process of 'feminising the proletariat'. This inherent degradation of work is said to be disciplining to labour unions with their male dominated, 'standardised jobs'. Trade unions should not abide by the rules of precariousness as this concept was successfully fought during the apartheid era. This required more than workplace tactics; unions have used political, community and workplace forums to organise against labour market inequalities and exploitation against the black masses. Despite the decline of labour studies and their influence in the post-apartheid era (Buhlungu, 2009) I believe there is still a space for unions within the public sector to rethink their constituency and leadership tactics. This means women representation apart from being administrators in the SAMWU office needs to be focused to transform their organisational strategies.

### **9.6 Call centres – the new 'mining industry' in South Africa?**

Despite CWU (2013: 8) labelling the call centre industry as a "modern day mining industry" because of its ability to absorb up to 1000 agents in factory-like shopfloor. Local government call centres are small and unionized with job security in South Africa. They may look like 'mining industry' but they should be recognised as spaces of work with the ability to open up labour market for the young unemployed members of our country. These public sector call centre jobs could give an opportunity for job security within the state.

Call centres are entry-level jobs mainly for the younger generation of workers, who sometimes use this opportunity to pay for their studies and feed families. This is why I argue that the precariousness can be addressed by collective organisations demanding security in these jobs rather than dismissing them as 'deskilled' and 'robotic'. High unemployment and increasing flexibility towards the use of labour brokers makes it hard for trade unions to track and hold accountable employers exploiting this industry. Call centre experience tends to be limited and recycled within the same industry. Despite short-term contracts (not more than two years), workers are moved from one call centre to another ensuring a continuous supply of call centre labour power. Call centres operate in rather remote geographical areas where working conditions increase the risks to the health and safety of young workers. Workers are keen to hold onto these precarious jobs, given the high rate of unemployment in South Africa. Many matric school leavers are drawn into call centres without a chance of

changing their socio-economic class position as they often 'recycle' their precarious positions from one call centre to another. However, this negative view of call centre jobs can be outweighed by their potential to create easy and quick jobs for those without any post-matric qualifications. Too much emphasis on the poor and insecure nature of these jobs should not overlook their potential to give access to income for those who like 'office jobs' without qualifications.

Call centre service jobs join a history of precarious jobs occupied by the black women in South Africa. Meer (1991) has provided a detailed historical outlook on the type of jobs occupied by black women before the apartheid system in 1948. In looking at the current call centre jobs it remains crucial we look at this history and its meanings for the contemporary state service jobs mainly occupied by black women in South Africa. All the jobs occupied by this group were characterised by emotional labour, where in the presence of the racist and violent state, black and women workers had to 'smile' to survive. The heart, which Hochschild (1983) argues has become the importance for accumulation in the interactive service economy, was the main 'survival' mechanism in the 'apartheid workplace'. This means the study of the service workplace in South Africa needs to be contextualised in this history where racial capitalism imposed 'feeling management'. It is this context that is contradiction in call centre work in South Africa, especially in local government. This study does not deny the degraded working conditions of call centre work in general but the robotic characterisation of call centres needs to acknowledge the opportunities provided by the security in government call centres. This is why I argue that government call centres cannot be compared to sweatshops in a South African context where blacks and women mainly continue to occupy precarious and dehumanising jobs. Local government call centre jobs provide job security and competitive salaries (R100 000 -R150 000 per annum).

Access to wage means more than a job; it means daily routine, dignity and most importantly citizenship which is now defined by the ability to consume (Bauman, 2005). Consumption of the basic services from the state requires access to wage, though Barchiesi (2011) has noted the decline in the wage labour in South Africa. It is worth noting that his solution (basic income grants) to the broken nexus between 'wage labour and citizenship' does not solve the dehumanising and stigmatising nature of these social security grants. Despite the precariousness of call centre work, the benefits within the state sector – worker routine,

access to credit, and security – outweigh the drudgery of dirty work in most service employment traditionally employing black women. However, one needs to note the impact of the presence of these call centre jobs in spaces formerly enjoying security like the state sector. If call centres continue to be the norm as they seem to be, it means unions need to strength their organisational and leadership in dealing with this potentially ‘insecure’ space of work which will ultimately challenge unions’ strength in the state sector.

