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Reflecting on a call centre workers' inquiry. Contradictions, tensions, and the role of the researcher

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Introduction

This article reflects on the experience of conducting the research for (Woodcock, 2017), in which I worked in a call centre in London for six months. During the workplace ethnography, I was critically engaged, also intervening with other workers as an organiser. The project explored the labour process, management, resistance, and the possibilities for organising in the sector. This form of engaged research is becoming increasingly popular – both in terms of participatory observation, as well as more radical methods like workers' inquiry and co-research.

However, the university remains an unsupportive terrain for conducting these kinds of projects, both because of the limitations of academic norms about what constitutes “research” as well as hostile ethics boards that often consider covert research to be inappropriate. Despite this, there has been a recent proliferation of new studies that take these approaches. In light of this, the piece returns to reflect on the opportunities and challenges of workers' inquiry (as on method that involves participant observation), while also considering why this approach is so important for studying work. In particular, this focused on the necessarily embodied nature of the labour process – something that is often hidden from other forms of inquiry, either at the other end of a telephone line or mediate via other forms of technology.

This embodied dimension is key to understanding the experience of work, something that can either be accessed directly through ethnography, or through co-research that draws workers into the process of exploring their own working conditions. In the call centre, this means drawing attention to those hidden aspects, while also requiring the development of a reflexive approach to make sense of this. Although call centres have fallen out of recent research focus, they represent an important moment of the development of managerial techniques – particularly the electronic panopticon and attempted control through digital technology. Through examples of these aspects of the labour process in the call centre, the paper draws out the different contradictions and tensions, as well as highlighting the role of the researcher within these.

This critical reflection is intended to provide a methodological reflection for researchers interested in participant observation, as well as connecting the insights from the call centre to other forms of work. The paper concludes by arguing why workers' inquiry – albeit updated to address new forms of work – holds the possibility for making a sustained contribution to understanding not only call centres, but also the growth of other forms of work.

Call Centre Research

When I first started my PhD, I wanted to try combining the approach of workers' inquiry with an academic project. My aim was to pick a workplace that others considered to be free from traditional forms of worker organisation and empty of open resistance. At the proposal stage, this was intended to be in the service sector, with the suggestion of looking at chains of cafes. The managerial practices at Pret a Manger – combining the now abandoned “Pret behaviours” on exactly how workers should act, as well as widespread use of mystery shopping techniques – were the focus at this point. However, due to the frustrations of the

ethics approval board, working in more general service work became the focus. The shift towards call centres came about after starting to search for work in London. Employment agencies would explicitly ask whether applicants would be prepared to work in a call centre. One application form even had a tick box to indicate this.

While I did not expect to be carrying out the project in a call centre, the more that I read about working conditions, the clearer it became that it should be the focus. In the UK context, there is a wide range of academic writing on call centres, so much so that Ellis and Taylor (2006, p. 2) argued that academics ‘now know a great deal about work organization, surveillance, managerial control strategies and other central concerns of labour process analysis.’ There was a decade or so of critical research focused on call centres, some of which focused on a debate about technology and control. On one side, academics inspired by Foucault (1991) and his analysis of Bentham's (1995) ‘panopticon’ model. This argument was updated into an analysis of call centres as becoming organised like an ‘electronic panopticon.’ As Fernie and Metcalf (1997, p. 3) define it, the ‘possibilities for monitoring behaviour and measuring output are amazing to behold – the “tyranny of the assembly line” is but a Sunday school picnic compared with the control that management can exercise in computer telephony.’ However, on the other side of the debate were academics influenced by Labour Process Theory or Marxist (or at least critical) theories of control and worker resistance. For example, McKinlay and Taylor (1998, p. 175) were critical of the panopticon metaphor as they argued it fails to understand that ‘the factory and the office are neither prison nor asylum, their social architectures never those of the total institution.’

