City Research Online

City, University of London Institutional Repository

This is the accepted version of the paper.

This version of the publication may differ from the final published version.

'Being Yourself' in the Electronic Sweatshop: New Forms of Normative Control

Abstract

This paper aims to extend research about high-commitment management practices in tightly controlled work environments. It does so by studying developments in normative control in a call-centre. *Contra* conventional normative controls (which emphasize shared values and collective identification), we observed employees being encouraged to '*just be themselves*', especially in relation to lifestyle differences and diverse identities. Although this afforded some important freedoms, we take a critical view. The managerial discourse sought to harness workers' pre-existing identities in a way which captures their 'sociality' (thereby enhancing the quality of interactive emotional labour). At the same time, it detracts attention from the dysfunctions of extant call-centre controls associated with technology, bureaucracy and culture management. Building on a study of workers' experiences, this paper provides an analysis of a significant development in normative control. It presents a critical appraisal of its relationship to conventional controls and shows how 'freedom' in the call-centre and other contexts where such regimes prevail is not all that it seems.

Introduction

> Individuality is not just tolerated … but actively encouraged – particularly when it comes to employees expressing the fun side of their personalities… All of this is based on the belief that when people are happy and have the freedom to be themselves, they are more productive and give more of themselves (Bains, 2007: 241).

A formidable body of research tells us that call-centres are one of the more controlling and oppressive forms of employment in contemporary society in the west and beyond (Russell, 2009). With the growth of customer service and interactive employment in western economies, call-centres have received much public attention for their unpleasant and sometimes draconian

conditions. Scholarship and the popular press have typically depicted this kind of workplace in negative terms, using referents like 'electronic panopticon' (Fernie and Metcalf, 1998), 'assembly lines in the head' (Bain and Taylor, 1999), 'human answering machines' (Wylie, 1997) and 'bright, satanic offices' (Baldry et al., 1998). Although by no means consonant with skilled 'knowledge work' (see Fleming et al., 2004), commentators also note that call-centres are different to the classic assembly-line. Whilst the work is highly regimented, micro-managed through overt technical controls and performance targets, it also involves high levels of interactive customer service that requires a personal touch (Deery and Kinnie, 2002). In order to elicit motivated and 'lively' emotional labor (friendliness, rapport, warmth, etc.), call-centre management is becoming concerned with the positive 'sociability' of employees (Callaghan and Thompson, 2002) and the levels of satisfaction derived from the wider work environment. According to Callaghan and Thompson, in this respect 'call-centres and service work more generally are at the forefront of such shifts' (2002: 236). But how can the dispositions of warmth, discretion, personality and friendliness be cultivated in a workplace that is overly homogenized, controlling and akin to a deadening manufacturing line (Schneider and Bowen, 1993; Crome, 1998)?

This tension between the quantitative regime of workplace controls and qualitative necessities of interactive customer service in call-centres has attracted scholarly attention. Kinnie et al. for example, argued that the apparent paradox required a delicate balance that is different to other jobs since 'the immediacy of the production process and its highly personal characteristics intensify and counterpose these conflicting demands in a way which is often absent, camouflaged or kept at arms length outside the sector' (2000: 980). A growing body of research now suggests that one way call-centres might manage this paradox is by deploying value or normative based techniques along side overt technical controls in order to enhance both the interactive customer service (idiosyncratic, fun and sociable attitudes on the phones) and perhaps, smooth over the inherent tensions between control and discretion endemic in the call-centre labour process - what

Houihan (2002) calls a 'low discretion, high commitment' combination and Korczynski (2001) terms 'customer-oriented bureaucracy'. Kinnie et al. (2000) for example, point to the attempt to create opportunities for 'fun' as particularly salient in the normative control strategies they observed. In a similar vein, Frenkel et al. (1999) refer to the use of 'info-normative control' in which valued-based training and socialization techniques are instrumental in achieving quality customer service in a context notorious for its stultifying boredom. Likewise, Callaghan and Thompson (2000) note the importance of normative control in the recruitment and training of call-centre employees, practices designed to craft attitudes conducive to the emotional labour and sociability requirements of the job task.

This paper seeks to build upon and develop this line of research in a number of ways. With reference to an in-depth empirical study of a US owned Australian call-centre, we propose that we need to know much more about the distinct features of the normative controls used in call-centres and other similar contexts. Otherwise, as Callaghan and Thompson (2002) also warn, we run the risk of conflating these techniques with the types of 'empowerment' and 'discretion' afforded to more skilled 'knowledge workers'. Indeed, we propose that call-centre normative controls can be significantly different to value-based identity management systems that might be found in other occupations. Rather than seeking to forge collective identification and commitment to the organization, the call-centre we studied exhorted employees to 'just be themselves' - love working for the company rather than love the company itself (cf. Kunda, 1992). Indeed, as the opening quote by Bains (2000) regarding South-West Airlines also intimates, freedom of self-expression, individuality and authenticity (especially non-work expressions of self) are emphasized as opposed to long-term clan-like solidarity (Ouchi, 1979); that this, the ability to display lifestyle diversity, sexuality, the fun side of selfhood and authentic feelings in the workplace. Even dissent and dissatisfaction are condoned albeit in a closely prescribed manner. This variant of normative control involves more (neo)liberalist themes of difference and self-expression than totalitarian cultural uniformity (cf. Willmott, 1993). The organizational rationale

here is that if workers are free to express their diverse non-work selves, then they might be more motivated to perform in a highly standardized environment. As we shall indicate, however, there are strict limits on how far employees might be themselves.

The second purpose of this paper is to clarify the relationship between the normative discourse of 'just be yourself' and more conventional call-centre controls. This may allow us to ascertain why the 'just be yourself' normative approach (as opposed to collective and shared identification with a unified norms) might be favored by management. Two arguments are forwarded. First, reflecting a wider shift in corporate domination that invites more of non-work social competencies into the workplace (see Ross, 2004; Fleming, 2009), the 'just be yourself' version of normative control is utilized to personalize customer service interaction. Rather than the customer feeling the emotional labour is being 'faked' or delivered by a corporate clone, the idea is to present the 'real' individual (albeit in a very scripted context). Traditional corporate culture management, on the other hand, is well known for blocking the personal from work (see Kunda, 1992), which we think represents a distinct difference. Second, we argue that the 'just be yourself' approach is designed not so much to loosen pre-existing controls or 'free' employees, but to detract attention away from such controls and their associated dysfunctions. In this sense, identity freedom is privileged in the managerial discourse since one can be free to 'just be oneself' whilst simultaneously complying with coercive controls of typical call-centre employment. This represents a kind of *freedom around control* that detracts from the dysfunctions of technical,, bureaucratic and mainstream cultural controls (such as boredom, depersonalization and inauthenticity) and in doing so, reinforces overall control over the labour process. This argument is derived from managers' accounts of control practices within the 'just be yourself' discourse and employee resistance to this control (however bizarre resisting 'being yourself' might initially seem). We thus call for caution about explaining identity-based freedoms as either a moderation of call-centre regimentation (Frenkel et al., 1999) or self-authored spaces of resistance that afford relief from surveillance (Knights and McCabe, 1998). Rather, the article

aims to deepen our understanding of value-based normative controls in the call-centre, by focusing on their seemingly liberal form and mapping how this 'freedom' interacts with more conventional 'hard' control systems. In this sense, we also aim to contribute to a broader tradition of critical inquiry that seeks to 'unmask the exploitative character of control that is obscured behind the rhetoric of inclusion, participation and mutual interests' (Sewell, 2007: 274).

The article is organized as follows. First we focus on research that has studied the dynamics of control in the call-centre, with special reference to the use of normative control. We then argue that a novel variant is emerging encapsulated by the phrase 'just be yourself'. This kind of 'liberation management' focuses on the expression of unique identities and attributes associated with extra-employment practices and social competencies. It is proposed that it is in part inspired by the enduring dysfunctions of conventional organizational controls, and aims to detract attention from them without diminishing their influence. An empirical example of a call-centre that deploys the 'just be yourself' approach is presented to support our claims. Based upon these findings, we discuss the significance that this novel form of identity management and its overall relationship to the hybridity of controls present in the call-centre.

