

SOCIAL PRODUCTION OF GLOBAL SERVICES IN THE OFFSHORE CALL CENTER: A VIEW FROM THE PHILIPPINES

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Abstract

The call center enterprise in the Philippines has attracted considerable attention and debate. Associated with staggering statistics regarding growth, revenues, employment and earnings, the call center enterprise promises to be the new sunshine industry of the Philippines, with projections of as many as two million jobs by the year 2010. Amidst these developments, this study probes this global service production complex, exploring how fragmented operations spanning a global distance impinge on work conditions and experiences of Filipino call center agents. The study situates and substantiates projections and figures associated with the global call center phenomenon by providing a snapshot of global outsourcing from below. It problematizes the notion of global service work in the third party, offshore call center, examining its imperatives and implications, as well as its various dimensions and conditions. Working for almost six months in a call center in Metro Manila, and supplementing my interviews with agents, managers, and trainers from various call centers, I looked into the social production taking place within these sites, highlighting processes and practices of social and symbolic work in the production and exchange of global services within what I call a "global economy of signs and selves." The study shows how the global restructuring of work and production to achieve increased levels of productivity, competitiveness, and profitability resulted in an intensified and dehumanized work regime. It demonstrates the expanding role of the agent in the offshore service platform, emphasizing the social dimensions and human costs of global outsourcing and the relentless pursuit of new efficiencies that underpins it. At the same time, the study illustrates how the Filipino call center agent locates herself within this global terrain, as well as identifies some ways by which agents negotiate and navigate through the structures and imperatives that constitute this global enterprise.

In this study, I look at the work regimes of Filipino call center agents, highlighting the social production involved in arms-length service provision carried out by offshore call centers.¹ Examining the experiences of Filipino agents who work under fragmented, global service operations, I conceive of

social production as a concept that captures the peculiar conditions of production comprised of varied, under-emphasized, and undervalued forms of work that the Filipino agent performs in the call center. Here, the globalized call center and the social production taking place is situated within a larger, *global economy of signs and selves*.

The frame of a *global economy of signs and selves* wishes to underscore a form of production that encompasses a unique combination of physical work, mental work as well as added dimensions of temporal work performance, emotional work performance, and sociocultural work performance that global call center production entails. These various aspects of the agent's work regime, the breadth and depth, and the range of different types of work performances required underscore the exaggerated and extensive demands of this global production enterprise. Further, it shows that while call centers have resulted in decreased costs as well as increased productivity, profitability, and competitiveness for corporations involved, agents in contrast have had to assume and contend with additional social dimensions and human costs of global call center production.

In this respect, notions of production and of a global economy are not only confined to the production, consumption, and exchange of goods and services, but moreover, the production, consumption, and circulation of *signs*, symbols, meanings, dispositions, performances, attitudes, and a particular presentation of a *self* that embodies the values, images, and imperatives of production. Worker performances reflect the peculiar conditions, demands, imperatives, and exigencies of call center production. As such, the idea of social production makes explicit the varied, intense and even deeply personal, private, and individual aspects of the (call center) worker's production and performance that are often overlooked.

Such a notion of social production springs from the idea of a "non-

economic" global economy, a "global economy of signs and selves," which weaves together three important bodies of ideas: First, Bourdieu's "economy of practice," in particular his view regarding the "dual reality" of practice, bringing to fore the social, symbolic, as well as the economic work that underpins human activity; Second, Lash and Urry's "economies of signs and space," which identifies a period of disorganized capitalism where the products are no longer material goods but are symbolic goods or "signs" given the faster and wider circulation of commodities in today's world economy; and Third, Goffman's dramaturgy and "presentation of the self in everyday life." By defining a global economy that does not simply consist of "economic goods," but of different forms of goods and capital, objects and subjects, circulating in various spaces and fields that constitute the social world and human practice, we present a framework that links everyday human practice (of workers and subjects) to corporate, organizational imperatives, and global processes and spaces. Such a global economy subscribes to the assertion that "it is in fact impossible to account for the structure and functioning of the social world unless one reintroduces capital in all its forms and not solely in the one form recognized by economic theory" (Bourdieu 1986, 242). This compels the sociologist to "make explicit" various forms of under-emphasized and under-valued goods, capital and work (cultural, social and symbolic) underlying human activity within any sphere, in our case, call center production.