Apart from the ‘collective resistance’ experienced during the 2007 strike in the COJ, SAMWU is yet to show any collective resistance against the city’s political leadership in policy. Despite the SAMWU call centre workers having permanent contracts with the city, SAMWU as a majority union is yet to disconnect itself from the ‘politics’ that seem to compromise workers at the local level. The case of Programme Phakama attest to the general challenges faced by SAWMU similar to those of the trade union federation in South Africa (COSATU) where trade union leadership seems to use the trade union positions as a way into government positions. Of nine union officials interviewed in this study, four ended up working for the City as key personnel dealing with labour issues. It this ‘transitional’ space that union positions seems to be providing for the leaders to join the government secured jobs. Though not unique to SAMWU, this ‘transition’ space needs to be analysed in relation to the general South African political culture that sees government jobs as a destination for security. This phenomenon has been discussed at length by labour experts in South Africa and leaves one pondering about the role and nature of state jobs for blacks in this country. Trade unions’ continuous tendency for ‘upward social mobility’ needs to be understood within this political culture and social context within South Africa.

## **9.7 Future research**

This thesis aimed at studying the call centre labour process through the City of Johannesburg, not the other way around. The working relations within the local government were believed to be representative of the South African post-apartheid society given the socio-historical and political landscape of the city. The disciplining nature of the city for the customer and citizens requires more research on the nature of the ‘disconnected state’ which bullies the citizens in accepting an individualising neoliberal framework for the provision of services. The city was described by the workers, activists and some unionists as a ‘bully boy’ that tends to define the neoliberal state.

The customer perspective, especially the Rate Payers Association, needs to be more fully investigated, as these organisations seek to take revenue from the local state and provide their own services. What form will future revenue collection take? If these groups have a political base, where does it come from?

In the South African precarious labour market, job seekers often believe that 'any job is a good job' because of the high unemployment rate especially among young people. This means call centres will continue to be seen as part of the solution to labour market problems and will be attractive to matric qualified candidates. Call centres can employ up to 1500 employees in a factory-like environment, which means many of those who drop out of the higher education system and those without post-matric experience have the possibility of working in a call centre. If this is then a trajectory of call centres, it makes sense to investigate ways in which security can be advocated for by the collective representation of the industry despite the difficulties in outsourcing.

To argue for the case against this sort of work would be ludicrous, as this kind of service work provides a better option for many low skilled prospective employees in the labour market, as most unemployed in South Africa are still young people with matric certificates. The precariousness of public sector call centre work can never be matched by the servitude experienced by domestic workers even in the post-apartheid era (Cock, 2011). Local government call centre work is complicated and multilayered, and goes beyond the simplistic differences in subject and objective work(er) conditions that has characterized the research on call centre labour process. This work proves that the 'body and its socio-historical context' complement one another as the subject and object are two sides of the same coin. To understand the public sector labour process one will need to look at the worker and the conditions shaping the work rather than trying to fit them in a narrow economic logic defining call centre work in general.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A: Interviewee List

