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Connecting Selves

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

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**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

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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

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.’

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PART ONE: TELLING STORIES



Be Open to the Monstrous

Take especially seriously problems, beliefs and experiences that are annulled by ('quaint', 'naïve', 'outrageous', unthinkable in terms of) a dominant discipline, whether they are intractably personal or contaminated by the disreputable demotic or popular, by passion or anger or delight, by the desire to change the world or to dream a new one.

(Bob Hodge 1995, p.37, in *Monstrous Knowledge: Doing PhDs in the new humanities*)

CHAPTER ONE: Storied Beginnings

An Invitation to Question and Connect

What would happen if the researcher,
rather than attempting to elicit the truth,
accepted that the truth is elusive,
and concentrated instead on opportunities for connection?...

The field of Academic discourse seems peopled
by a search for communion and connection.

What would happen
if the product of such research
was presented in non-traditional forms
presented in evocative rather than didactic ways?

(Peter Burrows 2001, p.126, A Trinity of Dreamers - Researched, Researcher and
'Reader')

How can we move beyond the fear that destroys connectedness? ... By reclaiming the connectedness that takes away fear. I realize the circularity of my case - but that is precisely how the spiritual life moves, in circles that have no beginning or end, where as T.S. Eliot writes, we "arrive where we started/And know the place for the first time." The only question is whether we choose to stand outside of the circle or within it?

How do we get into that circle? When we are gripped by the fears that keep us disconnected, what will move us towards joining hands with others? The truth is that the circle is already in us.

(Parker J. Palmer 1998, p.58, The Courage to Teach)

“Bums on Seats”¹ Working With/In Conversations and Connections

The April day dawns fine, sharp and clear. Bird song fills Linda’s new and yet to be cultivated garden. The early morning chorus inexorably draws her outside, despite the air’s autumnal nip, to savour that which she enjoys most. Her day’s first coffee in hand, she tosses the crumbled remains of Renee’s long discarded sandwiches to an eager swathe of gathering blackbirds and sparrows. Inside her daughter sleeps on, oblivious as always, to her mother’s early morning routines.

As Linda stands beneath the turning leaves of the garden’s showy Maple tree, contemplating how she will tend this new patch of earth that is truly her own ... ‘what flowers and shrubs to plant, what colours and shapes to choose ...’ she fights off encroaching thoughts of the work day ahead. Intrusive thoughts, unwelcome in her reverie, they nevertheless begin to dominate the longer she lingers there wishing it were otherwise. She has promised her Service Manager she will come in to work today. On Monday she’d left early to take Renee to the doctor, Tuesday, her day off, passed in a blur of domestic organising, and now Wednesday is calling her to account. ‘No rush though’ she muses, nothing to rush for.

Already at the Call Centre, I glance at my watch yet again. Where is she?

A tinge of uncertainty begins to set in. Sitting alongside Linda’s vacant workstation, surrounded by bland and unadorned green partitions, I feel strangely alone amidst the steady conversational hum of an already busy workplace, and I fight off a growing reluctance to undertake the day’s research. I realise my email reminder sent the previous Friday will have arrived after Linda finished her shift, and groan silently at the oversight. But I am also aware of a partially formed desire that perhaps Linda will not come in to work today, thereby relieving me of the need to spend yet another long day observing and interacting with another relatively unfamiliar person.

¹ The phrase “bums on seats” was a familiar catch cry at this research site (a Work and Income New Zealand (WINZ) Regional Call Centre. WINZ is a large public sector organisation I will hereafter call ‘Frontline.’ The organisation and research participants are introduced in detail in Chapter Three). On one hand, “bums on seats” was frequently used by managers as a colloquialism for expectations of telephone Customer Service Representatives’ (CSRs) work ethic. The term referenced another more formal version of required work practices prominent in many organisational texts, where CSRs were exhorted to be, “The Right People, in the Right Place, at the Right Time, doing the Right Things”. On the other hand, CSRs fondness for the term was as an ironic mantra, often used to chide one another light-heartedly when their bums were anywhere but on the seats.