The social production that characterizes agents' work practices in the call

centers are conceived then as performances, where the worker is at once producer and product of the day-to-day production she undertakes. This places special emphasis on:

1. The interactive, relational aspect of production, which takes place always with respect to and in behalf of an audience, whether the audience in question is the client, the management or the customer on the line;
2. The expanded conception of production, which resurfaces under-emphasized aspects of social-symbolic work and sign producing functions of the worker, as such, highlighting the signs and symbols which are produced, consumed and circulated in the global economy as well as highlights the central role of the agent, the worker, the self engaged in, subjected to, reflecting on and circulating in such a "global economy of signs and selves;" and
3. The deeply personal and intimate character of production, in the sense that performances make use of resources and inputs that are identified with and integral to the worker, with production imperatives increasingly regulating various arenas of the agent's body and personal front, thereby constituting the worker as a social product, the primary commodity being offered by the call center enterprise.

In this respect, the use and elaboration of the theories of Lash and Urry, Bourdieu, and Goffman allow us to connect personal performances of everyday local production to larger global sign economies where the worker, the agent, plays the central, critical productive role. This global economy of

signs and selves underscores the global conditions as well as the "non-economic," social and symbolic work that underpin personal, individual, local human activity. Here, I put forward the concept of a global economy that is not simply confined to or defined by economic production and exchanges, but more importantly by social relations, symbolic practice and human interaction. It argues that the production and exchanges taking place in call centers are made possible by the different forms of work performances carried out by the agent, forms of work performance that draw extensively and intensively on emotional, temporal, social, and cultural resources of the agent, who may have to subsume these deeply personal aspects of herself to production imperatives. The different work performances delivered by the agent illustrates the distinct production taking place, one which is inextricably intertwined with the worker, in the sense that work performances cannot be disembodied and divorced from the worker carrying them out. This deeply personal and private aspect of performances highlights how the day to day work of the agent in turn results in the "production of the agent," the worker, as well as the self that can plug into such a globally fragmented production enterprise.

Thus, we emphasize that the main product of the call center enterprise is not just services but selves, in particular "outsourced selves." The notion of "outsourced selves" refers to the manner that the production and presentation of the self is grounded on imperatives and conditions that are outside the immediate realm and control of the agent in question. At the same time, it pinpoints

and demonstrates the factors that go into the “outsourcing” of selves, that is, the process and conditions by which these agents are produced such that they can be readily launched and widely circulated within the global economy of signs and selves.

The distinct product of “outsourced selves” highlights the peculiar conditions that underlie the global call center. Here, the global call center is presented as a production enterprise that exemplifies the process by which corporations have restructured their operations in order to achieve new levels of productivity, competitiveness, and profitability. The development of call centers illustrates how corporations have fragmented their operations to focus on core functions for more efficient production, in the process slicing off and standardizing peripheral functions such as customer service. Such segmented functions are either delegated to in-house “back offices” or outsourced to other organizations resulting in significant decreases in operations and labor costs. Moreover, functions are not just outsourced to third party vendors, these are also increasingly being transferred to remote locations overseas, illustrating the twin drive to restructure and relocate operations that underpins global outsourcing of services. What was only previously observed in manufacturing production became possible for services, which traditionally required face-to-face transactions. The capacity to provide remote, real-time service became the cornerstone of this regime of new efficiencies under global restructuring and offshore production.

As such, we focus on how the global restructuring and relocation of call center

operations has engendered a unique combination of conditions that characterize call center work regimes, facilitating the outsourcing of selves. Outsourced selves circulating in globally fragmented production systems are defined and regulated by conditions and imperatives outside their own context and control. Here, I consider how agents are driven by technology, systems and production structures that set the pace of work, the workload and the required level of productivity per worker. Also, I stress how agents take on and perhaps even internalize the demands and interests of others, external imperatives presented by the caller, the corporation and/or the call center, which regulate and shape individual practices and personal performance.

Here, the global and organizational distance between producers and consumers of service has placed the call center agent in a peculiar location, a distance which she experiences and responds to in various ways. First, given the organizational distance that defines production, the agent finds herself contextualized by and identified with various interests that she must cater to, interests and demands imposed by the corporation-client, the third party vendor, and the customer. This is a potentially challenging position given tensions and relations surrounding these interests, where the agent assumes the productive role of catering and attending to these varied and at times conflicting demands. This global outsourcing enterprise is underpinned by a greater imperative of keeping costs at a bare minimum, and extracting maximum output from each worker to ensure profit margins for these vendors. The offshoring of call center