This led to a series of debates in journals like *Work, Employment and Society* and *New Technology, Work and Employment* focusing on work in call centres. Taylor and Bain (1999, p. 103) argued that the call centre labour process created an experience analogous to an ‘assembly line in the head.’ Following on from the themes of Labour Process Theory, they argued that the ‘dynamic process of capital accumulation’ were key to understanding work in call centres, critiques the more Foucauldian approaches as it ‘understates both the voluntary dimension of labour and the managerial need to elicit commitment from workers.’ The main risk, and one that I shared a concern for, was that it could ‘disavow the possibilities for collective organisation and resistance.’ However, with my own research taking place almost 15 years after these debates, the dichotomy between the two sides appeared as less relevant, with some benefits to integrating Foucault’s metaphor to make sense of the changing nature of call centre work. For example, as Taylor and Bain (1999, p. 109) argued that technologies in call centres ‘represents an unprecedented level of attempted control which must be considered a novel departure’, it was worth returning to see how technology and working conditions have changed. Similarly, further writing on call centres was being published, critically considering workers’ agency (Brophy, 2010; 2017).

On Workers’ Inquiry

My own research is deeply inspired by the tradition of workers’ inquiry (see: Woodcock, 2014), particularly after discovering the call centre inquiry by a group called Kolinko (2002) which detailed the experience of attempting this process of co-research, combining both research and organising. Workers’ inquiry takes as its starting point Marx’s (1938) call for an inquiry into workers experiences. Marx established a challenge, as Haider and Mohandesi (2013) have noted: to understand ‘the relationship between the workers’ knowledge of their exploitation, and the scientific analysis of the “laws of motion” of capitalist society.’ This challenge has been taken up in various instances by groups including the Johnson-Forest

Tendency – see, for example, Romano and Stone (1946) and Denby (1989) – *Socialisme ou Barbarie* (van der Linden, 1997), and the Italian Operaismo (Wright, 2002) and developing theories of workerism (Tronti, 2019).

My own research involved drawing on these critical traditions of workers' inquiry, while trying to negotiate this into the institutionally shaped form of a PhD. There is a longer history of workplace ethnographies in the UK, however, while I was studying, these had become rare, if non-existent. Indeed, as noted by [a review of *Working the Phones*]: 'Unfortunately, participant observation inside workplaces is a methodological strategy underused by labour sociologists, especially in Italy.' For the PhD, this meant drawing heavily on the writings of critical ethnographers like Burawoy (1998), despite the differences in terms of political engagement in the process and his disagreements with Braverman (1999).

Nevertheless, work has remained a partial concern of ethnographers – it is, after all, an activity that most people will spend most of their time doing. This has been developed into forms of action research that seek to effect change as part of the research process (Reason and Bradbury, 2008), with arguments for participatory action research (Fals-Borda and Rahman, 1991), often drawing upon longer traditions of critical education and social change (Horton and Freire, 1990). In a more sociological vein, this entails a reflexive process for the researcher (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992), with arguments specifically relating to how sociology could develop an 'organic public sociology of work' that relates to the workers movement (Brook and Darlington, 2013).

Reflecting back now, forms of engaged research are becoming increasingly popular – both in terms of participatory observation, as well as more radical methods like workers' inquiry and co-research. In particular, workers' inquiry is having a resurgence of interest, both within critical academic research and more widely. *Viewpoint Magazine* and *Notes from Below* (the latter of which I am an editor, see *Notes from Below*, 2018) have published a series of issues about the theory and practice of workers' inquiry. Cant's (2019) recent book, *Riding for Deliveroo*, is a brilliant example of the strengths of this approach applied in the gig economy.

Despite the increasing number of workers' inquiries, the university remains an unsupportive terrain for conducting these kinds of projects, both because of the limitations of academic norms about what constitutes "research" as well as hostile ethics boards that often consider covert research to be inappropriate (Locke et al., 2013; Badger and Woodcock, 2019). Despite this, there has been a recent proliferation of new studies that take these approaches. However, at the time, this meant that much of the early stage of the PhD involved justified workplace ethnography – and particularly covert forms – to various boards in the university.