“Oh my God is it today?” Linda’s surprised voice jolts me from my conflicted musings.

“Yep” I reply smiling widely, pleased, knowing Linda’s arrival will put paid to my misgivings, because now we will just get on with it.

“I’m late almost every day,” she giggles as she tosses her bag under the workstation, swings into her chair, flings the headset around her neck, and begins to login to the computer that will dominate the next eight hours, all in one seamless movement.

“Besides, it’s school holidays and Renee’s still in bed, lucky thing, and would you believe it we had no hot water this morning. I’m going to have to ring a plumber first up.”

While Linda calls the plumber, I connect the headset that I will spend most of my day attached to as well. Like all the other CSRs I’ve ‘shadowed’ during this research phase, Linda appears to have no qualms about me listening in to all her conversations and following her every move. She winks conspiratorially at me as she endeavours to explain to the plumber that “yes there is someone at home, but that someone is a fast asleep fifteen year-old who is not easily woken.” We both know the ‘joys’ of living with teenagers.

Plumber organised, she diverts her attention to her email.

“I’m not really ready for the first phone call this morning,” she grins.

Settling into the rhythm of my research day, I survey my surroundings again. Customer service staff numbers have built steadily since the seven o’clock start when the phones were switched over from night service. The large open-plan space is already well populated with many faces I recognise from long days following my research participants around the call centre. I glance up at the electronic reader boards dotted at regular intervals around the place. As they flicker through their ever circling range of workload statistics, I note how busy it is, not yet eight thirty and already over five hundred calls have been “offered” the text informs. A following numeric immediately declares that somewhat fewer calls have actually been “answered.”

The winking text fascinates me. Along with each day's constantly changing numbers, the lighted boards often share other, less pressing news. It ranges from the organisationally mundane – the names of the Service Managers who are 'floor walking' and can be called on for assistance – to the socially celebratory. Babies' arrivals, anniversaries, birthdays, and weddings are each marked by the scrolling text, which seems to bear silent witness to all that goes on beneath it. I find this spatially disconnected yet 'all seeing' blend of the technological and the personal ironically symbolic. After several months submerged in the centre's processes and environs, I've come to feel this is a workplace characterised by struggles with disconnection. Technological and organisational imperatives mean CSRs become disembodied voices, separated from each other by featureless partitions, at the same time as they are attached, quite literally, to telephone headsets and computer consoles. Subjected to tightly monitored 'performance' targets, they spend their days simultaneously connected to and disconnected from the difficulties and dilemmas at the other end of the phone. Yet my presence in the centre has also brought me into contact with many staff, CSRs and managers alike, continually looking for a more holistically human way to be in this environment, and a kinder, less numbers driven way to do "business."² The ubiquitous electronic boards are a constant reminder of the contradictions.

"Welcome to Frontline. You're speaking with Linda." My headset springs into life with the scripted opening of Linda's first call.

I take notes as Linda deals with an elderly caller's routine enquiry, still relishing the challenge of capturing the flavours and nuances of each contact in writing. This is a tricky task, often made more formidable by the fast and furious flow of interaction as CSRs field call after call in rapid succession. It's good to have a straightforward one first up.

Ignoring the scripted 'closing' pinned underneath her screen Linda farewells her caller with a breezy "thank you and you take care ... bye." Glancing down at her telephone console she sees there are twenty three calls in the queue. She sighs, remembering a time not so long ago when the pressure of this statistic would reverberate through her

² Both CSRs and Managers often refer to the work they are involved in as "business" – a point that will be developed at length in this study.

body causing anxiety and tension not easily dispelled. Her sigh is of relief now as she flicks to the next call safe in the knowledge she can manage the stresses so much better these days. She seems more worried about the effect of all this writing on the woman sitting alongside her.

“You need a laptop, or you’ll be ragged by the end of the day. It’s a wonder you haven’t got OOS³ by now, you know,” she whispers to me as her next caller can be heard rummaging around for the identifying ‘client number’ he’s been asked to provide. I acknowledge her concern with a shake of my wrist and a rueful grin. My hand’s been aching for weeks now.