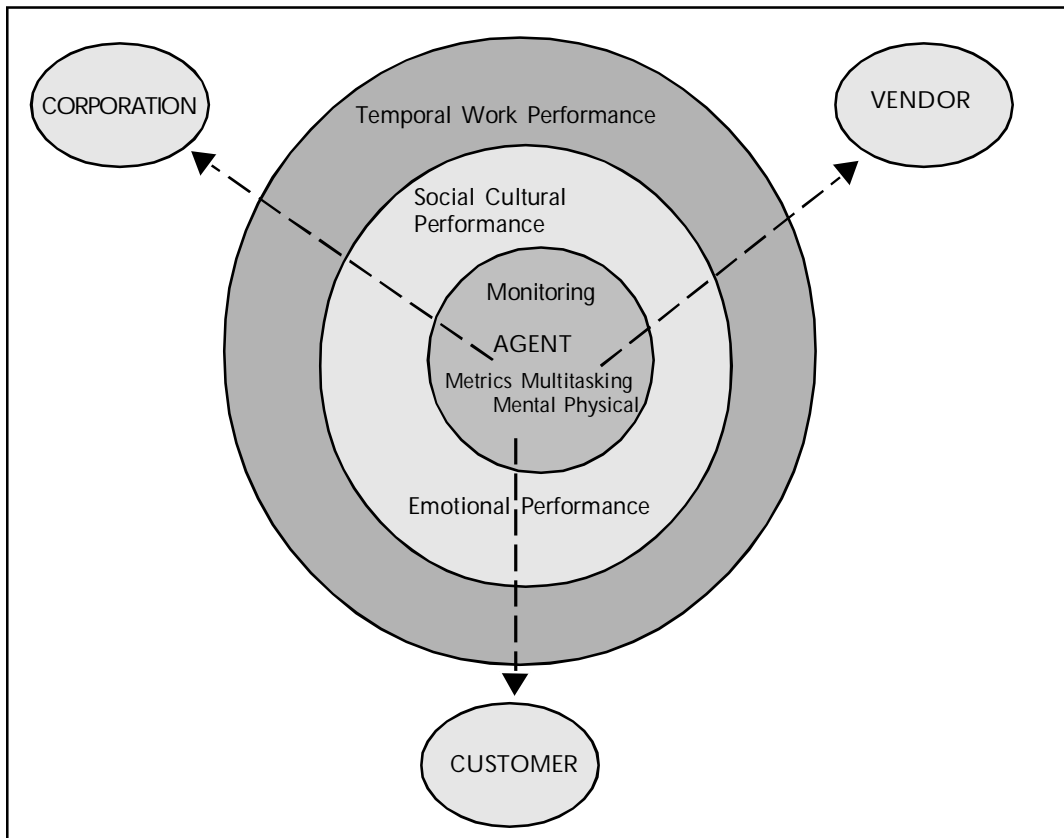
production became more than just a platform to take advantage of cheaper labor overseas. It also heightened imperatives for exaggerated demands on labor time and productivity. In effect, the outsourced climate has resulted in intensely monitored, manic paced and tightly controlled work regimes.

The outsourcing of selves over such a global distance moreover implies cultural, social, and temporal differences between the agent and the customer, which contextualize the performance carried out by the agent. These differences require the agent to expend additional emotional, temporal, cultural,

social, and symbolic work, to tap into such external “sources” of the self, and integrate these into each performance encounter with a customer. Here I argue that as call handling work is “deterritorialized” and performed in remote locations, the job description remains the same, but the demands change (Figure 1).

For instance, the agent carries out additional temporal work, as she is required to synchronize her performances and production with the rhythm, the beat and the cycles of call center production. Call center production imposes rotating, erratic, graveyard schedules, mandatory overtime, and rest

Figure 1. Multiple Dimensions of Global Service Work



day overtime on the agent who is expected to submit her sleep and eating patterns, the bodily and biological functions that define the order of her everyday routines, to the dictates and imperatives of production. This is reinforced by strict attendance and adherence policies as well as constant monitoring and surveillance in the call center. In this regard, it was demonstrated how agents had to perform work in adjusting individual cycles to coincide with external imperatives presented by production. Here, we emphasized that the apparent readiness of agents to comply with the pulse and urgency of production is made possible by considerable, hidden, under-valued work she performs to synchronize her routines with an alien distant sociotemporal dimension. Apart from offering her physical and mental labor therefore, an agent must also regulate her own cycles so that she will be readily available whenever production requires.

Moreover, the agent performs additional emotional, cultural, symbolic, and social work as she attends to an incessant barrage of calls that are routed to her without let up. In this respect, emotional performances require agents to manage disruptions that result from the abrupt, uninterrupted routing of calls as well as suppress spontaneous feelings arising from an interaction so that she is able to consistently present the affective line specified by production rules which projects the image of empathetic, efficient customer service. The adjustment and management of emotions and feelings becomes an integral component of the service being delivered. In this view, agent performances are structured by

scripts and spiels, regulating the tone, pace, and content of exchanges. This is also implied in the social and cultural work performed as production imperatives impose particular accents and speech patterns that must be incorporated into agent performances. Agents are required to exhibit a particular identity and persona that coincide with the attributes and characteristics of the callers they relate with, as if these exchanges are taking place at home, rather than overseas. As such, agents take on more familiar names (Paul instead of Bong, Terry instead of Tere), use more "normal" sounding accents, and infuse their performances with everyday "jargon" and "common" signs and symbols that spring from the alien social dimension they cater to, in order to facilitate these exchanges that are lifted out of their local moorings and transposed to a global sphere. These performances become necessary as agents relate with and attend to the issues and concerns of demanding American customers, who may be upset, distressed, agitated or hostile. This shows how agents must expend additional work on top of their physical and mental labor to bridge the global distance that separates them from their customers.