	<b>*Name</b>	<b>Position</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Pseudo name</b>	<b>Date of the Interview</b>
	Shaun	Director -Customer & Revenue Management	Male	Top Manager 1	04/07/11 and 23/08/13
	Felicia	Director –Joburg Connect (2007, 2011)	Female	Top Manager 2	04/10/07; 04/08/10; 03/07/11
	Jessica	Director- Joburg Connect (2010)	Female	Top Manager 3	02/08/10 and 10/08/11
	Tinashe	Assistant Director- Billing	Male	Top Manager 4	08/07/11
	Peter	Former CCA and Shop Steward	Male	Ex CCA 1	25/08/10 and 26/08/13
	Petros	Supervisor	Male	CC Team Leader 1	23/08/10
	Lethu	Supervisor	Male	CC Team Leader 2	23/08/10
	Kromotso	SAMWU Shop Steward	Female	Shop Steward 1	09/08/10, 04/07/11
	Vusumzi	SAMWU Secretary Joburg Branch	Male	SAMWU official 1	05/10/07, 11/08/10
	Petros	SAMWU Sec Gauteng Province (2010)	Male	SAMWU official 2	05/07/11
	Fuzile	Programme Phakama-Manager (2011)	Male	Top Manager 5	07/07/11
	Mezisa	Assistant Director- Joburg Connect (2007)	Female	Top Manager 6	02/10/07
	Andile	Assistant Director- Joburg Connect Harrison Building	Male	Top Manager 7	06/07/11; 29/08/13
	Kholiswa	Former CCA, and HR Rep in Joburg Connect	Female	Ex CCA 2	09/08/11
	Mahlubi	SAMWU Retired President	Male	SAMWU Official 3	04/07/11
	Denson	SAMWU National Treasurer (2010)	Male	SAMWU Official 4	11/08/10
	Mpho	CCA 1 technical (Shop Steward Harrison)	Male	Shop Steward 2	06/07/11
	Sqhamo	CCA 2 (Shop Steward Harrison)	Female	Shop Steward 3	06/07/11
	Thuli	CCA (Proton)	Female	CCA 3	04/07/11
	Thola	CCA (Proton)	Female	CCA 4	03/08/11

	Musa	CCA (Proton)	Male	CCA 5	04/07/11
	Thula	CCA (Proton)	Female	CCA 6	04/07/11
	Siboniso	CCA (Proton)	Male	CCA 11	03/08/11
	Nancy	CCA (Proton)	Female	CCA 7	03/08/11
	Nombuso	CCA (Proton)	Female	CCA 8	03/08/11
	Hazel	CCA (Proton)	Female	CCA 9	04/07/11
	Mthunzi	CCA(Proton)	Male	CCA 10	05/07/11
	Letitia	CCA (Proton)	Female	CCA 12	05/07/11
	Jenifer	CCA (Proton)	Female	CCA 13	05/07/11
	Zinzi	CCA (Harrison)	Female	CCA 14	24/09/12
	Matsepo	CCA (Harrison)	Female	CCA 15	24/09/12
	Snethemba	CCA (Harrison)	Male	CCA 16	24/09/12
	Mazi	CCA (Harrison)	Male	CCA 17	24/09/12
	Anton	CCA (Proton)	Male	CCA 18	05/07/11
	Mangi	CCA (Harrison)	Male	CCA 19	26/09/12
	Thami	CCA (Harrison)	Female	CCA 20	26/09/12
	Tsego	CCA (Harrison)	Female	CCA 21	26/09/12
	Kevin	CCA (Proton)	Male	CCA 22	04/07/11
	Mosses	Director- COJ Finance Group	Male	Top Manager 8	26/08/13
	Elias	Back Office Clerk 1	Male	Back Office 1	08/07/11
	Paulet	Back Office Clerk 2	Female	Back Office 2	08/07/11
	Dini	Operations Manager: Back Office Invoicing	Male	Back Office 3	26/08/13
	Amoss	CWU Sec General	Male	CWU Official	23/08/13
	Rosie	Residents Association: Saxonworld Rep.	Female	Residents Association Rep	21/08/13
	Micheal	IMATU Gauteng/JHB Branch Manager	Male	Imatu Official	21/08/13
	Troy	APF Representative	Male	APF Activist 1	29/08/13
	Dellan	APF Rep 1/Researcher	Male	APF Activists 2	20/08/13
	Mandisi	APF Rep 2/Researcher	Male	APF Activist 3	29/08/13
	Dominique	Communications - Manager	Female	Top Manager 9	23/08/13
	Nomatshawe	JC (Acting) Director- 2010	Female	Top Manager 10	04/07/10
	Joseph	JC Assistant (Acting) Manager (2012)	Male	Top Manager 11	28/09/12

