



Copyright Statement

The digital copy of this thesis is protected by the Copyright Act 1994 (New Zealand). This thesis may be consulted by you, provided you comply with the provisions of the Act and the following conditions of use:

- Any use you make of these documents or images must be for research or private study purposes only, and you may not make them available to any other person.
- Authors control the copyright of their thesis. You will recognise the author's right to be identified as the author of this thesis, and due acknowledgement will be made to the author where appropriate.
- You will obtain the author's permission before publishing any material from their thesis.

To request permissions please use the Feedback form on our webpage.

<http://researchspace.auckland.ac.nz/feedback>

General copyright and disclaimer

In addition to the above conditions, authors give their consent for the digital copy of their work to be used subject to the conditions specified on the Library

[Thesis Consent Form](#)

Connecting Selves

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

Susan Copas

**A Thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree
of
Doctor of Philosophy
in Management and Employment Relations and Sociology
University of Auckland
2004**

The University of Auckland

Thesis Consent Form

This thesis may be consulted for the purpose of research or private study provided that due acknowledgement is made where appropriate and that the author's permission is obtained before any material from the thesis is published.

I agree that the University of Auckland Library may make a copy of this thesis for supply to the collection of another prescribed library on request from that Library; and

- I agree that this thesis may be photocopied for supply to any person in accordance with the provisions of Section 56 of the Copyright Act 1994

Signed:.....

Date:.....

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

Acknowledgements

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.

To my supervisors, Dr Wendy Lerner in Sociology, and Dr Judith Pringle in Management and Employment Relations; thank you. Your trust and patience, insights and constructive critiques of my academic process have been invaluable.

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. “Invoke 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.’

Table of Contents

ABSTRACT	III
DEDICATION	V
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	VI
PART ONE: TELLING STORIES	1
CHAPTER ONE: STORIED BEGINNINGS	
AN INVITATION TO QUESTION AND CONNECT	2
"Bums on Seats" Working With/In Conversations and Connections.....	3
Introductions and Disruptions	21
CHAPTER TWO: SETTING OUT	
MAKING AND MAPPING MEANINGFUL CONNECTIONS	
IN AN ALWAYS IN PROCESS WORLD	22
Dialogical Selves: Researching and Living the Underlined 'in'	23
Aims and Aspirations.....	24
Attitudes and Assumptions.....	25
Becoming ... Always Becoming	30
Becoming With/in Stories	30
Author and Audience(s):'Voices' In Conversation	34
Me, Myself, I ... A Life 'Passing Through'	38
While Doing this PhD.....	42
'Once Upon a Time' ... Backgrounds, Border Crossings and Tensions: Working With/in the Flux and Flow of Becoming.....	43
Flash Back: Life and Work Conundrums and Connections	46
Proposals, Predicaments and Possibilities.....	49
Call Centres: On Networks, Connections and Serendipity.....	51
Mapping the 'Adventure' Ahead	54
CHAPTER THREE - FIRST STANZA ON COMING TO KNOW WHAT IS KNOWN	
'UNPACKING' THE RESEARCH CONTEXT AND EXPLORING A VALUE CHAIN.	57
"Welcome to Frontline" Potential, Values, Movement	59
The Social Policy 'Business': Legacies and Landscapes.....	62
"Welcome to Frontline" - the Call Centre as Strategic Organisational Interface	66
CHAPTER THREE - SECOND STANZA ON COMING TO KNOW WHAT IS KNOWN,	
RESEARCH PROCESSES AND A CAST OF CHARACTERS	73
"Welcome to Frontline" - 'Coming to Know' in the Call Centre Milieu	74

"Welcome to Frontline" - Conversations and Complications	76
'Coming to Know' on the Front Line and Beyond.....	84
Research is Relationship: Much More Than a List of 'Methods'	87
'Coming to Know' A Cast of Characters.....	97
CHAPTER FOUR: IMPROVISATIONAL CHOREOGRAPHY	
DANCING WITH THEORY AND PRACTICE	100
Emerging.....	101
Languaging Emergence	103
Walking the Talk - The Logo Story.....	110
'Extended Epistemology' and Ethical Knowing.....	113
Bending Time (Forwards).....	115
Embodied Knowing and 'Feelingful' Selves	116
Inside a Living Kaleidoscope: Relationship, Identity, Reflexivity.....	118
And So To The Stories	125
PART TWO: STORIES TOLD	127
CHAPTER FIVE: RELATIONSHIP STORIES	
'BEING IS ALWAYS BECOMING' (RE)MAKING ME, THEM, AND US	128
Recruitment: Going In, 'Finding Our Feet'	129
Getting Along	133
Time Trials.....	138
'Them', 'Us', and 'Me'.....	140
The Power of Three: Talk, Time, and Trust.....	145
A Thrice Told Tale.....	151
CHAPTER SIX: IDENTITY STORIES	
DOING THE 'BUSINESS' OF PUBLIC SERVICE	158
Helping People: Frankie's Story	159
Doing the 'Business' of Public Service: Frankie Goes to Hollywood.....	163
Doing the Professional Thing.....	164
What's it all about Frankie?.....	167
Frankie at Twenty Six - a Found Poem.....	168
Organisational Identity - 'Professionalism' in Process	176
Getting the Look.....	177
Person and Voice: The Language of Business	184
Morals and Discretion: Living an Identity Process.....	189
Managing the 'Franchise,' Managing Identities	193
CHAPTER SEVEN: REFLEXIVITY STORIES	
AMPLIFYING CONNECTIONS AND 'BEING MORE HUMAN TOGETHER'	205

Questions of Potential: Moving Beyond 'Bums on Seats'	206
Radical Reflexivity	208
(1) Feeling our way together	210
Emerging Interactively: How Else Can We Know?	215
Epilogue and Reprise	219
Possibility and Openness, Particularity and Closure - Reflexively Living in the Moment	223
(2) Embodied Reflexivity: Feeling There's No Way To Go On Together	226
Interruption and Respite	230
Coming Back Around: Reflexive Embodiment, Moving Circles and Undivided Selves	232
CHAPTER EIGHT: IN PROCESS	238
Crystalline Refractions: A Conversational Coda	239
APPENDICES	252
Appendix One: Initial Research Proposal	252
Appendix Two: Introductory Letter to the Organization	258
Appendix Three: Invitation to Staff to Participate	262
Appendix Four: Interview Goals and Schedule	263
Appendix Five: Initial Report to Participants	268
REFERENCES	275