Reflecting on Working the Phones

At the time of writing this reflection, it has been seven years since I was fired from the call centre that was the site for *Working the Phones*. I spent almost six months selling life insurance in a call centre in London. It was medium sized, with space for one hundred workers on each shift, over a two-part pattern in the afternoon and evenings. The key finding was that while this call centre (like many in the UK) did not appear to be a site of resistance, workers *did* resist on the call centre floor. The book details the organisation of the labour process in the call centre, understanding it as a form of electronic Taylorism, through which management attempted high levels of supervision and control. Yet, workers still found ways to avoid work, take advantage of breaks, and workers would regularly quit. Rather than

understanding quitting as a lack of resistance, this is re-framed as workers engaging in the first part of a strike – just not making demands that would have to be met before they returned. In this context of high turnover, the book explored attempts to try and organise with call centre workers. The conclusion is that while traditional forms of trade unionism were not appropriate for organising, starting from the acts of resistance in the call centre could provide the basis for new and creative forms of organising.

As I noted at the time, my final meeting with my supervisor ‘was, unsurprisingly, quite hostile. I was made to sign the feedback form including the statement that “Jamie should have a more positive attitude towards his role. Made negative comments on C&R during buzz session, doesn’t give other agents a good impression” (Woodcock, 2017, p. 149). This meant that I had criticised the approach of “C&R” which stands for “Clarify and Reassure”, essentially a way to explain and convince a customer to buy something, during the “buzz session”, a meeting at the start of a shift designed to motivate workers. At the launch of the book, someone in audience had asked what effect working in the call centre had upon me. I responded slightly flippantly and talked about the negative impact that intense affective labour has on works. A friend of mine who I lived with during the project then responded to the question. He said that I was underplaying the effects. He remembered me arriving late home in the evening, following the late shift and long tube journey. I was, although I remember this less, much less talkative. He also sometimes found me asleep on the sofa, episodes of *Battlestar Galactica* still playing, alongside mostly finished beans on toast dinner. He finished by saying the work had clearly taken a physical toll on me.

I described the experience of working in the call centre as negative:

The affective package that workers are required to perform during the labour process is demanding. The experience was exhausting and emotionally draining. From my own experience of working eight-hour afternoon/evening shifts – unfortunately also complemented with a morning of reading and writing about call centres – the labour process was exhausting (Woodcock, 2017, p. 53).

The physicality of the labour process was one of the important findings from the ethnographic part of the project. I drew upon Foucault’s (1991, p. 152) understanding of disciplinary control to unpick some of these experiences:

does not consist simply in teaching or imposing a series of particular gestures; it imposes the best relation between a gesture and the overall position of the body . . . good handwriting, for example, presupposes a gymnastics – a whole routine whose rigorous code invests the body in its entirety, from the points of the feet to the tip of the index finger.

There are similarities here with Selmi’s (2013) use of Shilling’s (1993) notion of the body as ‘an absent presence.’ In particular, throughout the training in the call centre, the physical aspects of a so-called “good” phone call were regularly repeated. For example, I was encouraged to stand at my desk, using the posture to improve my tone, while gesticulating at points during the speech. This was captured by Taylor and Bain (1999, p. 103) as the demand to ‘smile down the phone.’

As I noted in *Working the Phones* (Woodcock, 2017, p. 73):

Workers are not allowed to sit slouching at the desk making calls. The supervisors explain that an upright posture must be maintained at all times, keeping the head lifted to project the voice. It is not simply a case of reading the words out loud. The voice itself requires modulation throughout the script. Trainees get printed scripts and annotate them with the required pace, tone, pauses, emphasis and indications of where to freely elaborate. It is regularly stated that standing and gesticulating can add the ephemeral 'good' quality to calls. Trainees have to observe the top sellers and emulate their delivery. I struggled to understand how mimicking posture and hand movement would lead to sales. Even so, my own best results all involved a physical aspect. I developed a routine: standing up at the start of the call, ensuring that my body was moving, gesturing as if addressing someone in person, with specific movements and exaggerated facial expressions. While this bizarre performance worked for me, each worker had to develop their own style.

I also found that the demands to do this in the call centre shaped my speaking practices following the PhD. For example, I never take calls sitting down now. Whether work related or social calls, my preference is to use a hands free setup (which I luckily happen to have as my headphones used to listen to music from my phone while commuting has a microphone) and I only ever speak publicly while standing – never sitting down.