Call-Centre Control and its Discontents

Control is a central concern within management and organization science, with particular attention given to the shaping or influencing of employees' behaviour or performance outcomes – what is frequently called the 'worker problem'. As Tannenbaum (1967) argues in a classic definition:

> *Organization implies control*. A social organization is an ordered arrangement of individual human interactions. Control processes help circumscribe *idiosyncratic behaviours* and keep them conformant to the rational plan of organization. ….. The co-ordination and order created out of the *diverse interests and potentially diffuse behaviours of members* is largely a function of control (Tannenbaum, 1967: 3, emphasis added).

Missed in the definition, of course, is the highly contested nature of the concept, reflected in having both negative and positive popular connotations – being controlled or 'in control' – as well as varying positions on its legitimacy, inevitability and perfectability (Sewell, 2007). Here, critical perspectives challenge the unitary or managerialist view of control, considering it inherently political and imperfect rather than neutral, especially in the context of capitalism (Jermier, 1998).

Control in the Call-Centre

Research investigating life in the call-centre has revealed them to be exemplary sites of organizational control. Given the regimented, standardized and technical nature of the work, a number of important studies have pointed to similarities with traditional industrial and manufacturing labour processes that were explored by an earlier generation of scholars (e.g. Edwards, 1979). According to Fernie and Metcalf (1998), call-centre employment involves a micro-managed and highly monitored mode of labour in which coercive performance systems blend with electronic surveillance to form an 'electronic panopticon'. As with other forms of technical control (see Edwards, 1979; Zuboff, 1989), technological monitoring aims to supercede the need for extensive direct supervision (and the potential conflict that lies therein) as the expectation of observation encourages employees to 'internalize the gaze' of management (Fernie and Metcalf, 1998). Other research has focused on the coercive use of targets, rigid customer service scripts and performance appraisals to demonstrate how this kind of work involves controls analogous to the notorious assembly line (Bain and Taylor, 1999). Subsequent research has moderated this view somewhat by pointing to varying levels and contingencies of control instensity and to the presence of resistance in the call-centre, be it in the form of collective action or more modest acts of defiance (Bain and Taylor, 2000; Taylor et al., 2002; Callaghan and Thompson, 2001).

As mentioned in the introduction, the importance of value-based normative controls in this highly Taylorized environment became an important area of investigation. According to Kinnie et al. (2000), the 'subtle paradox' of high commitment management practices in the tightly controlled call-centre makes for a somewhat unusual work environment. Not only is the labour process highly controlled by conventional management systems associated with technological pacing, bureaucratic formalization and the depersonalization that results, but it also requires an important degree of personal expression and motivation given the emotional labour that it entails. Apart from the typical 'hard' measures – target achievement, pay systems, log-in records, call-rate speed, time discipline etc. – call-centres must also focus on the qualitative aspects of work related to customer service interaction. According to Kinnie et al. (2000), this why they observed the strange co-presence of obtrusive surveillance and management initiated 'fun' exercises in the call-centres they studied: alienated and bored workers tend not to make for motivated high-quality emotional labour. They observe in relation to the instigation of a team culture,

> Teams were not required by the technical aspects of the job since it could be carried out independently, but were instead used to manage individual performance more effectively, to seek to exercise normative control over attitudes and behavior and to provide a social dimension at work, occasionally, outside of work (Kinnie et al., 2000: 981).

The reference to 'normative control' here relates to a management practice of creating high-commitment cultures – shared values, beliefs and norms – so that employees form an emotional identification with the firm (Kunda, 1992). Having internalized the vision of the organization, the aim is that workers gain a sense of shared meaning and belonging via the organization, much like a 'clan' (Ouchi, 1979) or perhaps even a 'cult' (O'Reilly and Chatman, 1997). It is the identity of the worker that is the target of control or regulation (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). Committed workers are thought to be more motivated and thus more amenable to the emotional labour demands of interactive voice-to-voice service work. Frenkel *et al.* (1999) refer to this blending of control and commitment in the call-centre as a kind of hybridity, suggesting that its presence and

effects (including 'fun', 'empowerment' etc.) contradict or moderate the critical view of call-centres as merely modernized 'satanic mills' (see also Korczynski, 2001).

The Dysfunctions of Conventional Controls

Callaghan and Thompson (2002) rightly recommend caution when studying value-based or normative controls in call-centres. They note the importance of recruitment and training in regard to exploiting the social competencies of employees when directing and maximizing emotional labour in the customer-service interface. What they call 'social process' perspectives 'are holistic, person-centred and geared towards identifying individuals within a complex network of relationships, focusing on broader social competencies such as openness, flexibility and capacity for change' (2002: 235). Likewise, others have pointed to selection based on physical appearance and accent – aesthetic labour (Nickson *et al*, 2001). The danger is that one conflates this managerial development in call-centres with the loosening of conventional controls *per se* (something pop-management guru's would like us to believe, as we shall observe in the next section). Moreover, this value-based discourse perhaps unfolds in a different way in the call-centre environment than in more highly-skilled occupations that are usually considered the purvey of normative-based management systems (computer programmers, consultants, academics, creative industry workers, etc.).

Heeding this caution and based upon the empirical study that we shall soon introduce, we argue that call-centre methods of 'identity regulation' are indeed geared towards the productive demands of emotional labour or 'social competencies' of this type of work. Perhaps more importantly, we also argue that they are designed to detract from the counter-productive dysfunctions that flow from conventional call-centre controls. We contend that this gives the value-based management system a particularly unique flavor that has hitherto been largely neglected in the literature. Rather than adhere to a uniform and collective 'culture', the 'just be

yourself' discourse prizes difference, diversity, non-work associates and authentic expressions of self (and even dissent).

The dysfunctions of conventional controls are generally well known (see Table One). Technological regimentation such as those used in call-centres - the metaphorical 'an assembly line in the head' (Taylor and Bain, 1999) - often has crippling alienating effects (Braverman, 1974). It is not surprising that this control was met with various forms of resistance in more or less subversive games and sabotage (Roy, 1959). Bureaucratic control is associated with the formalization of work through an administrative apparatus such as job descriptions, performance evaluation and sanctions and rewards (Adler and Borys, 1996). Much research has outlined the unintended outcomes of bureaucratic control (Blau, 1965), including its numbing psychological effects – what Weber called disenchantment. Repetitive and standardized rule following can result in a crippling sense of dullness, amplified by the administrative aim to depersonalize the bureaucratic role. Moreover, because bureaucracy is founded upon an authoritarian 'rule of law' demanding conformity, the resistance it can evoke is likely to take the form of various anti-authoritarian gestures (Jermier *et al*., 1991).

Many management commentators have also noted the dysfunctions of cultural or clan controls, which might also explain the specific mutation of the unusual type of 'identity regulation' noted in our empirical study. The popularity of cultural control emerged concomitantly with the widespread (re)turn to teams as a foundation for achieving value-based regulation or 'concertive' control (Barker, 1993). Cultural control aims to go well beyond mere compliance or cooperation to 'internal commitment' (Kunda, 1992: 11). While culture management rhetoric also continued the human relations emphasis on job-based autonomy, in terms of values, the coercive unitary message was clear: 'you either buy into their (organizational) norms or you get out' (Peters and Waterman, 1982: 77). One of the more striking dysfunctions of normative control is the sense of inauthenticity that many experience when they feel forced to identify with the firm and express specified feelings and beliefs (Fleming and

Spicer, 2003; Vallas, 2003). The resulting cynicism allows employees to maintain some inner sense of self that is considered more genuine or authentic than the 'designer selves' proffered by the firm. While mental distancing can be seen as having some positive organizational consequences, such as containing burnout, it limits the level of commitment. This tension is underscored by the advent of a new, more individualistic and rationalistic organizational paradigm associated with downsizing and outsourcing ('market rationalism') which further undermined the credibility of value conformity and organizational loyalty (Kunda and Ailon-Souday, 2005). The counter-productive nature of imposed value conformity has also emerged from managerial concerns that organizational groupthink undermines innovation, initiative and creativity (Foster and Kaplan, 2001).

======================
Insert Table 1 about here
======================

Just be Yourself … Or Else!

