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Connecting Selves

Relationship, Identity and Reflexivity on the 'Frontline' in a New Zealand Call Centre

Susan Copas
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Abstract

This dissertation centres on process and connection. Beyond the popular concept of ‘worklife balance’ it presents an integral and holistic view of how work (including the ‘work’ of research), and life are inextricably connected. Eschewing the more conventional model of the PhD; it does not develop a question (or set of questions) about this area of interest, and then proffer answers. Rather, it works with/in an ever emerging flow of living relationships and experiences, to offer inclusive, constantly shifting understandings of the embodied dialogical processes that relationally construct and connect people, our ‘selves,’ in the everyday flow of life, work and research centred around a particular organisational setting: a large public sector call centre.

The study rests on the assumption that rich multiply inflected emergent processes and relationships ‘make’ people and their worlds, including the world of research. Hence the dissertation is presented as an on-going construction, in which individuals and organisations are not autonomous entities, but are in-effect, always becoming. The organisation, its frontline staff, managers, and I (the ‘researcher’) emerge moment-by-moment, relationally made and remade, within the communicative realm of embodied language, in many different social, local, and historically inflected ways.

In the field, this everyday becoming is explored using a hybrid form of organisational ethnography and collaborative action research. On the page, academic prose, stories and narrative poems combine and interweave to (re)construct and deconstruct the situated dialogues and relationships.

Narrated in two parts, the first section - “Telling Stories” - works with contexts, scene setting and character development. Its layered and iterative unfolding begins with a day-in-the-life story of work, life and research at the call centre. The section then outlines the attitudes and assumptions that guide relational-responsive becoming, before detailing the political economic, organisational and personal backgrounds and
values influencing this study. With/in the conversations and complications of collaborative practice I ‘show and tell’ how ‘coming to know what is known’ is a rich relational emergent process that reworks research away from the more traditional notion of it as data gathering and retrospective analysis.

Part two - “Stories Told” - is the heart of this study. It brings a sense of emergence to life by focusing the kaleidoscopic lenses of relationship, identity and reflexivity on people-in-process within the dynamic interplay of call centre technologies, organisational systems and human interaction; both at work and outside of the workplace. The stories interweave the rich multidimensionality of emergent lives, as they explore the camaraderie and subversion of working in a tightly monitored and time pressured environment, amidst changing conceptions of what constitutes public service in New Zealand. Radically reflexive, they unsettle the often taken-for-granted assumptions, feelings, actions and words that make selves in life, work and research. In doing so, the stories raise expansive and inclusive possibilities for new ways of understanding each other, our knowledges, practices and experiences. They also remind us of the everyday, every moment possibilities for developing more mindful and holistic understandings of the relational processes and the communicative practices, within which we make our selves, our organisations, and our worlds.

KEYWORDS: Relational Construction; Emergence; Reflexivity; Identity; Organisational Processes; Call Centres; Work and life; Public Sector; New Zealand.

*   *   *
Dedication

My intellectual, emotional and at times visceral journey with doctoral research finds one representation among many in this written version. It is dedicated to my son

David John Keith

May your songs supplant your struggles

And your courage win out
Firstly, I would like to thank the Management and Customer Service staff at the Auckland Regional Call Centre, Work and Income New Zealand (a division of The Ministry of Social Development). Without the wholehearted participation of my research colleagues in this organisation, this study would not have been possible. Their ongoing engagement, critical input, generosity, and support facilitated a challenging research journey that has been a privilege to undertake.

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I would also like to acknowledge the financial support I have received from the University of Auckland with a doctoral scholarship; from the New Zealand Government via the Foundation for Research, Science and Technology administered “Bright Futures” Top Achiever Doctoral Scholarship; and from the New Zealand Vice-Chancellors Committee (NZVCC) Bank of New Zealand Research Fellowship. Appreciative thanks to these organisations for timely funding and recognition of the importance and value of my research.

To editor extraordinaire, Margaret Dowling, I am ever grateful for the commas that continue to elude me. To my wonderful husband, Kevin Montague, thank you for believing in me and walking alongside me throughout this process. Thanks also to my children, David, Luke, Andrew and Isabella for bemused encouragement, and special thanks to Luke and Isabella for their art work which graces the section headings in parts one and two.

Finally, no doctorate can be completed without a touch of serendipity and magic. “Invocate Angelos” (Sing in the Angels), as musician Chris James counsels. Early in my process I must have done just that. For ‘angels’ came to me in the form of Melissa Spencer and Vivienne Elizabeth. Their ethereally wise, pragmatic earthly magic has sustained, supported and on more than one occasion ‘saved’ me, as I negotiated the always moving complexity of parenting, working and researching over a number of years. Thank you ‘Sheilas.’
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