This embodied nature of call centre work also provides an important way to engage with the technological surveillance. As articulated by Taylor and Bain (1999) this still requires the input and intervention of human supervisors, but the embodied experience of surveillance is a powerful example of electronic Taylorism, developed in the call centre along Braveman's (1999) understanding of Taylorism as a management approach. It also provides a way to revisit Foucault's (1991) metaphor of the Panopticon, as developed by Fernie and Metcalf (1997). My own experiences in the call centre provided a way to go beyond the dichotomy of the previous debates, integrating parts of the Foucauldian inspired analysis with the uncovering of practices of resistance on the call centre floor.

Any inquiry into call centre work must examine the ways in which technologies of surveillance and control have been key to their development. Looking back, the first call centres appear quite rudimentary in comparison to their contemporary incarnation: workers huddled over phonebook, manually dialling numbers into phones, holding the handsets, all while scribbling notes on paper to log their own calls. The introduction of new technology – beyond that of the phone itself – was a process rather than a single event. During this process there was the potential to contest the way this was introduced: what changes, how were they achieved, whose interests did they serve.

The most important technological innovations involve the connection between the telephone and computer(s) in the workplace. This has allowed a threefold strengthening of management. The first is the potential to greatly increase the speed of the labour process. The development of the automatic call distributor heralded the beginning of the modern call centre. It transferred the process of connecting phone calls away from the operator and onto a computer system. This allowed the queuing of incoming calls and also the automatic dialling of outgoing calls. The control of the pace of phone calls is therefore taken away from the worker, maximising the amount of calls that can be made in a shift. The second strengthening of management is the computerisation of the calls that allows for a vast quantity of measurements to be automatically collected. The meshing of the telephone with computers – and in many cases now the complete integration with VoIP (Voice over Internet Protocol) technology – allows computer software to collect and collate data about each worker's

performance. These quantitative variables are context free; not something that can be debated, considered instead as the evidence base for rewards or discipline. The third strengthening of management is related to this data collection, but has a particular importance. The computerisation produces digital records of all phone calls at a low cost. In sales the calls are considered as the verbal contract confirming the purchase and compiled in databases and archives. The availability of digital storage meant that every single phone call made could be played back at a moment's notice. This allows an unprecedented level of surveillance; every call encounter is permanent, every mistake could be punishable in the future. As a method of retrospective control it operates as if the factory foreman had gained the ability to recall every commodity produced on an assembly line and judge the quality of its production.

These three examples highlight the way management control has been actively programmed into the technology used in the labour process. This represents an insight into one of the ambiguities of that Burawoy (1985, p. 47) identifies in Braverman's work: 'control becomes a secondary feature in the organization of work, while the pursuit of efficiency becomes its primary feature', yet Burawoy argues that 'Braverman presents another view, based on the [Charles] Babbage principle, according to which control is inseparable from the pursuit of efficiency.' While it is possible to treat technological innovation as the result of competition between capitalists, driven primarily by a desire to gain a profitable advantage, this misses a more nuanced understanding of how the imperatives of capital are written into machinery. In the call centre the desire to increase call volumes is a constant pressure, as managers set high targets of numbers of calls to find potential customers. The automation of dialling in the call centre is an example of how 'machinery offers to management the opportunity to do by wholly mechanical means that which it had previously attempted to do by organizational and disciplinary means' (Braverman, 1999: p.134). Braverman (1999, p.134) quotes Charles Babbage, who argues 'one great advantage which we may derive from machinery . . . is from the check which it affords against the inattention, the idleness, or the dishonesty of human agents.' It is therefore possible to argue that the processes of computerisation in the call centre involve both speed-up and new methods of control.

Affective workers are subjected to increasing demands on the delivery and maintenance of packages of affects. This 'emotional administration' brings with it new forms of supervisions and control. Cederström and Fleming argue that a worker 'can no longer happily blend into the anonymous throng of dark suits or blissfully disappear into an indistinguishable mass of factory workers.' Instead the prevalence of new forms of surveillance and control of emotions creates 'what could only be called exposure capitalism, everything about us is suddenly on display – to be seen, to be judged' (Cederström & Fleming 2012:38). As argued in the book (Woodcock, 2017, p. 89)

The supervision is no longer limited to where, how, and what we do on a task, or how long it takes. It reaches into an emotional level: is the worker showing that the correct emotions? Are they genuinely feeling those emotions? This introspection shifts the balance of power in the workplace: it is not the boring tasks to be completed in poor conditions; the fault lies instead with worker for failing to expose genuine emotions.