Our study was initially inspired by the concept of cultural control and its attempt to wed the interests of workers to those of the corporation through shared values and conformity of beliefs. Our empirical study, however, revealed a scripted managerial discourse that confounded our theoretical precepts. Rather than simple collective solidarity, we also observed a celebration of individualism and difference. Opposed to the clan-like preclusion of non-work influences as described by Kunda (1992) and Barker (1993), diverse extra-employment identities were actively encouraged (also see Ross, 2002). Even dissent and slacker 'anti-capitalist' sentiments appeared to be welcome. The 'just be yourself' discourse is a tailored variant of normative control and identity regulation, one we subsequently found to feature regularly in contemporary popular-management discourse. For example, as Bains (2007) explains in the opening quote to this article, allowing employees to 'just be themselves' assumes that superior performance can be harnessed

as employees are freed from the homogenizing influence of organizational control. Following Mirvis (1994), it is the complete and idiosyncratic person that is desired by the organization, with extra-employment themes like lifestyle, sexuality, consumption, leisure and so forth especially salient. Here then, conventional forms of control are thought to undermine 'authentic difference' because they are founded on regimentation (technical control), standardization (bureaucratic control) and normalization (cultural controls). According to its advocates however, the new paradigm replaces these archaic management regimes – 'now control is passé and a badge of incompetence. Now, you are free' (Semler, 1993: xiii). Likewise, Bains claims that organizations have historically 'squeezed' their employees 'both psychologically and materially in a way they cannot continue to do' any more (2007: 35).

Tom Peters is also a particularly strong advocate of this view. Following long humanist traditions, Peters (2003) argues that workers are *naturally* inclined to be innovative, curious, risk-taking, imaginative and exciting. But Peters is not simply calling for renewed emphasis on self-actualization through job discretion, but for a challenge to out-dated management controls that desire conformity. In direct contrast to the thrust of his earlier views (Peters and Waterman, 1982), a laissez-faire approach to norms is the new imperative[1]. The market metaphor is now deemed salient here. As opposed to the rhetoric of unitary values and extreme organizational identification, we instead find individualism, entrepreneurial risk-taking and self-reliance as key signifiers (also Kunda and Ailon-Souday, 2005). In the same vein as Fierman (1995), Peters (1994) encourages a 'joyous anarchy' in which zanies, nutters, mavericks and freaks are hired and celebrated. Employee creativity derives not simply from job autonomy then, but from employees' freedom to be themselves and express their most private 'off the wall' desires. We highlight three elements of the 'be yourself' management approach in recent management discourse and practice.

---

[1] In fact, as Ray (1986) points out, Peters and Waterman (1982) also recognised the individual within strong corporate cultures – 'everyone can be a winner'. However, this was otherwise underplayed, especially when translated into the practice of corporate culture management.

Playful Expressions of Self

A significant way in which employees can apparently 'be themselves' is by expressing their playful and fun nature. This also resonates with the findings of Kinnie et al. (2000) in their call-centre research. Popular writers like Deal and Key (1998) argue that sober productiveness – the cornerstone of bureaucratic and related technological controls – can undermine productivity and competitiveness given the boredom it engenders. Playful celebrations at work 'provide social support for *being yourself* and believing that you matter' (1998: 16, emphasis added). If employees are able simply to express themselves freely or, as Deal and Kennedy suggest, if the 'Fun Quotient' is high, everyone will benefit (1999: 234). The management of play and fun can form part of conventional culture management regimes, but the emphasis here is more to lead workers to love being *in the* company rather than love *the* company itself. Indeed, such instrumentality is implied in managerial efforts to become an 'employer of choice' or 'best place to work', especially in tight labour markets (Frenkel et al, 1999). Likewise, this type of fun is also indicative of certain individualistic personality traits (mavericks, zanies, crazies, etc.) celebrated in the new, more individualized and marketised vision of employment.

While many of these guru prescriptions can be treated sceptically in terms of their translation into organizational practice, there is considerable evidence that the management of fun and play with an emphasis on individual expression has now become quite widespread as Kane (2004) indicates in relation to the rise of the corporate 'play ethic' (also see Karl *et al.*, 2005). Likewise, in popular surveys of 'best places to work' such as those in *Fortune* magazine and the *Sunday Times*, fun is a prominent theme. Google for example, explicitly draws on the image and social activities of a college campus (*New York Times*, 2006). Even in highly structured work like call-centres, employees are often encouraged to engage in more or less organized fun (Kinnie *et al.*, 2000; *Employee Relations*, 2009).

Difference and Diversity

According to Peters (1994), the standardized 'organization man' (Whyte, 1956) is indicative of controls that demanded conformity, homogeneity and selves devoid of difference or diversity. In keeping with the view that the market, rather than the clan, is becoming the guiding metaphor of workplace relations, Peters claims that 'chaos is with us…but the way to deal with it is pursue variation, not to manage (stifle) it' (1994: 51). If employees are to be motivated, innovative and creative, they must be free to be themselves with respect to diverse lifestyles and identities (also see Ross, 2004). The celebration of diversity also has a moral dimension since it absorbs liberalist motifs *apropos* minority groups such as gays, ethnics and others often disenfranchised in western corporate settings (Florida, 2004). Difference along these dimensions should be encouraged and used by the firm for productive ends (Janssens and Zanoni, 2005; Raeburn, 2004).

Opposed to the 'rule of law' demanded by bureaucracy, the freedom to be yourself extends to difference of opinion, including voicing dissent. Accordingly, if management are to retain a role, they ought to hire and nurture employees who are troublemakers, insolent, uncomfortable with the norm and willing to thumb their noses at authority (Sutton, 2001). For example, in his discussion of the 'industrialization of bohemia' in Silicon Alley dot.com companies, Ross (2004) observed firms actively recruiting employees with counter-cultural and anti-capitalist values (also see Liu, 2004). This is why the ethos of the unruly youngster is often drawn upon - 'go for youth' (Peters, 1994: 204) – even if this does conflict with liberal concerns over age discrimination.

Authentic Selves

As Bains (2007) and Sutton (2001) indicate, many of the exhortations to 'just be yourself' through play and difference articulated above are captured by the term authenticity or 'truth of oneself' (Guignon, 2004). Rather than hide, suppress or deny those unique elements of

self that make up the individual person at work, they ought to be communicated. As noted earlier, organizational control, especially culture management, is clearly problematic in this regard given the feelings of inauthenticity it can engender (Kunda, 1992).

In addition to play and difference, authenticity is developed more generally through blurring the symbolic distinction that traditionally separates home and paid work or, at least, the formal organization. The idea that employees must adopt an *organizational* persona at work (Kunda, 1992; Hochschild, 1983) is reversed. Most modestly, this is reflected in the managerial practice of encouraging employees to bring informality, local accents and 'personalised' rather than fully scripted approaches to the service encounter (Sturdy, 2000; Nickson *et al*, 2001). But the new discourse is more ambitious. People can, and should, express their authentic selves at work rather than repress the intrinsic desire to be playful and curious (Peters, 2003; also Deal and Key, 1998). For Bains for example, the question is 'whether employees are able to bring their full selves into work …characteristics in their private lives that they could bring into play at work' (2007: 219). Indeed, the idea is that this may even make organizations more existentially meaningful than the traditional home, as Reeves suggests in *Happy Mondays* (2004).

The Case of Sunray Customer Service

A principal aim of this article is to build on research exploring the use of normative control in the call-centre context. We suggest that it can take on a particular form ('just be yourself') that represents a significant move beyond the archetypical 'clan-like' controls typically associated with culture management. Moreover, we propose that this variant can in part at least be linked to the abiding presence of conventional controls and their dysfunctions. An analysis of this variant will hopefully tell us more about the specific form that value-based managerial discourses assume in call-centres and the dynamism between them and pre-existing controls. In order to do this, we now present an in-depth qualitative study. This was conducted over an 8-month period at *Sunray* (a pseudonym), a United States owned call-centre with around 1000 employees based in

Australia. Sunray was founded in the early 1990s by James Carr (another pseudonym). The company deals with outsourced communication functions and thus puts much emphasis on the customer service skills of employees. The work is also demanding and routine, with agents receiving calls in 8-hour shifts, with two 15-minute rest periods and a half-hour meal break. Workers are employed on temporary contracts, with hourly-pay rates similar to those in other local call-centres. However, team-based and individual performance bonuses for above average work (measured monthly in both quantitative and qualitative terms) were considered above the industry standard. The work system was coordinated by Automatic Call Distribution technology (see Callaghan and Thompson, 2001). As noted earlier, the initial research aim was to understand employee experiences of cultural controls, but the data required an alternative conceptual paradigm to explain the emphasis on authenticity and diversity.