As such, the global and organizational distance implied by globally fragmented call center production has presented a host of different social, cultural, physical, emotional, and temporal demands that the agent has to contend with. This underscores the extensive range of exaggerated demands that call center production imposes upon agents. It is in this respect that I argue that the Philippine case stresses the manner that call center work conditions have become ex-

cerbated by globalized production, in the sense that global service outsourcing platforms have managed to perfectly integrate and execute the drive to keep costs at a bare minimum, optimize individual worker productivity, and maximize firm profitability by incorporating technology and management tools available into the labor process as well as the over all production system.

Apart from pre-determining the boundaries of the service interaction, the corporation (client) also imposes strict monitoring and metrics to keep the agent in line with imperatives set by the corporation, during a call and even beyond. Moreover, the agent is not only subject to control and surveillance measures set by the corporation-client but also by the call center vendor which imposes sanctions and corrective measures for agents who fail to comply with specified targets for performance and productivity. It should be noted here that for agents employed by third party vendors, there is that lingering threat of losing one's job due to corrective action and termination for "poor performance." Also, in the context of highly mobile accounts, agents may find themselves jobless once the contract with the client ends or when accounts are closed and transferred to yet another vendor. Performance and productivity targets have become tougher and sanctions more severe, since vendors need to remain competitive vis-a-vis other outsourcing firms and at the same time maintain a profit margin. Agents are usually measured according to how fast they handled a call, how well they resolved the issue, and how much they satisfied the customer. In this context, there is constant pressure driving the agent to do

it faster, better, cheaper than everyone else.

This condition is illustrated in Figure 2. In the discussion that follows, the agent bears the brunt of agreements decided upon by the vendor and the client.¹ The vendor, in order to secure or maintain accounts, tends to bid lower or agree to certain penalty clauses to keep an account. In such a relationship, the agent becomes subject to conditions that she has little knowledge of or control over.

- The metrics laid down on the contract with the client have corresponding penalties. Like for example, these are the metrics that you need to meet. So for each metric that the vendor is not able to meet, at the end of the month, the amount that they should get for the service will get penalized and reduced by this much.²
- The vendor gets penalized for not meeting the metrics?
- Like for example, quality monitoring, this is your goal. If you don't meet it at the end of the month, five percent of the amount will get deducted. They have this in the agreement.
- So there's really pressure on the vendor to meet the metrics, but does that pressure translate to the agent?
- On the agent, of course. Yes. Because you'll really push them to meet these stats.
- Otherwise the vendor loses money.
- What they do is they cut your lunch hour, for example reduce it to thirty minutes if the targets are not met.
- Or they take away your second break
- If you don't meet the metrics...
- Because managers are measured by the gross profit of the account. If that

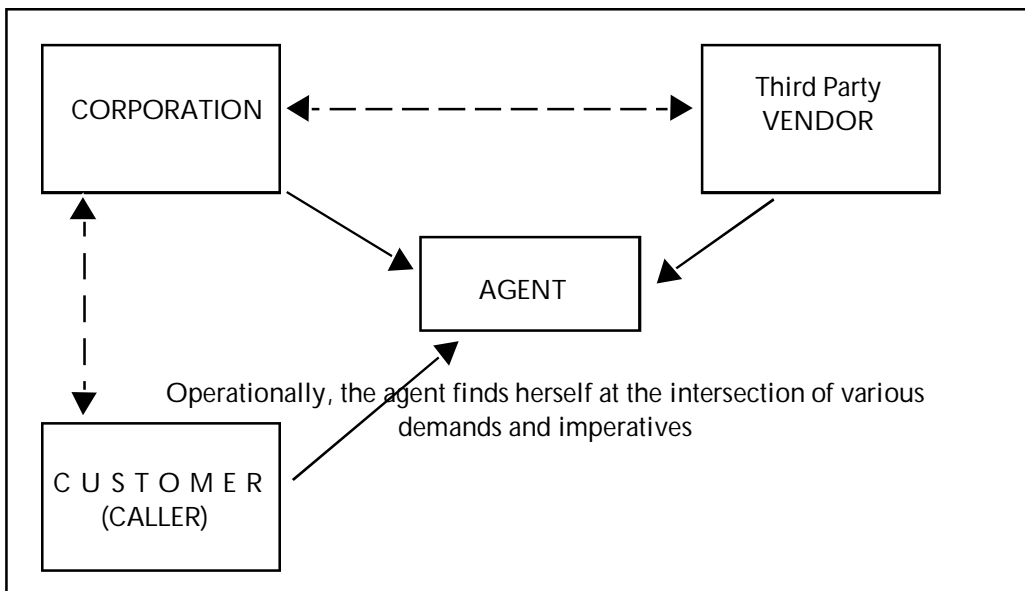
is not met, it means the metrics are not met. So they drive the team leads and the team leads drill the agents.