“I just potter at my own pace. I’m not going to burn out again for anybody” Linda continues after cheerfully bidding her caller farewell.

I admire Linda’s resolve in the face of tight organisational expectations to achieve among other things, average call times of less than three minutes apiece. I know, as does she, there are real consequences both cultural and financial for not meeting specified Key Performance Indicators (KPIs). At the same time I’m also well aware of Linda’s previous problems of feeling overloaded and stressed out by the job, the toll this took on her health, and how hard she has worked to regain her equilibrium and wellness. Linda talked passionately and at length about these experiences in our interview conversations weeks ago. It seems her hard won gains will not be easily sacrificed. For in the midst of an already frenetically busy morning, it’s more than obvious she’s pacing the workload to suit her own needs.

A tetchy voice rising in my ears changes the focus of my attention sharply.

“I’m sick of it you know; I don’t want her as my Case Manager. I ring and ring and she never replies to any of my calls. I’ve had a gutsful of it mate.”

“Chris, it will have to be sorted out with your Case Manager today, so I’m going to try and make an appointment for you. Okay?” In a placatory voice, Linda goes over the required procedures with the caller again, calmly trying to elicit more information

³ Occupational Overuse Syndrome, also called Repetitive Strain Injury (RSI) is a condition caused by muscle fatigue associated with tasks that require tense muscles and repetitive action. A number of staff in the call centre suffered from OOS and there was a general awareness of the problem amongst the CSRs.

from him. Just out of remand centre, and feeling jettisoned, he's in no mood for either procedures or placating.

"Lady, you obviously don't understand. They won't give Joe Bloggs anything. I don't want to discuss it; it's disgusting what's gone on."

"I'm sorry I can't answer on your Case Manager's behalf ..."

"Because you don't give a stuff!"

On one level I know that to 'give a stuff' hour after hour, day after day in this place would be debilitating. Linda is the twenty-second person I've 'shadowed' in the centre and this call is typical of the many faced every day on the phones here. I know CSRs get tired and bored with it. Many have told me they've "heard it all before." Yet, from my privileged 'outsider' status, I cannot reconcile each day's litany of problems, pathos, difficulties, and the sheer drudgery at having to jump through so many organisational and policy hoops, to any sense of the repetitious, the dull or tedious. The dilemmas faced by the callers and CSRs alike all seem so important to me.

"Look, all the best with that Chris. Alright?" Linda closes the call with the same friendly professionalism she's maintained throughout.

"Gonna be another one of those days today, I can feel it" she sighs, rolling her eyes, stretching and breathing deeply as she gets to her feet. The spiralled cord of her headset elongates and unwinds lazily behind her as she moves almost in slow motion to the corner of her workstation. Watching her, I smile, the image of an old fashioned deep sea diver springing to mind. Maybe ... but in this ocean of green that cord is no life line, I observe wryly.

The morning passes in a blur. Calls continue to fly in unabated. Linda sets up, changes and rearranges numerous Case Manager appointments (sometimes doing all three in the course of one call). Problems are listened to, and questions are answered. Benefits are applied for. Addresses are changed, payments are queried, added to, stopped and restarted. Countless forms are filled in and emails sent out. And I write and write, and write as lives play out in stereo through our headsets.

“I’ve rung to tell you my father passed away ...”

“Do I get a list of jobs from you? I don’t want to go on the benefit eh ... I just want another job ...”

“It was such a shock because of the kids but I thought I’d have to try and help out somehow, and I need the benefit to feed the kids, my daughter’s just been sentenced to six years prison”

“My rent’s just gone up ‘cause my flatmate’s moved out and I need some money for food ...”

“It’s a bit difficult for me to leave him. I’ve had to give up my job to take care of him, can someone come out to help us set up a benefit ...” asks a wife on behalf of her mentally ill husband.

“I’ve got two kids and my power’s been disconnected ...”

“Why’s my benefit been cut so much? They promised they’d ring back and nobody has ...”

“I got a job in a café, rostered work on a trial basis ...”