The physical and mental experiences of working under an 'electronic panopticon' created numerous moments of refusal, drawing on Mulholland's (2004) framework of 'Slammin' Scammin' Smokin' an' Leavin'' – or 'cheating, work avoidance, absence and resignation.'

While the first three could be found in abundance on the call centre floor, the fourth was clearly found in the high levels of turnover.

The negative effects of working in the call centre (as noted by my housemate), also meant leaving the call centre – or rather being fired – was a celebrated moment of exiting the fieldwork. This went against the early fears of failing to remain employed long enough in the ethnography – something shared by Linhart (1981) upon finding he was not very good at working on an assembly line. As discussed in *Working the Phones*, most of the people I had worked with longest had already left the call centre – either moving on to other things or similar jobs. The collective moments of resistance and early organising that we shared had passed, as the turnover reshaped the dynamics of the workplace.

Developing the Methods

My entry and exit from the workplace created tensions for thinking of the project in terms of a workers' inquiry. I met with some of the workers I spent time from the call centre afterwards, discussing the ideas that would go into the PhD and later the book. However, these became harder to sustain, as many of them had moved onto new forms of work and other projects. While call centres were my key interest at the time, many workers did not want to spend time out of work discussing them. This tied in with the demands of the PhD process, including the necessity to limit the timeframe of the fieldwork and produce a written piece of work of the appropriate length.

Without wanting to get too much into an ethnographic account of finishing an ethnography, the exit from the fieldwork site and writing up process meant an intense period of writing and making sense of call centres. Rather than spending time organising with call centre workers, which would be the expected outcome of an inquiry, it instead focused on the written output. This tied in with a collective inquiry that I was involved in at Goldsmiths (Woodcock, Donegan, & Goard 2014), organising PhD students who taught through a combination of surveys and union recruitment. In a sense, this was part of a process of decompression from call centre work. One of the last things I wanted to do after submitting the PhD was to talk about call centres or reengage in the inquiry. This is, of course, a privilege of operating within an academic context. Unlike many workers who find themselves in call centres, I was able to step away from the call centre. For all the problems of finishing a PhD, it comes with significant benefits and opportunities not available elsewhere. I therefore took a break from call centres between the submission of the PhD in 2014 and the publication of *Working the Phones* in 2017.

Working the Phones was intended as an account of the PhD inquiry, written in an accessible format for the book, then later being made available as a free downloadable eBook. I later translated the research into an interactive format to experiment with how experiences of work can be shared. As part of a special issue on call centres for *Notes from Below*, I produced 'a short interactive experience' about call centres. Using the narrative game making tool Twine, it is a text-based representation of what it is like to get a job in the call centre and a typical shift. It attempted to highlight the pressure of quantitative targets, as well as using example conversations of how customers interact with workers. As one user commented: "this was so horrifically like my summer working in a call centre it's eery." This was intended also as a reflection on the gamification of work (Woodcock and Johnson, 2018), thinking about how games can also be used as part of a critical conversation about work. This draws on a wider

growth of critical videogames, like those of Paolo Pedercini (Molleindustria, 2019) and Colestia (2019).

Returning to the book, it put forward an argument about call centre work, how it is managed, and how workers resist. One of the key arguments is around workers' inquiry. Looking back, the book provides a detailed account of both the changing technical and political composition of call centre workers, but also argues that:

what is needed are further attempts at workers' inquiries. These can either be conducted where researchers take on work themselves, in areas where they have contact with workers already, or in workplaces where they want to make contact with workers. In so doing, researchers can aim to take up the challenge that Marx laid out in the concept of the workers' inquiry (Woodcock, 2017, p. 164).