In accordance with other studies that seek to examine employees' experience of management regimes (e.g., Casey, 1995; Barker, 1993), qualitative data collection methods were chosen. Here, the aim was to achieve a situational understanding of the meaning systems in play (Van Maanen, 1998), especially concerning the experience of being controlled. Access was negotiated and gained through a senior manager who had connections with the local business school. Methods included one-on-one and focus group interviews which ranged from 1 hour to 1 ½ hours, observation and document analysis. Because of the in-depth nature of the interviews, a limited sample of three Human Resource managers and 30 telephone agents and mangers (18 females and 15 males) was randomly selected and interviewed at various intervals over the eight months. The average age of the agents interviewed was 23 while the Human Resource managers were in their mid to late 30s. Participants were selected from 40 work teams - according to their client sector such as airlines, insurance, banking – in order to gain some insight into the consistency of management practices.

Document analysis focused on text pertaining to the culture programme found in a large induction handbook, recruitment advertisements, extensive newspaper and magazine reports and

booklets from training sessions. Observation was used at the beginning of the project to understand the job-tasks and environment before the interviews began. Following Spradley (1979), the interview schedule consisted of background, framing and focus questions with a high degree of flexibility retained to allow unpredictable dialogue flow. 20 participants were interviewed on-site and 6 were interviewed in cafes around the organization to gain more insight about the overall effect of call-centre life on employees. However, greater depth of access was also achieved when one interviewee introduced his 'cohort' of 3 other informants, which then became an important supplement to the more formal and individual interviews. This resulted in 4 informants being interviewed individually outside work, in cafes (1-1 ½ hours), and in their homes. This helped provide a different context for their reflections. Furthermore, the home-based interviews were conducted as focus groups, of which 5 sessions took place, each lasting an average of 2 hours.

Finally, all interviews were recorded and transcribed after the interviews. Observations were made by hand and a formal record made after the interviews. The coded observational data were integrated in the data set as background information (especially regarding control) and to provide context to the interview data collected. Transcripts and field notes were manually coded and categorized surfacing the themes discussed shortly. This followed a traditional method of analyzing ethnographic data in relation to emergent and *apriori* phenomena which were then explored sequentially to achieve an iterative and analytically robust interpretation (Stablein, 2006). Finally we developed a coding tree around the themes of control, freedom, cynicism, identification and managerial objectives. This helped organize the presentation of the data.

Being Yourself in Sunray

Sunray can be considered a quintessential 'liberal organization' (Courpasson, 2006) in the way it challenges a number of the traditional notions of what it means to be a worker. Largely in keeping with the prescriptions and regimes discussed above, emphasis is placed on play and

fun, diversity and difference and authenticity – on being yourself. Managers believe this will enhance the quality of the customer service by creating highly motivated and fulfilled workers. The 'just be yourself' management philosophy is communicated to employees in the slogan 'Remember the 3Fs: Focus, Fun, Fulfillment' which is disseminated in team training exercises, away days, recruitment documentation and appraisal meetings. Employees are invited to celebrate themselves and display a commitment to who they are rather than the company itself. According to CEO, James Carr, Semler's book, *Maverick!* inspired this management style: 'the 3Fs philosophy delivers service excellence by simply allowing people to be themselves and communicate their uniqueness – we like different people here from all walks of life' (CEO introductory document for new recruits).

The performance outcomes and success of managerial innovations such as this emphasis on employees being themselves are difficult to specify precisely (Staw and Epstein, 2000). Nevertheless, according to company data, Sunray enjoys a relatively low turnover rate (19% compared to the 29.5% industry standard) and higher levels of job satisfaction and 'performance' in the call-centre industry, a fact attributed by management to the freedom employees enjoy (official statistics were unavailable). Furthermore, Sunray consistently won 'best employer awards'. In support of such claims, 17 of the employees interviewed held a view of the organization as one in which employees were highly motivated by the 3Fs campaign. Although there were also some strong negative views, which we shall discuss shortly, these findings also seem to fit with the claims of the various advocates of this approach to management more generally such as Bains (2007). Indeed, although certainly not generalisable, around half the sample were positive about the 'just be yourself' policy (which can be deemed a managerial success in an industry with endemic job-dissatisfaction). We now explore the approach in more detail, largely in terms of the three elements we identified earlier as being charactersitic of such regimes – fun, diversity and authenticity.

Play, Fun and Youth

> At Sunray we try to make work fun – in fact we try to make it fun instead of work (Training manual).

The realization that call-centres are typically extremely mechanized and routinized environments is not lost on management. Sunray aims to do things differently, seeing fun and freedom as synonymous. Regarding the widely held belief that call-centre workers can be likened to being battery hens, the training manual claimed that the opposite was true at Sunray:

> Forget lone rangers – at Sunray we have free-rangers! It's hard to have fun when you're confined to a workstation like a battery hen, so we encourage you to enjoy the freedom and latitude you need in order to fulfill your obligations to Sunray (Training manual).

Making call-centre work fun begins with a recruitment strategy that uses friendship networks to employ overtly youthful employees who have had little employment experience (also Castilla, 2005). Aside from cost considerations, employing young people is typically associated with an assumed ease in inculcating corporate culture. However, and following Peters' call mentioned earlier to 'go for youth', the rationale given reversed this logic in that 'young people find (the)… culture very, very attractive because they can be themselves and know how to have fun' (Human Resource Manager). In other words, young people were seen as more likely to be expressive and playful, including with identities, rather than impressionable or conformist. For example, on one occasion, employees were asked to bring to work an item that 'best explains who you are' - one agent responded by bringing a surfboard into the office.

Exhortations to behave in this manner included a range of activities that were more or less explicitly linked to those associated with the schoolroom. For example, colourful, cardboard cut-outs of *Sesame Street* characters and jungle scenes were provided to decorate the workspace. Likewise, workers were asked to take home a rainbow colored pamphlet with a fill-in-the-blanks word puzzle. Similarly, annual 'away days' were seen as somewhere between a 'kind of school musical' and a party. In relation to the school themes, teams had regular dress-up days where

employees came dressed as a superhero or in keeping with a particular idea such as 'The tropics' (floral shirts and sun hats). Many employees seemed to enjoy these exercises. As one agent said, this management style 'treats me more as whole person rather than simply a call-centre robot like they do at Tag [a competitor]'. Likewise, another enthused:

> … it's like this: when you leave work you don't feel drained: 'oh, I've just had another day at work' – the fun allows you to focus not only on your work but yourself as well – and at the end of the day you come out feeling fantastic and you like coming to work – you love coming here (Insurance Agent)

Diversity and Difference

According to the Sunray CEO and Human Resource Managers, bureaucratic formalization and the 'rule of law' are eschewed in favour of 'a melting pot of different people and lifestyles'. When conveying this message, the training manual questions – 'who wants to be another cog in the machine'? Similarly, another Human Resource Manager avers:

> Everyone is different and we make sure that people can express themselves and will be accepted for who they are………. It all comes down to our environment – the culture, the freedom to enjoy being themselves and to enjoy being at work.

Likewise, the CEO suggests that workers should not hide their non-work (or even anti-work) identities, but celebrate them in the name of freedom. The promotion of lifestyle, ethnic and, in particular, sexual orientation diversity is especially important. Indeed, Sunray had a strong gay focus (see also Clair *et al*, 2005). For example, one airline agent, said that 'they (gays) like it because they can be themselves' and that 'Sunray definitely promote it [open homosexuality] … well, not promote it but, say, you are what you are and you are allowed to be that way'.

Another way in which Sunray claims to undermine the classic bureaucratic milieu is by downplaying or minimizing a hierarchical chain of command and authoritarian use of power by reference to a flat and even inverted hierarchy. For example, one Human Resource Manager argued, 'that team members don't have to ask to make changes. We tell them, just do it!' The 3Fs

discourse particularly trades on youthful anti-authoritarian chic, underground cool and designer subversion (a number of agents wore T-shirts with anti-corporate slogans). A team development exercise conveyed this idea with the help of Peters' idea of 'WOW' and its aversion to bureaucratic formalization and authority relations: 'Cubicle slaves… The white collar revolution is on! Subvert the hierarchy! Make every project WOW! Be distinct or extinct!'