- So the client pressures the vendor and the vendor pressures the agents.
- It's the agent who's got it the worst in the end. Basically they agreed to that kind of set up. In the first place it's in the contract.
- Do agents know these things when they get in?
- No.

This resonates findings in previous research regarding management and employee systems in offshore call centers. A study by Batt et al. (2005) compares call center workers in India and the US and reports significantly more intense monitoring and lower worker autonomy resulting in higher stress levels among Indian workers than their American counterparts.

In the Philippines, agent work regimes reflect the worker's lack of autonomy and control over the pace, content, direction, and context of her own work, defined and structured by the various forms of intense demands and impositions on the worker's time, routines, emotions, attitudes, dispositions, and identity. Call centers have exercised pervasive and invasive forms of control, through the use of monitoring technology, performance measurement tools, workforce management systems, scripts, to the point of structuring and subsuming various other aspects of workers' day-to-day lives, assumed personal and private, according to the imperatives of call center production. In this regard, the "outsourced self" is primarily derived not from the individual, personal and private context of the worker, but from conditions and imperatives that are sourced out and external to the worker in question.

Figure 2. Web of Demands



Here I underscore the “total,” “encompassing tendency” of the call center enterprise, which heavily regulates various aspects of the “self” and different spheres of the agent’s life in order to achieve operational goals of producing “selves” that may be readily outsourced, launched and circulated in the global market. This bears significant resemblance with Goffman’s notion of a total institution. For Goffman (1961,5-6),

“a basic social arrangement in modern society is that the individual tends to sleep, play, and work in different places, with different co-participants, under different authorities, and without an over-all rational plan. The central feature of total institutions can be described as a breakdown of the barriers ordinarily separating these three spheres of life. First, all aspects of life are conducted in the same place and under the same single authority. Second, each phase of the member’s daily activity is carried out in the immediate company of a large batch of others, all of whom are treated alike and required to do the same thing together. Third, all phases of the day’s activities are tightly scheduled, with one activity leading at a prearranged time into the next, the whole sequence of activities being imposed from above by a system of explicit formal rulings and a body of officials. Finally, the various enforced activities are brought together into a single rational plan purportedly designed to fulfill the official aims of the institution.”

As such, total institutions are contrasted with ordinary establishments where for instance “the authority of the workplace is kept within strict bounds,” with clear demarcation lines drawn that distinguishes where the authority of the work place stops and where the worker’s

private affairs begin. Work organizations such as the call center exact total authority and control in the sense that their control extends beyond the realm of work, permeating arenas that are considered private and personal. In the call center, agents do not find themselves confined within one place/space, but it is evident how the enterprise defines and regulates their different practices, whether pertaining to “work, sleep, or play,” as such, including activities that take place beyond the physical space that the call center occupies.

This condition can be observed in call center demands on agent time. As demonstrated in previous sections, agents submit themselves to tight, erratic, rotating graveyard schedules that are precisely matched and synchronized with production hours, referring to both the distinct timezones of their callers and the specific times that calls actually come in, with the call volume dictating their actual presence on the floor. Tight schedules require strict adherence on the part of the agent, who is expected to log in on the dot, take their breaks on designated times and only for the exact duration set, as well as adjust to periodic changes to schedules. Particular attention paid on “over break” for instance, where failure to return from breaks on time becomes grounds for corrective action and supervisor reprimand, reflects the kind of demanding schedule regime agents have to face. Conditions of mandatory overtime and even rest day over time present another illustration of how agent hours are contingent on call volumes and subject tight production control. In this sense, an agent is “on call,” expected to be readily available whenever production requires. As

Goffman (1961, 10) observes, "in some institutions there is a kind of slavery, with the inmate's full time placed at the convenience of staff."

Under such settings, an agent's movements and actions are strictly regulated, in the sense that they are required to ask permission before proceeding from one activity to another, undergoing a tedious process before she can take "toilet breaks," authorized absences and leaves. The conditions on the production floor, including the design of the labor process and the design and structures of the work setting, prevent agents from simply getting up, moving about, commencing or ending an activity at their own pace and discretion. In *Asylums*, Goffman (1961, 41) explains that in the total institution,

"one of the most telling ways in which one's economy of action can be disrupted is the obligation to request permission or supplies for minor activities that one can execute on one's own on the outside, such as smoking, shaving, going to the toilet.... This obligation not only puts the individual in a submissive or suppliant role "unnatural" for an adult but also opens up his line of action to interceptions by staff."