I took up this challenge in two main ways following the publication of the book. The first was continuing to undertake inquiries as an academic. For example, in the gig economy (Woodcock, 2020) and the videogames industry (Woodcock, 2016; 2019). The second was launching *Notes from Below* with a collective of editors.

The experience of conducting an ethnography for the PhD showed the limitations and the strengths of using a method like this to gain access to, and research with, workers. *Notes from Below* (2019) uses and develops:

the method of workers' inquiry. We draw our methods and theory from the class composition tradition, which seeks to understand and change the world from the worker's point of view. We want to ground revolutionary politics in the perspective of the working class, help circulate and develop struggles, and build workers' confidence to take action by and for themselves.

This involves trying to move from inquiries 'from above' – those conducted from outside the workplace by academics, like *Working the Phones* – to 'from below' – conducted as a form of co-research with workers (Rieser, 2001). At *Notes from Below*, we are trying to develop the latter. As Roggero (2014, p. 515) has explained, 'the aim of co-research is entirely a political one. It is the organization of the struggles. This does not mean that co-research ignores science: on the contrary, the process was greatly influenced by the social sciences.' It is therefore an experiment with how those on the editorial board that work in universities can contribute to the development of a theory and practice of workers' inquiry.

Across nine issues, *Notes from Below* has published inquiries across a wide range of sectors, including: education, platform capitalism, the tech industry, international struggles, higher education, hospitality, housing, and supermarkets. It has featured over one hundred authors, the overwhelming majority of which do not work as researchers. Similar to the focus of *Working the Phones* on the experiences of workers, this has involved drawing out what factors are important in shaping class composition at various points. Therefore, building on this experience – and others from the rest of the editorial collective – *Notes from Below* expanded the traditional Workerist framework of class composition from the original two of technical and political to include a third: social. As we argued (2018):

Class composition is a material relation with three parts: the first is the organisation of labour-power into a working class (technical composition); the second is the organisation of

the working class into a class society (social composition); the third is the self-organisation of the working class into a force for class struggle (political composition).

What the project is particularly concerned with is the way in which ‘capitalist exploitation is not an abstract idea; it always takes particular, material forms. Through class struggle, capitalism changes itself.’ It is in this context that ethnography – whether with researchers ‘from above’ or workers autoethnographic experiences ‘from below’ – is a powerful tool that can be used to unpick changes in work.

The *Notes from Below* project also provided a way to continue what began with *Working the Phones*. In 2019, we were contacted by a call centre worker who had come across a copy of the book and was inspired to start writing about their experiences. The resulting piece is a workers’ self-inquiry into the changing conditions in a call centre in the north of England. As Bob Elliot (2019) writes: ‘drawing on the tradition of workers’ inquiry, I wanted to provide an account of my own experience in a customer service call centre. *Notes from Below*, which provided the opportunity for this, is a project with the potential to become a base for sharing and co-ordinating similar inquiries, experiences, ideas and strategies for change.’ His name is a ‘pseudonym because of my position as a precarious worker in a cycle of call centre work.’ Through discussions with the editorial collective of *Notes from Below*, Elliot began experimenting with organising and discussed the production of a workplace bulletin. While the project remains ongoing, it highlights how even more limited forms of institutional inquiries can have an impact outside of the university, contributing to the circulation of ideas about struggles and potentially catalysing action of various kinds.

Contradictions, tensions, and the role of the researcher

What this piece has sought to draw out are some of the contradictions and tensions, as well as the role of the researcher in attempting to conduct a workers’ inquiry with ethnographic methods. One of the key tensions that emerges from *Working the Phones* is that the project was much wider than the both the PhD and the monographic that emerged from it. As this article has outlined, the book captures a part of the project, but should not be taken as an indication that it is self-contained. While this is always the case with ethnography as much has to be left out when translating and inevitably cutting down from experience to the written output, this is particularly the case with *Working the Phones*. As an academic – or at least an aspiring academic as a PhD student – there is a great institutional pressure to produce journal article outputs from projects. The book was therefore an attempt to meet some of these requirements, while also remaining accessible and relatively affordable for potential readers outside of academia. This is why the project continued to experiment with alternative forms of output, including the downloadable free pdf, the issue of *Notes from Below* on call centres, the game-like experience, and then the publishing of a workers’ inquiry by a call centre worker in the UK.