Authenticity

Rather than demanding unitary values and collective expressions of commitment to the firm as with classic culture management, Sunray claims to embrace 'true selves'. A team leader said in this regard, 'we don't have to hide anything here'. It is the feelings, beliefs and characteristics behind the 'face work' that is encouraged. This includes the playful and diverse selves mentioned above, but also covers a whole host of characteristics that are perhaps less welcome in conventional models of organizational management. This is achieved by symbolically blurring the divide between work and private lives.

Rather than enjoy who one really is when the workday is over, management encourages its expression on company time. For example, Sunray takes pride in developing an environment that is akin to a party or rave. In particular, employees were openly encouraged to drink alcohol and perpetuate a party-like atmosphere in the organization. Job advertisements were headed with the phrase 'do you know how to party?' and management often said that Sunray life is similar to a 'party' because of the energy and 'good times' that distinguished the firm from other call centres. One training session, held in a nearby park, was analogous to an actual party with beer drinking and the open expression of sexuality and flirting. Again, most employees interviewed appeared to experience such activities in a positive manner.

The erstwhile private realm of sexuality and flirting was not confined to parties nor simply a reflection of workplace life or, even, the demographics of the employees. Rather, according to some informants and confirmed by observations, it was openly accepted at Sunray.

As one agent said, 'we like to think of our selves as fun, sexy and dedicated.' While some found this element of the culture obtrusive, its presence in the call-centre environment was understood:

> There are some very sleazy guys at Sunray and you walk past them and they look you up and down and that is very uncomfortable … but it's a boring job and most who work here want to do something else… sex is less boring (Bank Agent)

Part of the openly sexual and flirtatious culture at Sunray was its expression through clothing, encouraged through what some might see as a liberal dress code. A bank agent referred to this, saying, 'you can wear what you want – people are allowed to wear low-cut tops and short skirts.' This practice cut across others such as the organized parties and events and allowed for the expression of employees' identities as consumers. Being centred on the latest fashion labels and promoted with the intention of creating a party-like atmosphere, the ritual of consumption and shopping is a strong theme of the culture of fun and self expression. According to a Human Resource Manager, 'the idea is to get away from the boring office look and make things fun and happy like we are going out for the night'. This extended to 'fun' physical appearances among workers such as bright orange dyed hair, visible tattoos and facial piercing; the comparison to 'parties', 'raves' and 'clubbing' is justified in this sense. Many of the employees interviewed relished this part of the 3Fs philosophy because they felt 'free to be who we are', as an airline agent put it.

Control, Freedom and Call-Centre Life

The study resonates strongly with the observations of Kinnie et al. (2000) and Callaghan and Thompson (2001) that identity and normative regulation form an important part of call-centre management given the requirement for 'happy' and 'authentic' customer service in an inherently alienating environment. The Sunray case, combined with numerous prescriptive and descriptive accounts of similar regimes elsewhere, indicates, however, that normative control can take on a particular form. Rather than slavishly conform to uniform values *a la* Kunda's (1992) or

Willmott's (1993) investigations, employees are encouraged to 'just be themselves' and express those aspects of self that might have once been prohibited at work (sex, play and lifestyle, etc.). The emphasis on freedom and emancipation is particularly striking given the work context. The integration of the 'whole person' and the social skills replete in non-work situations obviously aids the 'social competencies' and emotional/aesthetic labour pre-requisites of proficient interactive service work. Following Callaghan and Thompson (2001), the 'just be yourself' philosophy might be considered a way in which the firm mines, captures and screens the social and emotional skills of the employee. The functionality of this 'mining' in relation to priming workers for emotional labour was indicated by a Sunray trainer who stated: 'the key to persuasiveness (with customers) is personalization: the more personalized the conversations the greater potential for success and customer satisfaction'. We observed this personalization being translated into practice in varying degrees on the phones (deviating from the script, telling jokes, etc.) (Authors, 2003). Furthermore, managerial rhetoric at Sunray (echoing 'liberation management' enthusiasts) implies that employees not only acquire a new freedom to be themselves on the phone and in the workplace, but other forms of control are seen as counterproductive and rendered obsolete or 'passé'. Indeed, the frequent contrasts made to the typical 'battery hen' portrayal of call-centre workers in the liberation rhetoric is telling in this regard. And it is this nexus between the claims of freedom and pre-existing controls that might shed light on the corporate functionality of the 'just be yourself' discourse as well as the conflicts that arise from it.

The Reality of Hybridized Control at Sunray

Clearly, the notion of a completely control-free organization can be readily dismissed as hyperbole. Indeed, at a more philosophical and general level, *freedom from* constraint can be seen as a dead end compared with a more positive view of '*freedom to*' (Berlin, 1958). However, in the context of working at Sunray and corroborating empirical arguments that resistance in call-

centres is far from eliminated (see Callaghan and Thompson, 2002; Bain and Taylor, 2000), such hyperbole is most clearly revealed by employees themselves, some of whom cynically saw through the 'just be yourself' declarations of liberation. Regardless of particular employee responses and in keeping with the view that organizations comprise multiple and hybrid forms of control (also see Karreman and Alvesson, 2004), we propose that each of the archetypical controls mentioned earlier – technological, bureaucratic and cultural – combined with personal control from managers and supervisors was clearly evident at Sunray. The most conspicuous is technological control such as through call scripting through screen prompts; performance measurement systems; and the design of office space and equipment to survey employee interaction (also Taylor et al., 2002). Likewise, despite the claim that the organization was non-hierarchical and non-authoritarian, various instruments of bureaucratic co-ordination including job descriptions and work rosters were enacted through a well-defined and traditional hierarchical structure. The 'rule of law' was clearly present as an airline agent explains:

> I am empowered only in their terms, not mine…. Am I empowered to choose when to have my lunch break? No. Am I empowered to talk and have fun with my friends? [*Impersonates an angry supervisor*] 'SSHHHH!' - No'.

Such enforcement of formal authority made some sceptical about how genuine the celebration of freedom, diversity and counter-bureaucratic empowerment was, as the following account suggests:

> A woman in my team was told that she had to go to the away day but she said she had family commitments, 'I'm a mother.' But she was told 'no, we are all going. You should go.' She said, 'No I can't.' And again she was told, 'It's expected that you go or you must pay the $65 fee for the end of year party.' Now, I would think empowerment would suggest the decision is yours to make, but they don't practice the rhetoric (Bank agent).

Finally, Sunray also adhered to a rather conventional form of cultural control in which an attempt was made to align the values, beliefs and emotions with those of the firm. Group team

exercises, the mandatory away day and the fetishization of the CEO as a cultural icon indicate a strong desire to shape the norms of employees. The numerous games and songs were largely prescribed. An airline agent complained about having to align her feelings with the culture of the company:

> … you have to be able to see the lighter side of things. You have to be able to look at your work and turn it around in a positive way. You have to be the right type of person to work here and make sure you show it…you have to be bouncy and willing to try anything…

The paradox underlying this conformist cultural pressure and the apparent freedom to 'just be themselves' was even a point of confusion for managers:

> Every 3Fs activity we undertake is implemented in a controlled way and adherence is mandatory – although individualism and creativity are encouraged… we have one Sunray attitude … um … but people can still be themselves (Human Resource Manager).

The subtext of compulsory identification with a shared set of values indicative of culture management is similarly surfaced when another Human Resource Manager dismissed the idea that employees might cynically resist these initiatives: 'It's impossible – since I would not have selected people who thought like that in the first place' (also see Callaghan and Thompson, 2001 in relation to 'recruiting attitude'). The instruments of cultural control are perhaps most evident in the limits imposed on employees' normative practices. While individual authenticity was celebrated, *only certain expressions of it were permitted* – those that supported the collective vision communicated in the '3 Fs' slogan. An agent for an insurance firm, said:

> … it seems to me that individualism is forced here – to be yourself as the company wants you to be is not to be yourself at all really'.

Indeed, there was no room for the non-fun, non-'different' person in the organized events. Some employees even tested this limit though irony. Following the practice of bringing in

homemade food for colleagues, one employee made cannabis cookies (which is decriminalized in the State where Sunray was located) and was, unsurprisingly perhaps, dismissed for his efforts. When employees were thought to be under-performing too, culturally based normative controls were summoned in the guise of counseling. Contrary to Peters' exhortations about promoting dissent then, Sunray unsurprisingly favoured only a certain type of authentic identity.