“Hey congratulations, that’s great.” Linda smiles spontaneously. “But just to safeguard you, would you like me to suspend your benefit until you can confirm whether you’ve been taken on as permanent staff ...?”

Every now and then Linda jumps to her feet to stretch and glance around the centre. Still conversing with her callers, she often flicks through the screens and enters data while standing. On other occasions, she rolls her chair beyond the panels that divide her from the CSRs on either side to snatch a few words with them between calls. Eyes and hands become animated as they talk to each other and their respective callers at the same time. Linda has already made several calls home in an attempt to wake Renee before the plumber arrives, and the saga of the hot water is shared with her team mates in multi-tasked sound bites.

Morning tea in the upstairs cafeteria provides fifteen minutes respite and a chance to elaborate. I follow Linda and a couple of her team mates through the brightly lit noisy

room out to a covered porch reserved for the smokers. Grabbing a cup of tea on the way, forces me to juggle polystyrene cup, pen and clipboard. I wish for some down time of my own, but know these interludes are invariably rich and interesting goldmines for my research.

“Looks like it’s the electricity and not a faulty cylinder. Bit lucky it’s school holidays and Renee can handle it, ‘cause it’s turning into a bit of a major.”

Linda’s friend Sara rolls her eyes “Yeah. You’re lucky, don’t talk to me about school holidays ...” She looks forlorn as her voice trails off. A single parent with two young children and a limited support base, she finds the school holidays particularly challenging.

Sara’s not the only one looking forlorn today; Jennie’s teenage daughter has just called her mother in tears. “Her boyfriend’s just broken up with her, she’s beside herself ... I dunno what to do ...”

Sara thinks Jennie should go home to her daughter, and their conversation tosses around the pros and cons of doing so.

“They won’t accept that as a valid reason for leaving ... it sounds pathetic” Jennie grimaces.

“Well ring her back then, try and talk it through” Sara counsels as she turns to me, “this doesn’t happen to Jennie, ever!” she explains. “She doesn’t have crises like the rest of us.”

I fervently hope my opinion will not be sought on Jennie’s quandary. Years with a chronically ill teenage son would shape my response. Being there for my children is very important to me. Yet at the same time I’m keenly aware of the difficulties the managers face trying to cover workflows in this centre. Now it’s not just the cup and the clipboard I’m juggling, it’s parts of myself. I’m grateful the conversation is interrupted by another CSR with news he’s gained a position in different area of the organisation. Commiseration turns to congratulations and light hearted banter about escape, a theme that continues as we leave the café and return to the call centre.

“Did you see that email from Tony this morning?” Sara asks indignantly, leading the way down the stairs. “Bums on seats, bums on seats, we’re getting hammered today, bums on seats” she chants paraphrasing its message. “Like we don’t know that!” she scowls.

“Oh you poor thing,” Marie, a Service Manager, calls out in jest as we make our way back to Linda’s work area. “Fancy having to put up with her all day!” We all grin broadly, and Linda shakes a fist in mock defiance. While the comment was aimed at me, I like its ambiguity. The same could equally be said for Linda having to put up with me on her tail all day.

We reconnect our headsets and Linda takes another call. I glance towards the reader boards. It is 10.51am they announce. Three thousand, five hundred and ninety five calls have now been “offered,” two thousand eight hundred and forty one “answered” and “Liz D has had a baby girl.”

“Welcome to Frontline. You’re speaking with Linda ...”

My head spins, and my hand hurts.

Some days it feels like the pressure building around the numbers weighs physically on the centre, thickening the air and bowing each tethered head even further. Today is one of those days. I write each interaction almost automatically and minutes pass before I’m brought back to sharper focus by rising irritation in Linda’s voice. Looking up, I meet her questioning eyes. She’s having a difficult time understanding a softly spoken woman for whom English is patently a second language. I listen intently as the caller tries to go over her identifying details again, leaning over to spell out the name she gives in large clear letters on a jotter pad sitting on the otherwise empty desk. Linda repeats the name I’ve written, and visibly relaxes when her caller quietly confirms it. The complicated conversation continues for some time while Linda clicks her fingers, rolls her eyes and shakes her head trying to dissipate the veil of frustration that seems to have descended over her. Across cultures and airwaves, trying to ascertain the fine-grained details needed to assess the caller’s situation, is a tough task.