A second tension involves the contradiction between academic researcher and organiser, one that is expressed in the attempts to resist and unionise in the call centre. This required careful consideration as to the implications of organising – not for myself, but how this could affect other people in the call centre who relied on the job for the income it gave them. This meant ensuring not to lead the organising, nor pushing workers into doing things that could create risks for themselves. However, what I found in the call centre was workforce that regularly resisted before I arrived, many of whom would quit with very short notice before moving on. This raises important questions about intervention. All research makes an intervention,

whether small or large, progressive or reactionary. It is important to remember that Taylor (1967) whose name goes on to shape the management practices in the call centre, conducted research with the explicit aim of intensifying work. Indeed, during my time in the call centre I came across a management consultant who was meant to be researching undercover to do something similar in the call centre. The intervention of researchers into the workplace is not the preserve of the left or those on the side of the workers movement. As the Italian Workerists found before starting their own interventions in the Olivetti factory, many workers were already 'cautious' about engaging, due to the 'contributions made by previous left sociologists to the intensifications of labour' in the factory (Wright, 2002, p.54).

The problem of intervention is therefore not one of whether intervention should happen or not. Instead, it is about what kind of intervention to make. To make no intervention is an intervention, just mostly one that supports the current organisation of work. During the PhD, I drew upon Burawoy's (1998, p. 14) argument for reflexive ethnographic practice. He argued that it is not possible to minimise intervention and instead it should be used as part of the investigation:

It is by mutual reaction that we discover the properties of the social order. Interventions create perturbations that are not noise to be expurgated but music to be appreciated, transmitting the hidden secrets of the participant's world. Institutions reveal much about themselves when under stress or in crisis, when they face the unexpected as well as the routine. Instead of the prohibition against reactivity, which can never be realized, reflexive science prescribes and takes advantage of intervention.

However, this means that the kind of noise being created needs to be carefully considered, as noted above. It is not a good idea for a researcher to enter a workplace site and begin intervening without building relations and carefully considering the context and balance of power. As Kolinko (2002) reflected, this means the level of struggle within the workplace is crucial in shaping the potential of an intervention. Similarly, Brook and Darlington (2013, p. 240) note that 'the ebb and flow of struggle 'from below' obviously affects the opportunities.' As *Working the Phones* has highlighted, interventions can also develop beyond the workplace, not limited by the time in the workplace or the publication of the book itself. However, these were of varying levels of success at different points.

Workplace Ethnographies Today?

This reflection on *Working the Phones* was intended to draw attention to new forms of ethnographic practice, as well as processes beyond this, that are inspired by workers' inquiry. Reflecting upon the book a few years after its publication (and longer after the fieldwork) provides the opportunity to make sense of the practice of the ethnography and its implications. While the success of the co-research was relatively limited at the time – involving some initial organising and sharing of ideas that contributed towards the book – it has gone on to develop as part of a broader process of co-research as part of *Notes from Below*.

What is clear from the experience is that workplace ethnographies can form an important part of making sense of, and trying to change, work today. While there has been a longer trend of workplace ethnographies becoming less popular, there has been an increase in recent years. This has particularly been the case with younger or earlier career researchers, seeking to combine research with forms of practice. For example, as part of *Notes from Below*, I have

experimented with new forms of co-research writing practices, including those with Deliveroo and Uber drivers. For the piece on Deliveroo (Waters and Woodcock, 2017) this involved writing up the experience of delivering food in London via a platform, using self-tracking and photographs as part of a multimedia practice to make sense of this form of work. For the Uber organising piece (Aslam and Woodcock, 2020) this involved telling the story of one of the key Uber driver organisers in the UK, providing a narrative that helps to make sense of how their struggles have developed. These processes further break down the distinction between researcher and subject, seeking to explore work and struggles against it from the perspective of workers. However, there remain tensions relating to the role of academic work, its constraints, and demands that shape engagement in projects like this. What is needed is more examples of these kinds of studies, connecting with workers and the labour movement, to explore how workers' inquiry can become a useful tool today.

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