The Antinomies of Control and Freedom

If strict control is in fact an important reality of Sunray life, then how does it interact with the 'just be yourself' management approach that trades in the rhetoric of freedom and authenticity beyond the stultifying effects of coercive uniformity? We feel uncomfortable with Frenkel *et al.*'s (1999) and D'Cruz's (2007) overly optimistic conclusions that this seemly liberating pursuit of 'fun' and 'creativity' in the call-centre ought to moderate the 'battery hen' view. Such opportunities of self-expression are inextricably linked to enhancement of control and domination. We concur with Taylor and Bain that, 'even in the most quality driven call-centres it is difficult to escape the conclusion that the labour process is inherently demanding, repetitive and … stressful' (1999: 110). Our exploratory study suggests that the 'just be yourself' approach to identity regulation is more about *detracting* from the negative experience of extant controls rather than superseding or diminishing them. Its functionality (with varying degrees of success as the mixed reactions indicate) lies not only in imbuing 'individualized sociality' into the labour process, but also in obscuring the harsh effects of traditional controls. By 'detract' we mean to take away attention, which may involve various forms of compensation and mystification. When questioned about the conditions under which most telephone agents work in the industry, the Sunray CEO said, 'call centres have become the sweatshops of the modern era. The industry is plagued with high turnover, with under-trained, under-motivated and unenthusiastic staff, most of whom are casuals with no long-term commitment to their jobs' (business press report). The explicit management rationale for the '3Fs' was to compensate for the hard and mundane work

required of agents and secured by technical, bureaucratic and cultural controls. A Human Resource Manager said, 'we need to make up for the kind of work that is done here'. She continued:

> Without the culture, the place would be drab, and in most workplaces people can't wait to leave. But at Sunray they love to work and really get into it. You know, just the other day I heard someone say 'I can't believe they pay me to have fun!' and that is exactly what happens.

This rationale is also revealed through what might be called the 'emotional resistance' of critical employees to whom control was more visible and less legitimate. Echoing a 'work to rule' mentality, some asked if they could *really* follow the philosophy, since they thought taking the 3Fs seriously would undermine managerial authority. Similarly, they undermined the sentiment and celebration of diversity by emphasizing solidarity, uniformity and collective subordination from the standardized tasks and labour market position that defined their organizational realities:

> Sunray likes people who have different colored hair and who are into [*in a sarcastic tone*] 'being themselves'. Now I'm not too sure which one we fit into, but basically we are all plebs. Just plebs (Insurance agent).

This agent's colleague – an airline agent - also used the term 'pleb' as a more apt interpretation of those engaged in call-centre work given the mundane constraints of technological, bureaucratic and cultural controls. Her discourse undermines the rhetoric that employees and management are equals:

> They [management] pretend we are equal to them. But when I see myself and my team, I know I'm just a pleb. I only wish they [management] would simply tell me the truth and not pretend it to be otherwise!

For another agent, a previous employment experience meant that the 3Fs did not appear to detract from conventional controls, but simply prompt the familiar response of behavioural compliance:

I think all of that ('corporate thing') is a load of bollocks because I have worked a load of different places and at the end of the day it's all the same regardless of the 'culture.' So during my interview I just told them what they wanted to hear.

Discussion

Our findings suggest that normative control can take on a particular form in the call-centre environment, stemming in part from the continuing influence of traditional and visible controls strategies. Based upon direct observation of the work, accounts of the intentions of management and employees' various reactions, we suggest that the 'joyous anarchy' (Peters, 1994) claimed for this management approach can detract from existing controls – controls that are particular forceful in call-centres. We now discuss two aspects of this which are important for understanding the interaction between control and the 'just be yourself' discourse that hopefully extends out understanding of normative approaches in call-centre workplaces in particular.

Detraction and the dysfunctions of control

The data suggest that, the 'just be yourself' management discourse sought to *detract* attention from the potential dysfunctions associated with technological, bureaucratic and cultural controls. The mundane rhythms of technological control lead to boredom and alienation (or turnover) which is a key reason why Sunray attempted to impute a sense of fun and play in the roles. Likewise, the standardized and hierarchical formalities of bureaucratic control can be associated with feelings of disenchantment and sometimes anti-authoritarian sentiments. Sunray therefore focused on the importance of diversity, informality and dissent as defining features of the employment experience. Similarly, culture management can result in employees having feelings of being fake, lacking individuality and a cynical division between 'who they really are' and the prescribed corporate self. Sunray therefore galvanized its approach via an emphasis on individual differences, authenticity and non-work selves in particular (see Table Two).

As we have seen, control forms do not exist independently or strictly according to analytical categories. Indeed, overall, the demotivating dysfunctions of control that the 'just be yourself' discourse detracts from, can be seen to derive from the more general ills of collective conformity evident in each of the traditional controls. Technology regiments, bureaucracy standardizes and culture normalizes. This could help explain the strong emphasis on individualism and idiosyncratic expressions of self in this discourse or what Tannenbaum (1967), quoted earlier, argued are the central targets of organizational control. The valorization of individual freedom and choice regarding how we define and express ourselves also resonates strongly with the way in which personal authenticity has been defined in liberal ideological thought (Taylor, 1992). Perhaps this is why the 'liberal organization' (Courpasson, 2006) attempts to harness authentic expressions of self by drawing the private realm and its signifiers into the workplace, and thus making use of those aspects of employee selves that were previously barred or ignored by management or simply retained or protected by employees as a point of difference (also Anteby, 2008).

Authenticity and solidarity

The 'just be yourself' approach emphasises a particular and contained kind of freedom in the call-centre, one pertaining to identity and expression of self rather than, say, job discretion or participation in decision making. It did not free workers *from* the call-centre controls, but introduced freedoms *around* control. As practiced at Sunray, employees enjoyed liberties mostly *around* the work task – displays of lifestyle choices, sexuality, private desires and consumption patterns – rather than so much in the task itself. Visual aspects of identity in particular enjoyed greater tolerance although this is likely to be a condition of the lack of face-to-face customer

contact in the work. Such freedom was especially noticeable in comparison with technological control since monitoring and Automatic Call Distribution were dominant modes of constraint in work tasks. Autonomy *around* the rules of bureaucracy – how one conducts himself or herself within a formally defined shift or mandatory social event – was also evident in the case. A similar process is inevitable with cultural control. Team building exercises, for example, are imbued with an array of quirky idiosyncrasies such as the employee bringing in a surfboard to show peers 'who he really is'. There are however unsurmountable tensions here given the contradiction between the requirement for collective identification and the celebration of individual difference and authenticity.

More generally, the difference between freedom *from* control and freedom *around* control, itself gave rise to dysfunctions. For example, the newly legislated freedom to just be themselves did not always sit well with the continued coercive conformity to extant controls. It is easy to see why expectations were raised in this regard when one considers the sensational claims about 'free-rangers' and the 'upside down organizational structure'. Indeed, for some employees, this identity-orientated detraction from control was experienced more as mystification, inspiring its own variants of resistance. They were cynical about the aims and legitimacy of the 'be yourself' discourse since it did not afford practical freedoms *apropos* the concrete task of work and its organization. Echoing contradictions between service and cost control identified by Korczynski (2001) in a similar context, charges of hypocrisy were common in relation to the culture programme: 'we are supposed to be individuals, but only on their terms'.

This cynicism harbours an unintended construction of authenticity that challenges the proto-liberalist assumptions utilized by the firm and the 'just be yourself' discourse. Authenticity in the rhetoric and practice of 'just be yourself' management reflects the axioms of individual identity and the market. Likewise, much of the recent practitioner orientated literature simply equates authenticity with expressions of *individual difference*. Indeed, the main 'reason why people have learned to be inauthentic in relating to others is the pressure to conform' (Bains, 2007: 249). The

cynicism noted in the call-centre we studied challenged this definition of authenticity as a road to freedom. The observations that 'we are all just plebs' gives voice to shared experience and position and even solidarity (also see Vallas, 2003). The focus was on the standardized nature of the work task and regime, undermining continual references to diverse identities and selves surrounding tasks.