In yet another way, exaggerated impositions on agent time can be gleaned from the manner by which agents synchronize their day-to-day routines with the schedules of call center production, in the process dramatically altering and reversing the order of their everyday life. As they take on the timezone of their customers and clients, the day-to-day lives of agents begin to revolve around call center production, strictly limiting outside, private activity

and interaction with significant others. This represents a parallel "curtailment of self," where barriers are effectively put in place between the agent and the "wider world." For Goffman (1961, 14),

"[t]he barrier that total institutions place between the inmate and the wider world marks the first curtailment of self. In civil life, the sequential scheduling of the individual's roles, both in the life cycle and in the repeated daily round, ensures that no one role he plays will block his performance and ties in another. In total institutions, in contrast membership automatically disrupts role scheduling, since the inmate's separation from the wider world lasts around the clock and may continue for years. Role dispossession therefore occurs."

As agents take on their productive role within the call center, their ability to carry out their roles in other arenas become constrained and reconfigured by the demands of production. Call center production in this sense considerably shapes their capacity to play out their roles as husbands or wives, fathers or mothers, sons or daughters, and so forth. Instead of actual physical barriers that lock them up, agents confront temporal barriers that isolate them from their parents, their children, their partner, and friends. Consider for instance the case of Anelle and her instant, fleeting encounters with her husband. Her husband is at home when she's at work. She's at home when he's at work. She works on weekends and takes time off on weekdays. In their day-to-day lives, they cross each other's paths without ever really meeting. She talks about not "seeing" each other much. "The only time we really get to spend with each other is that ten minutes when we have coffee

near the train station. We just share that cup and kiss goodbye. Then he's off to work and I'm on my way home. That's the way it works everyday," she shares.

Instead, the more significant relationships that agents are able to maintain are with co-workers and friends from call centers who share the same sociotemporal space they inhabit. Agent leisure time for instance becomes a function of production, in the sense that they are still pivoted around the hours and structures of the call center system. Agents in this respect unwind during "8 am happy" hour, with co-workers, exchanging stories about work, their supervisors and their calls.

Even resting hours are drastically altered, with sleep patterns considerably disrupted by rotating shifts and graveyard schedules. Apart from having to sleep during the day and work at night, agents have to undergo considerable adjustment to regularize sleeping habits and achieve enough rest for another work shift, given weekly changes in their schedules. In this respect, agents spend a considerable amount of time outside work to recoup sleep lost, so that they may be re-energized to take on their productive role when they return to the production floor. Agents lament that they do nothing but "sleep and work," as they devote much of their non-work hours and rest days, catching up on sleep. In this respect, agents also share their difficulty in adjusting to work hours, and to achieve restful, uninterrupted sleep, during the day, under broad daylight, when it's hot, humid and noisy. This is primarily attributed to "the biological make up" of bodies, which have been designed and socialized to carry a particular activity,

"work, sleep, play," at specified hours. In this respect, the demands of call centers are total in the sense that the production system ignores and violates the body and the biological, which they similarly attempt to regulate to adhere to production imperatives. It is also interesting that such adjustments, no matter how considerable and stark, remain under-valued, taken-for-granted aspects of the agent's work regime.

This further relates to another characteristic of the total institution, which is likened to "a finishing school, but one that has many refinements and is little refined." This pertains to the changes that agents have to undergo, as they are prepped up, "reassembled" and "finished" to become "outsourced selves." Such changes are not limited to the temporal work adjustments of agents, but also include emotional, cultural, and social adjustments so that they may embody the attributes and identities expected of "outsourced selves."

These identities are presented and performed on the floor, rehearsed and mastered during training, where agents are "processed" for outsourcing. Agent training can be considered what Goffman calls "admission procedure" that "trim" and "program" the worker or "inmate." "Admission procedures might better be called "trimming" or "programming," says Goffman, "because in thus being squared away the new arrival allows himself to be shaped and coded into an object that can be fed into the administrative machinery of the establishment, to be worked on smoothly by routine operations" (Goffman 1961, 16).

These admission procedures entail a process of "leaving off and taking on"

imposed attributes, values, and imperatives. For Goffman, "leaving off entails a dispossession of property, important because persons invest self feelings in their possessions" (Goffman 1961, 18).

Instead, substitute possessions in the form of specified attributes, characteristics, values, and imperatives are then imposed on agents.

"Once the inmate is stripped of his possessions, at least some replacements must be made by the establishment, but these take the form of standard issue, uniform in character and uniformly distributed," explains Goffman.