### Group Interviews:

Group Interview number 1 on 24 August 2011 @Proton House Call Centre

Group interview number 2 on 28 September 2012 @ Harrison House Call Centre

\* Pseudonyms are utilized to protect the identity of the participants

## Appendix B: Questionnaire CodeBook

	variable	SPSS Variable	Coding instructions
<b>1</b>	<b>Identification Code</b>	<b>ID</b>	<b>Number assigned to each survey</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>Sex</b>	<b>Sex</b>	1= Male 2= Female
<b>3</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b>Colour of your Skin</b> 1= African 2= Asian 3= Colored 4= White
<b>4</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Age in years</b> 1= less than 20 years 2= 20-25 3= 25-35 4= 35 and over
<b>5</b>	<b>Education</b>	<b>Education</b>	<b>number of years in university</b> 1= Matric 2= Diploma 3= Degree 4= Other
<b>6</b>	<b>location</b>	<b>Place</b>	<b>Place of Stay</b> 1= Suburbs 2= Township 3= Informal Settlement 4= other
<b>7</b>	<b>Language</b>	<b>Language</b>	<b>Home Language</b> 1= English 2= Isi Zulu 3= Setswana 4= Other

<b>8</b>	<b>years in call centre</b>	<b>workyears</b>	<b>number of years in call centre</b>
			1= less than 3 years
			2= more than 3 years
			3= other
<b>9</b>	<b>source</b>	<b>source</b>	<b>source of information about the job</b>
			1= Recruitment Agency
			2= Newspapers
			3= Friend
			4= other
<b>10</b>	<b>Municipal History</b>	<b>History</b>	<b>history in municipality</b>
			1=yes
			2=no
<b>11</b>	<b>number of years in COJ</b>	<b>experience</b>	<b>experience in municipality</b>
			1= less than 2 years
			2=more than 2 years
			3= other
<b>12</b>	<b>history in call centre</b>	<b>CallCentreExperience</b>	<b>call centre experience</b>
			1=private sector call centre
			2= public sector call centre
			3= other
<b>13</b>	<b>hours per week</b>	<b>Hours</b>	<b>hours per week</b>
			1=35-40
			2=40-45
			3=other
<b>14</b>	<b>length of breaks</b>	<b>breaktime</b>	<b>length of break</b>
			1= less than 10 minutes
			2= more than 10 minutes
			3= othe
<b>15</b>	<b>additional tasks</b>	<b>addeditasks</b>	<b>additional taks</b>
			1= faxing

			2= filling
			3= mailing
			4= Other
<b>16</b>	<b>pre-planning required</b>	<b>pre-planing</b>	<b>pre-planning for tasks</b>
			1= yes
			2= no
<b>17</b>	<b>pre-planning task</b>	<b>preplanningtaks</b>	<b>pre-planning for tasks</b>
			1= patience
			2= anger management
			3= All of the above
			4= Other
<b>18</b>	<b>training adequate</b>	<b>training</b>	<b>training sufficient</b>
			1= Not satisfactory at all
			2= Somewhat satisfactory
			3= Satisfactory
			4= Very Satisfactory
<b>19</b>	<b>career opportunitites available</b>	<b>careergrowth</b>	<b>carreer growth possible</b>
			1= Not satisfactory at all
			2= Somewhat satisfactory
			3= Satisfactory
			4= Very Satisfactory
<b>20</b>	<b>customer state of mind</b>	<b>customerstate</b>	<b>customer state of mind</b>
			1= Never
			2= Sometimes
			3= all the time
<b>21</b>	<b>reasons for above</b>	<b>reasons</b>	<b>reasons for state of mind</b>
			1= preparing my mind
			2= preparing suitable approach
			3= preparing for referral