Conclusion

The 'just be yourself' management method perhaps represents the arrival of a kind of liberalism in the workplace with its emphasis on freedom of self-expression, diversity and difference. While other work contexts may also have seen this kind of managerial approach, especially in the creative industries (see Ross, 2004; Liu, 2004), the celebration of freedom and emancipation in one of the most tightly controlled workplaces, the call-centre, might seem puzzling. However, the call-centre scholarship has documented the 'subtle paradox' (Kinnie et al., 2000) of overt controls and high commitment management practices given the necessity for positive emotional labour and 'social competencies', including authenticity, sincerity and rapport (Callaghan and Thompson, 2002). Our paper has added to this research by studying more closely the exact nature of this normative control and its development, demonstrating how it can assume a particularly intriguing 'just be yourself' form. We have argued that this discourse is related, but also distinct from conventional 'normative controls' given its emphasis on individualism, unique selves, diversity, difference and non-work attributes (e.g., sexuality, lifestyle, etc.). On the basis of our case study, we have suggested that the 'just be yourself' variant represents both an unsurprising form of capture (in which employee sociality is exploited to enhance the delivery of interactive customer service) and a detraction from the persistent dysfunctions of extant call-centre controls that inherently homogenize workers. This is why so much attention is placed upon the expression of individual identity. However, this freedom is not only delimited in itself, but takes a particular form. It is not freedom *from* control, as numerous management commentators

and advocates claim, but freedom *around* control. Certainly not all call-centres are practising this form of employee management, but we do hope our paper extends the conversation regarding the significance and dynamics of value-based management systems that aim to 'humanize' or 'liberate' the call-centre and related work contexts.

Existing research on the co-existence of 'soft' normative and 'hard' coercive controls tends to underline the positive outcomes of the former for employees, citing a more 'friendly environment' (Kinnie et al., 2000), opportunities for creativity (Frenkel et al. 1998) and increased well-being and satisfaction (D'Cruz, 2007). Our study too indicated a number of positive reactions among workers, as a distraction from the work task (which might also support our 'detraction' argument). However, as Callaghan and Thompson observe, many 'workers [in call-centres] are painfully aware of the power of technology and struggle under its pressure' (2001: 21). The introduction of the 'just be yourself' method of identity regulation therefore, with its jargon of freedom, authenticity and liberation, might just as well generate sentiments of cynical resentment as that of gratefulness. Indeed, emphasizing the point that resistance is seldom eradicated even in the most controlled environments, the cynical narrative we noted among some employees suggests that the freedom to 'be yourself' was more about detracting from the 'dull compulsion' of quantitative controls. Indeed, resistant workers found more critical purchase by highlighting peer equality ('we are all the same, we all have to do this horrible job') rather than identity diversity or difference.

This development and extension of normative control *apropos* identity and sociality also indicates how corporate management can put to work – either through sheer necessity or to garner legitimacy in an increasingly cynical society – the personal attributes of workers, especially those engaged in interactive emotional labour such as in call-centres. While this could be viewed as progressive step towards a free and 'frictionless' workplace, we might also listen to the workers mentioned above who were worried about this extension of managerial rationality. Indeed, the 'just be yourself' approach differs from past human relations practices by seeking to appropriate

(and therefore, partially construct) a range of non-work identities and other unrewarded characteristics for productive ends. This is particularly evident in the recruitment and production of youthfulness, sexuality and enthusiasm noted at Sunray. It also echoes the, albeit largely informal, ways in which employers have long used gendered characteristics as well as indulgency patterns where a managerial 'blind eye' was turned for functional ends on non-work misbehavior such as informal sports (Gouldner, 1955). A formalization of both these processes has been noted recently in the field of diversity legislation (Janssens and Zanoni, 2005) and in a case of 'negotiated leniency' by management in order to appropriate work-based occupational identities as a form of control (Anteby, 2008). The 'just be yourself' approach therefore resonates not only with contemporary liberalist themes such as diversity, market rationalism and enterprise (Kunda and Ailon-Souday, 2005), but with what Sennett (1976) referred to over 30 years ago as the 'ideology of intimacy' whereby more of the self becomes an open economic concern (see also Hancock and Tyler, 2009).

In the context of the contemporary call-centre, the 'just be yourself' method of management certainly afforded certain kinds of largely valued freedoms, perhaps unavailable in the past. The freedom to express gay identity, for example, should not be downplayed. But such expressions of individual selves do not address more collective forms of authenticity nor do they involve the transcendence of traditional forms of organizational control. In illustrating how this management approach was more about detraction than liberation, we follow a long tradition of literature which has challenged the liberal claims of management ideology and the death of control in favour of humanization and an ideology of intimacy (e.g. Mills, 1951). We therefore conclude that the 'humanized' call-centre remains some way off – capitalism trumpets freedom, but simply cannot deliver for obvious reasons.

References

Adler, P. S. and Borys, B. 1996. 'Two types of bureaucracy: Coercive vs enabling', *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 41, 1, 61-89.

Alvesson, M. and Willmott, H. (2002). 'Identity Regulation as Organizational Control: Producing the Appropriate Individual.' *Journal of Management Studies*, 39: 5: 619-643.

Anteby, M. 2008. 'Identity Incentives as an Engaging Form of Control: Revisiting Leniencies in an Aeronautic Plant.' *Organization Science,* 19, 2,202-222.

Authors, 2003

Bains, G. 2007. *Meaning Inc: The Blue Print for Business Success in the 21ˢᵗ Century*. London: Profile Books.

Barker, J. R. 1993. 'Tightening the Iron Cage: Concertive Control in Self-Managing Teams.' *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 38 (4): 408-437.

Barley, S.R. and Kunda, G. 1992. 'Design and Devotion: Surges of Rational and Normative Ideologies of Control in Managerial Discourse.' *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 37: 363-399.

Berlin, I. (1958). *Four Essays on Liberty*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Blau, P. M. 1955. *The Dynamics of Bureaucracy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Braverman, H. 1974. *Labor and monopoly capital*. New York: Monthly Review Press.

Callaghan, G and Thompson, P. 2002. 'We Recruit Attitude: The section and shaping of routine Call Centre Work. *Journal of Management Studies*, 39 (2): 233-254.

Callaghan, G and Thompson, P. 2001. 'Edwards re-visited: Technical control and call centres', *Economic and Industrial Democracy*, 22, 13, 13-36.

Casey, C. 1995. *Work, Self and Society: After Industrialism*. London: Sage.

Castilla, E. J. 2005. 'Social Networks and Employee Performance in a Call Centre.'*American Journal of Sociology* 110: 1243-1283.

Clair, J. A., Beatty, J. E. and MacLean, T. 2005. 'Out of Sight But Not Out of Mind:
Managing Invisible Social Identities in the Workplace'. *Academy of Management Review*, 30, 1, 78-95.

Courpasson, D. 2006. *Soft Constraint: Liberal Organizations and Domination* (Copenhagen Business School Press/Liber, 2006),

Crome, M. 1998. 'Call centres: Battery Farming or Free Range? *Industrial and commercial Training*, 30 (4): 137-41.

Deal, T. and Kennedy, A. 1999. *The New Corporate Cultures*. London: Orion.

Deal, T. and Key, M. 1998. *Celebration at Work: Play, Purpose and Profit at Work*. New York: Berrett-Koehler.

Deery, S. and Kinnie, N. 2002. 'Call centres and beyond: a thematic evaluation.' *Human Resource Management Journal,* 12 (4), 3-13.

D'Cruz, P. 2007. Technical Cal Centres: Beyond 'Electronic Sweatshops' and 'Assembly Lines in the Head'. *Global Business Review*, 8 (1): 53-67.

Edwards, R. 1979. *Contested terrain – the transformation of the workplace in the twentieth century*. Ney York: Basic Books.

Employee Relations 2009. Special issue on fun at work, October.

Fierman, J. 1995. 'Winning Ideas From Maverick Managers'. Fortune, Feb.6: 40-46.

Fleming, P. 2009. *Authenticity and the Cultural Politics of Work*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Fleming, P. and Spicer, A. 2003. 'Working from a Cynical Distance: Implications for Power, Subjectivity and Resistance.' *Organization* 10 (1): 159-181.

Fleming, P. Harley, B and Sewell, G. (2004). 'A Little Knowledge is a Dangerous Thing: Getting Beneath Knowledge Work in Australia'. *Work, Employment & Society*, Vol. 18, No. 4, 725-747.