"One set of the individual's possessions has a special relation to self. The individual ordinarily expects to exert some control over the guise in which he appears before others.... in short an individual will need an identity kit for the management of his personal front.... On admission to a total institution, however, the individual is likely to be stripped of his usual appearance and the equipment and services by which he maintains it, thus suffering a personal defacement (Goffman 1961, 19-20).

The call center in this respect strips agents of their speech practices and language as well as their identities and names, which are subsequently replaced with more "uniform," homogenized, familiar, and "normal" sounding ones, as in the case of Bong and Tere, a situation that for Goffman constitutes a great curtailment of the self.

"Perhaps the most significant of these possessions is not physical at all, one's full name; whatever one is thereafter called, loss of one's name can be a

great curtailment of self" (Goffman 1961, 18).

Similarly, "[j]ust as the individual can be required to hold his body in a humiliating pose, so he may have to provide humiliating verbal responses. An important instance of this is the forced deference pattern of total institutions" (Goffman 1961, 22). Agent speech and spontaneous responses are tightly regulated. For instance, a general deference to over-all production rules and protocol is expressed by agents, as they subscribe to enforced patterns of speech on the floor, where agents contend with a similar "removal of behavior opportunities," as when they are required to refrain from talking in Filipino, to adhere to the English only policy, speak the specified language, using the preferred, "normal sounding" accent (Goffman 1961, 13).

Moreover, such a level of deference can be seen during calls, where agents perform emotional labor as they take on a particular verbal pose, structured by tight scripts and spiels, peppered with words that reflect the company affective line, such as please, thank you, sorry, may I. This deference pattern in speech can be observed in the repeated use of the phrase "Thank you" from start to end of a call, no matter what transpires during the exchange. This can also be seen in the emotional performances of agents who are "sorry to hear that you're upset..." and "more than happy to help you with your concern."

Such verbal deference is imposed even when agents confront disrespectful treatment of hostile callers as they perform on the floor. This is another feature related to total institutions where inmates suffer

various forms of indignities while confined to strict behavior protocol and scripted responses. Within the total institution of the call center, agents are forced to bear the “indignities of treatment others accord him,” in the form of verbal or gestural profanations, such as when an agent is called obscene names, cursed and verbally abused (Goffman 1961, 23). Further,

“whatever the form or the source of these various indignities, the individual has to engage in activity whose symbolic implications are incompatible with his conception of self. A more diffuse example of this kind of mortification occurs when the individual is required to undertake a daily round of life that he considers alien to him – to take on a disidentifying role. On the outside, the individual can hold objects of self-feeling—such as his body, his immediate actions, his thoughts, and some of his possessions—clear of contact with alien and contaminating things. But in total institutions these territories of the self are violated; the boundary that the individual places between his being and the environment is invaded and the embodiments of self profaned” (Goffman 1961, 23).

For agents, the totalizing structures of the call center enterprise control them from responding spontaneously from verbal attacks and demeaning and dehumanizing encounters, as they are kept from displaying their real feelings, required to suppress negative feelings and over-express specified emotions and attributes, in order to portray the customer service image and persona that the corporation wishes to project. In this sense, agents find themselves in frustrating encounters with callers, who

berate and disrespect them for what they do, for who they are, for what they stand for, with hardly any means to counter or challenge such treatment and behavior given the tight structures that she is faced with. This level of adherence and control is made possible by normative and management structures that are embedded in the production system.

In this sense, call centers exhibit similar structures and conditions parallel to total institutions, as seen from the climate of intense monitoring and surveillance, punishment and corrective action on the floor. Such structures reinforce the specified productive role of the agent. As she attends to her call handling work and caters to the demands of various audiences, clients, management and customers, the agent is likewise “never fully alone; he is always within sight and often earshot of someone” (Goffman 1961, 25).

Agent performance in this respect becomes the arena of the audience, whose expectations and demands are incorporated into each routine, each delivery. The agent’s responses, performances, and practices are then carried out with the audience in mind, constantly reminding the agent that her actions do not belong to her, but ultimately belong to the audience she serves. Like in total institutions, agents “can be supervised by personnel whose chief activity is not guidance or periodic inspection (as in many employer-employee relations) but rather surveillance – a seeing to it that everyone does what he has been clearly told is required of him, under conditions where one person’s infraction is likely to stand out in relief against the visible, constantly

examined compliance of others" (Goffman 1961, 7).

On top of routine and constant monitoring therefore, agents have to face a harsh system of punishment and corrective action geared at making sure that the agent is consistently in line with production policies and imperatives. Agents who fail to perform according to production targets, receive corrective action memos and run the risk of being suspended or terminated. Under such conditions, agents find themselves gradually regulating their own performance according to the specified pace, direction, content, cycles, and exigencies of production, with their conscious knowledge that "they are being watched," and the constant, consistent drumming on the floor that instills in the agent the values, beat, urgency, and imperatives of production.