<b>22</b>	<b>frequency of anger</b>	<b>angerfrequency</b>	<b>frequency of anger</b>
			1= Never
			2= Sometimes
			3= all the time
			4= Other
<b>23</b>	<b>quantity of anger per day</b>	<b>dailyangerquantity</b>	<b>daily quantity of anger daily</b>
			1= less than 5 times
			2= more than 5 times
			3= other
<b>24</b>	<b>examples of angry situation</b>	<b>examples</b>	<b>situation of anger</b>
			1= customer shouting insults
			2= being blamed because Col problems
			3= customer calling me stupid
			4= customer being racist
			5= customer giving incorrect details
			6= Other
<b>25</b>	<b>mechanisms to cool off</b>	<b>dealingwithanger</b>	<b>mechanisms to cool off</b>
			1= take a walk
			2= smoke break
			3= sharing with colleagues
			4= other
<b>26</b>	<b>health risks</b>	<b>healthrisks</b>	<b>health risks of the job</b>
			1= stress and voiceloss
			2= voiceloss and hearing problems
			3= hearing problems and stress
			4= all of the above
			5= none of the above

			6= other
<b>27</b>	<b>dealing with customer abuse</b>	<b>customerabuse</b>	<b>dealing with customer abuse</b>
			1= Drop the phone
			2= share with colleagues
			3= they will talk unattended
			4= other
<b>28</b>	<b>job satisfaction</b>	<b>satisfaction</b>	<b>job satisfaction</b>
			1= Not satisfactory at all
			2= Somewhat satisfactory
			3= Satisfactory
			4= Very Satisfactory
<b>29</b>	<b>causes of stress</b>	<b>stresscauses</b>	<b>causes of stress in the job</b>
			1= Irate Customer
			2= Managerial Control
			3= poor communication
			4= Time Pressure
			5= Poor technological System
			6= all of the above
			7= other
<b>30</b>	<b>contribution to job satisfaction</b>	<b>satisfactioncauses</b>	<b>cause of job satisfaction</b>
			1= job salary
			2= being of assistance
			3= being a team member
			4= job control
			5= all of the above
			6= other
<b>31</b>	<b>IT sufficient support</b>	<b>Itsupport</b>	<b>IT adequete</b>
			1= Not satisfactory at all
			2= Somewhat satisfactory

			3= Satisfactory
			4= Very Satisfactory
<b>32</b>	<b>trust and respect exist between management and staff</b>	<b>trustandrespect</b>	<b>trust and respect with managers</b>
			1= Not satisfactory at all
			2= Somewhat satisfactory
			3= Satisfactory
			4= Very Satisfactory
<b>33</b>	<b>line management supportive</b>	<b>managementsuport</b>	<b>line managmene supportive</b>
			1= Not satisfactory at all
			2= Somewhat satisfactory
			3= Satisfactory
			4= Very Satisfactory
<b>34</b>	<b>effective communication with utilities</b>	<b>communicationutilities</b>	<b>communication effective with utilities</b>
			1= Not satisfactory at all
			2= Somewhat satisfactory
			3= Satisfactory
			4= Very Satisfactory
<b>35</b>	<b>effective communication between staff and management</b>	<b>commicatingmanagem ent</b>	<b>effective communication from management</b>
			1= Not satisfactory at all
			2= Somewhat satisfactory
			3= Satisfactory
			4= Very Satisfactory