Florida, R. 2004. *The Rise of the Creative Class*. North Melbourne: Pluto Press.

Foster, R. and Kaplan, S. 2001. *Creative Destruction: Why Companies That Are Built to Last Underperform the Market--And How to Successfully Transform Them*. New York: Currency.

Frenkel, S, Korczynski, M, Shire, K and Tam, M. 1999. *On the front Line*. New York: Cornell University Press.

Gouldner, A.1955. *Wildcat Strike*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Guignon, C. 2004. *On Being Authentic*. London: Routledge.

Hancock, P. and Tyler, M. (Eds) 2009. *The management of everyday life*. Basingstoke: Palgrave/Macmillan.

Hochschild, A. R. 1983. *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling.* London: University of California Press.

Houlihan, M. 2002. 'Tensions and variations in call centre strategies', *Human Resource Management Journal*, 12, 4, 67-85.

Janssens, M and Zanoni, P. 2005. 'Many Diversities for Many Services: Theorizing Diversity (management) in Service Companies', *Human Relations*, 58, 3, 311-340.

Jermier, J. M., Slocum, J. W., Fry, L. W., Gaines, J. 1991. 'Organizational Subcultures in a Soft Bureaucracy: Resistance behind the Myth and Facade of an Official Culture', *Organization Science*, 2, 2, 170-194.

Jermier, J. 1998. 'Introduction: Critical Perspectives on Organizational Control.' *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 43: 235-256.

Kane, P. 2004. *The Play Ethic: A Manifesto for a Different Way of Living*. London: Macmillan.

Karl, K, Peluchette, J, Hall, L and Harland, L. 2005. 'Attitudes towards workplace fun: A three sector comparison', *Journal of Leadership and Organizational Studies*, 12, 2, 1-17.

Karreman, D. and Alvesson, M. 2004. 'Cages in Tandem: Management Control, Social Identity and Identification in a Knowledge-Intensive Firm.' *Organization*, 11 (1): 149-175.

Kinnie, N., Hutchinson, S and Purcell, J. 2000. 'Fun and surveillance: the paradox of high commitment management in call centres', *International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 11, 5, 967-985.

Knights, D. and McCabe, D. 1998. 'What Happens when the Phone Goes Wild? Staff, Stress and Spaces for Escape in a BPR Telephone Banking Work Regime.' *Journal of Management Studies*, 35 (2): 163-193.

Korczynski, M. 2001. 'The contradictions of service work: Call centre as customer-oriented bureaucracy', in Sturdy, A., Grugulis, I., and Willmott, H. (Eds) *Customer Service – Empowerment and entrapment*, Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave.

Kunda, G. 1992. *Engineering Culture: Control and Commitment in a High-Tech Corporation.* Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Kunda, G and Ailon-Souday, G. 2005. 'Managers, Markets and Ideologies – Design and Devotion Revisited', in Ackroyd, S *et al.* (Eds) *Oxford Handbook of Work and Organization*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Liu, A. 2004. T*he Laws of Cool: Knowledge Work and the Culture of Information*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Mills, C. W. 1951. *White Collar*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Mirvis, P. H. 1994. 'Human Development or Depersonalization? The Company as Total Community.' In F.W. Heuberger & L.L. Nash (Eds.), *A Fatal Embrace? Assessing Holistic Trends in Human Resources Programs*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction.
New York Times. 2006. 'Can Google Come Out to Play?', 31st December, 2006.

Nickson, N., Warhurst, C., Witz, A. and Cullen, A-M. 2001. 'The Importance of Being Aesthetic: Work, Employment and Service Organisation', in Sturdy, A., Grugulis, I., and Willmott, H. (Eds) *Customer Service – Empowerment and entrapment*, Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave.

O'Reilly, C. and Chatman, J. 1996. 'Culture as Social Control: Corporations, Cults, and Commitment.' Pp. 157-200 in *Research in Organizational Behavior*, edited by B. Staw and L. Cummings. Greenwich, CT: JAI Press.

Ouchi, W. G. 1979. 'A conceptual framework for the design of organizational control mechanisms', *Management Science*, 25, 9, 833-849.

Peters, T. 1994. *The Tom Peters Seminar: Crazy Times Call for Crazy Organizations*. London: Macmillan.

Peters, T. 2003. *Re-Imagine! Business Excellence in a Disruptive Age*. Dorling Kindersley: London.

Peters, T. and Waterman, R. H. 1982. *In Search of Excellence*. New York: Harper and Row.

Raeburn, N. C. 2004 *Changing Corporate America from Inside Out: Lesbian and Gay Workplace Rights*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Ray, C. A. 1986. 'Corporate Culture: The Last Frontier of Control?' *Journal of Management Studies,* 23, 3: 287-97.

Reeves, R. 2001. *Happy Mondays: Putting Pleasure Back into Work*. London: Pearson Education.

Ross, A. 2004. *No-Collar: The Humane Workplace and its Hidden Costs*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Roy, D. 1959. ''Banana Time' Job satisfaction and informal interaction', *Human Organization*, 18, 148-168.

Russell. B. 2009. 'Call centres: A decade of research', *International Journal of Management Reviews*, 10, 3, 195-219.

Schneider, B. and Bowen, D. (1993). 'The Service Organization: Human Resource Management is Crucial' *Organizational Dynamics*, 21 (4): 39-52.

Semler, R. 1993. *Maverick! The Success Behind the World's Most Unusual Workplace*, London: Arrow.

Sennett, R. 1976. *The Fall of Public Man*. W.W Norton: New York.

Sewell, G. 2007. 'Control', in Clegg, S.R. and Bailey, J.R. (Eds) *International Encyclopaedia of Organization Studies.* New York: Sage.

Spradley, J. 1979. *The Ethnographic Interview*. New York: Rinehart and Winston.

Stablein, R. 2006. 'Data in Organization Studies', in Clegg, S. R., Hardy, C., Lawrence, T. and Nord, W. R. (Eds) *Handbook of Organization Studies* (2nd Ed.), London: Sage.

Staw, B M and Epstein, L D. 2000. 'What Bandwagons Bring – Effects of Popular Management Techniques on Corporate Performance, Reputation and CEO Pay', *Administrative Science Quarterly,* 45, 3, 523-556.

Sturdy, A. J. 2000. 'Training in Service - Importing and Imparting Customer Service Culture as an Interactive Process', *International Journal of HRM,* 11, 6, 1-22.

Sutton, R. 2001. *Weird Ideas that Work: 11 1/2 ways to Promote, Manage and Sustain Innovation.* New York: Penguin.

Tannebaum, A. 1967. *Control in Organizations*. New York. McGraw-Hall.

Taylor, C. (1992). *The Ethics of Authenticity*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Taylor, P. and Bain, P. 1999. `An assembly line in the head': work and employee relations in the call centre', *Industrial Relations Journal*, 2, 101-117

Taylor, P. Hyman, J., Mulvey, G. and Bain, P. 2002. 'Work organization, control and the experince of work in call centres. *Work, Employment and Society*, 16 (1): 133-150.

Vallas, S. 2003. 'The Adventures of Managerial Hegemony: Team work, Ideology and Worker Resistance.' *Social Problems*, 50 (2): 204-225.

Van Maanen, J. 1998. (ed.). *Qualitative Studies of Organization*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Whyte, W. H. 1956. *The Organizational Man*. New York: Doubleday.

Willmott, H. (1993). 'Strength is Ignorance; Slavery is Freedom: Managing Cultures in Modern Organizations.' *Journal of Management Studies*, **30**, 4, 515-552.

Zuboff, S. 1989. *In the Age of the Smart Machine*. New York: Basic Books.

Table One – Control forms and their principal dysfunctions

Mode of control	Key feature	Principal dysfunction
Technical	Regimentation	Alienation and boredom
Bureaucratic	Standardization	Dis-enchantment; anti-authoritarianism
Cultural	Normalization	Inauthenticity; 'organizational groupthink'

Table Two – Control forms and their detractions

Mode of control	Principal dysfunction	Be your self as a detraction
Technical	Alienation and boredom	Fun and play
Bureaucratic	Dis-enchantment; anti-authoritarianism	Diversity, informality and dissent
Cultural	Inauthenticity; 'organizational groupthink'	Authenticity/ individualism