What is interesting about this total institution is that agent entrance into the enterprise is voluntary and not forced, with agents having a level of understanding of what she is getting into as she takes on the job. "When entrance is voluntary, the recruit has already partially withdrawn from his home world; what is cleanly severed by the institution is something that has already started to decay," says Goffman (1961, 15).

In this respect, agents resign themselves to the total institution of the call center, carrying out their regulated practices as "part of their job" and "duty." At the same time, it can be said that parts of their productive role may resonate images and symbols that agents relate with themselves, having been socialized in a particular manner that has an affinity with the sociocultural spheres they

service, whereby portraying a particular act may be viewed as a form of validation of particular aspects of the agents sense of self, facilitating their submission to production goals and imperatives.

The encompassing character of the production system, as well as the level of submission of agents, can similarly be observed in practices that subtly attempt to interrogate the institution of the call center, as agents respond to the structures of the call center and try to direct their own actions within. As they navigate the call center enterprise, agents find themselves resorting to what may be considered "secondary adjustments," which for Goffman consist of "practices that do not directly challenge staff but allow inmates to obtain forbidden satisfactions or to obtain permitted ones by forbidden means." These practices are variously referred to as "the angles," "knowing the ropes," "conniving," "gimmicks," "deals," or "ins." Secondary adjustments provide the inmate with important evidence that he is still his own man, with some control of his environment (Goffman 1961, 54).

The study similarly demonstrated some means by which Filipino agents attempt to structure their own performances, in the process negotiate the conditions of production. This emphasizes the dialectical character of the performance of "outsourced selves," which are simultaneously subsumed by external, organizational, and global imperatives as well as directed and played out by the agent. In this sense, we note how agents find opportunities to subtly defy call center structures, in such strategies like transfer camping, release, and muted backtalk. Transfer camping

strategies for instance, where agents linger in the transfer call instead of taking on a new one, demonstrate how the agent has become so attuned to production, developing a keen, internalized sense of how production works, which permits her to identify and maximize opportunities that come at a particular moment so that she is able to slow down the pace of her work, negotiate her intense work load according to her own design without being detected. These opportunities are presented by procedural and technical aspects that constitute the labor process, such as the transfer call or the mute button.

In this sense, these strategies are carried out in spaces within the production system, identified by the agent who is able to maintain and assert resources of power within the very processes of her own subjugation. This has also been observed in the way agents construct their own role and position in the production process, as she defines her stance in relation to management, clients, and customers. This can similarly be seen from absenteeism and exit strategies that workers carry out. These become a platform for agents to act upon their dissatisfaction and resist their construction as mere cogs or robots plugged into the global call center complex, as they insist to leave their own imprint and “re-humanize” the intense and dehumanizing production they perform. However, it must be stressed that these forms of resistance have been practiced within spaces available, without considerably altering relations and conditions in this global enterprise. Forms of resistance have yet to take on a more organized and collective character to substantially

transform bargaining power of workers in order to establish a level of control over the pace, content, direction, context and over-all conditions of their day-to-day work. This in turn further demonstrates the invasive, pervasive, and almost total control exercised by the production system over the agent, whose resistance and negotiation are still structured along the axis of the system she contests, reflecting how deeply embedded these structures, imperatives, and values have become.

In this regard, globally fragmented service production exemplified by global outsourcing of call centers is made possible by the construction of the total institution of the call center, which encompasses various aspects of the self and different arenas of workers’ lives. Such an encompassing total production system is geared toward the process of “outsourcing selves,” such that agents are transformed into consumed and circulated commodities in the global economy. These outsourced selves embody the values, cycles, imperatives, urgency, and images of call center production, with such embodiment facilitating their outsourcing and circulation in the global economy. As such, outsourced agents are consumed by customers who call in for a specific, mediated, carefully designed brand of service and corporations that utilize these flexible, highly productive workers as company front liners. The processing and production of outsourced selves can certainly be related to the idea of flexible labor, as in the contractualization of labor that became pervasive under global manufacturing platforms. In the era of global service outsourcing however, the

demand on workers is not confined to the need to submit to contractual, flexible work regimes. Labor flexibility as a leverage and currency in global service outsourcing pertains to a level of flexibility, of malleability required of

workers who have to adjust and regulate their own performances in accordance with the multiple, exaggerated, encompassing demands of globalized production.

NOTES

- 1 This article is based on the author's master's thesis that was presented to the Department of Sociology, UP Diliman in February 2007. Dr. Walden Bello served as thesis adviser. An earlier version of the work won a citation in the Fourth International Sociological Association (ISA) Worldwide Competition for Junior Sociologists.
- 2 Group discussion, 8 July 2006.

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