<b>36</b>	<b>effective communication with trade unions</b>	<b>communicatingunion</b>	<b>communicating union</b>
			1= Not satisfactory at all
			2= Somewhat satisfactory
			3= Satisfactory
			4= Very Satisfactory
<b>37</b>	<b>Trade union effective with grievances</b>	<b>tradeunionsatisfactory</b>	<b>trade union effective</b>
			1= Not satisfactory at all
			2= Somewhat satisfactory
			3= Satisfactory
			4= Very Satisfactory
<b>38</b>	<b>managerial style in call centre</b>	<b>managerialstyle</b>	<b>managerial style in call centre</b>
			1= top-down
			2= Participative
			3= Democratic
			4= other
<b>39</b>	<b>current challenges facing callcentre</b>	<b>CCChallenges</b>	<b>call centre challenges</b>
			1= new Recruits training
			2= seasonal peaks in call volumes
			3= poor technology
			4= increased call volumes
			5= Shortage of Staff
			6= other
<b>40</b>	<b>Call Centre Trainig Provider</b>	<b>trainingserviceprovider</b>	<b>call centre training service provider</b>
			1= In-house
			2= Private Consultant

			3= Other
<b>41</b>	<b>control of pace of work</b>	<b>controlatwork</b>	<b>control of pace of work</b>
			1= Never
			2= Sometimes
			3= All the time
<b>42</b>	<b>waiting period for call pick up</b>	<b>waitingtime</b>	<b>call waiting period</b>
			1= less than 20 seconds
			2= 20-30 soconds
			3= other
<b>43</b>	<b>calls per week</b>	<b>callperweek</b>	<b>number of calls per week</b>
			1= more than 200
			2= 200-500
			3= 500-800
			4= more than 1000
<b>44</b>	<b>length of training period</b>	<b>trainingperiod</b>	<b>length of training</b>
			1= 2 week
			2= 3 weeks
			3= 4 weeks
			4= other
<b>45</b>	<b>calls allowed to abandon</b>	<b>callabondnemnt</b>	<b>calls allowed to abandon</b>
			1= less than 10 per day
			2= more than 10 per day
			3= other
<b>46</b>	<b>Additional Comments</b>	<b>comments</b>	<b>additional comments</b>

## **Appendix C: Interview Questions**

### **Biographical Information**

1. Do you want your name to be known? If yes answer 2 if NO skip 2
2. Name.....
3. Title.....
4. Home Language.....
5. Sex.....
6. How long have you worked for this organisation?
7. How long have you been working in the job title mentioned above?

### **Section A: History of Joburg Connect**

1. What are the key policies informing the introduction of call-centres in COJ?
2. How well are the key policies understood across the municipality?
3. What does Joburg Connect mean to you?
4. What was used before the introduction of call-centres/ customer care by citizens to contact the municipality?
5. How many call-centres are there in this municipality?
6. Can you give me a breakdown of the workers, i.e. demographics, part time, contracted?
7. What are the main functions of customer care centres in Joburg?

### **Section B: Call Centre labour process**

1. Is there a script in the call-centre? If yes, what does it entail?
2. Do you have service level targets? If yes what are they?
3. What have been the challenges faced by Joburg Connect since its inception?
4. Do you use any technological assistance in monitoring work? If yes, please mention. i.e. IVR, Call recorder, ACD?
5. How many calls [on average] does an operator take per shift?
6. What has been the benefit of introducing the call-centres?
7. What kinds of problems does your call-centre face right now?
8. How would you describe the management style in the municipality/call- centre?

9. Are there any extra multimedia technologies used in conjunction with the telephone within the call centre i.e. SMS, email, faxes?

### **Section C: Training and new customer culture**

1. Has the new customer driven system of service delivery affected relations between management and workers? If Yes How?
2. What is the municipality doing to instil the desired values and norms among the staff members? How is this done?
3. Impact of *Batho Pele* and other principles of the public service?
4. Impact of performance management on organisational culture? Who is pushing the discourse of performance?
5. How has the *Batho Pele* principles changed the ethos of the municipality (organisational culture)?
6. How has the municipality equipped its workers and managers to meet the *Batho Pele* vision?
7. What has the city of Joburg done to enhance the *Batho Pele* and customer Care awareness among the customers?
8. What does the call-centre training entail (for how long)?

### **Section D: Customer service and complaints system**

1. Since the establishment of call-centres have you noticed any improvements in customer service?
2. How have you measured these improvements?
3. What mechanisms do you use to evaluate the customer satisfaction with Joburg Connect?
4. How have the municipal workers reacted to the new customer driven service delivery approach?
5. What has been the community's response to the customer driven service delivery?
6. How active are the unions in decision making processes within in the City?
7. When the call-centre was introduced, how was the trade union reaction towards it

### **Section E: Policies and future of the City**

1. Institutional Review to merge some of the entities, what promoted the decision?

2. What is the current business model informing the review?
3. What was the rationale behind the Phakama Programme? What were the main achievements of it? Or where could it have done better? What did this mean for the autonomy of the Entities?
4. How did labour react to re-integration? What did Phakama mean for the customer/worker interface?
5. Can you say the Egoli model failed? In your own opinion what have been the achievements of this policy?
6. Behind the massive media rupture about billing woes, what went wrong?
7. I understand that you implanting a Road Step Map to improve customer service in the city? What does this entail? What is the policy informing it? And where are you in the different stages of the map?
8. In terms of revenue what did billing mean? (numbers if possible) For Joburg Connect?
9. What are the main challenges facing the Joburg (Connect) for now? And how have you tried to resolve them?

### **Section F: (Civil Society)**

1. Who are you? Who do you represent?
2. What is the involvement with the COJ right now?
3. What do you think are the main challenges facing the city right now? (3 main ones)
4. How would you describe the state of the city's business model in its current form?
5. At what level do you interact with the city? (Citizen, customer, civil society organisation?)
6. What do the billing woes mean for the community?
7. What are your suggested solutions to this long serving problem of the city?
8. How does the city interact with you? And how do you contact the city?
9. Do you see any value in the customer care policies of the city? Or the JC as interface?
10. What are your community's general challenges with the Joburg Connect? (main grievances put forward)

11. Has the city responded to any of your submissions?
12. Do you see any links with other civil society organisations in the future?
13. What do you think is the direction of the city and its relationship with its customers?

### **Section G: (Trade Union Interview)**

1. What do you think of the new growing call-centre industry in SA especially in public services?
2. Does your union have members who work as call-centre operators in COJ?
3. What have been the experiences of municipal workers at call centres?
4. Do you perceive any benefits from call centres for municipal workers?
5. Was there any consultation with the union in the development of call-centres in this municipality? If no, how did you know about it?
6. If yes, were there any discussions on call-centre working conditions?
7. What do you think are unforeseen problems concerning call-centres in public services?
8. What do you think are the unanticipated health risks that face call-centre workers in municipality?
9. If this call-centre were to be outsourced, what would be your reaction?
10. What do you think has been the impact of a 'customer' driven approach to service delivery on municipal workers?
11. How has the union responded to the introduction of Batho Pele principles at the municipality?
12. How have your members reacted to the introduction of these principles?
13. How have municipal workers been affected by technologically driven service delivery? (e-government)
14. What are the levels of trust in the call-centre (towards the union?)
15. What sort of training is received by the shop-steward to enhance his/her job?
16. Union challenges introduced by Programme Phakama within the COJ?

### **Section H: (Supervisor's Section)**

- 1) How would you describe the morale and commitment of the staff?

- 2) Do staff members have the sense of job security and commitment to service delivery?
- 3) What is the municipality doing to instil the desired values and norms among the staff members? How is this done?
- 4) Impact of Batho Pele and other principles of the public service?
- 5) Impact of performance management on organisational culture? Who is pushing the discourse of performance?
- 6) How would you describe the management style in the municipality/call-centre?
- 7) What assessments of existing staff have been carried out?
- 8) How are the relations between the management and staff?
- 9) Nature and efficacy of grievance and disciplinary procedures?
- 10) Impact of labour turnover, absenteeism, staff motivation and work culture?
- 11) Relationship between management and trade unions?
- 12) Which one is the majority trade union operating in the call centre?
- 13) What are the levels of trust in the workplace?