“Thank you for calling. You’re speaking with Linda.” The official scripted closing is recited in a clipped and brittle voice for the first time this morning.

Smiling at me she murmurs wearily, “Gee! You’ve got good ears. Thanks. I just get a block when they don’t speak English.”

“Nearly lunchtime,” I mouth silently. She nods in agreement.

Our half hour lunch break affords a much needed opportunity to get out into the sunshine. We join a number of CSRs sprawled at intermittent intervals along a wide grass verge at the back of the building. Bench seats and a couple of chunky wooden outdoor tables provide dubious comfort, but no one seems to mind. The flat green strip that separates the organisation from its car park is a popular gathering place.

“Uh Oh ... are you on an illegal?”⁴ Another CSR chides teasingly as we flop down beside her.

“Nah!” Linda feigns indignation. “It’s lunchtime.”

After the florescent illumination indoors, the sunlight seems piercingly bright. I put down my ever-present clipboard for a moment, closing my eyes to breathe in the warmth. Life and work intermingle as stories ebb and flow around me. Like the sun the mood is warm and friendly.

“Forty year-old rugby players don’t seem to know when to give up,” claims Sonia as she recounts her husband’s weekend sporting mishap. Her tale of his broken elbow is received with some sympathy amidst much hilarity, and prompts several recollections of related ‘endeavours’ by hapless spouses.

We are joined by Ben, a young CSR, who looks a little preoccupied. Dragging deeply on his cigarette he eases himself wearily onto the grass.

⁴ CSRs call any non-scheduled, non-sanctioned break an ‘illegal’.

“How goes it Bro?” The mood turns as Ben begins to tell of his harrowing experience with an ‘I.B.’⁵ suicide call that morning. His narrative is uninterrupted as his colleagues listen intently until the story’s end.

There’s a small pause before Sara replies, “yeah,” with a knowing sigh. Then, “Did you hear about Stacey last week, she had an ‘I.B.’ ring in and say he had to have his benefit stopped because the TV told him so. Stacey advised him to change the channel!”

The group erupts into uproarious laughter. Ben looks relieved. In the lightened atmosphere, I notice Linda giggling away too. She looks happy enough, although I know she doesn’t always appreciate hearing these stories. I keenly remember her pointed remarks following similar circumstances a few days ago.

“I get sick and tired of hearing the stories and the bitching about the tough calls at break times, but let’s face it, there’s nowhere else to put things. You either talk to the other CSRs, who are the only ones who really understand what’s going on, or you take it home with you”.

I’m brought back to the present by another voice.

“Hey Susan. How are ya? Who are you following today?”

Linda answers on my behalf, proudly claiming she is my “victim” today.

Amidst the banter, Julie’s questions initiate a discussion about my research. Like many CSRs not actively participating in the study she is nevertheless keenly interested in what I’m doing, and somewhat fascinated by what it might be like to follow her co-workers around all day.

“Do you like it here?” she asks.

“I find the place completely fascinating” I reply, aware I’ve circumvented the question. But my comment seems to satisfy. I’ve been in the centre long enough now to be familiar to most people, and while a few regard me with suspicion, most seem

⁵ ‘I.B.’ is a colloquial term CSRs use to describe Invalids Beneficiaries. The classification covers a wide range of chronic medical conditions. However, many Invalids Beneficiaries suffer varying degrees of mental illness, and it is this sub-group that is being referred to.

curious about my ‘work and life’ interests and eager to learn how my research is going.

“C’mon shadow,” Linda calls playing to her audience as she gets to her feet, “time to go back to the dungeon.”

“You need the people you work with in this place otherwise you’d go demented” she remarks, as we make our way back inside.

In many ways the afternoon mirrors the morning. Time, the most important and overplayed hand in this place, has mercurial dimensions here. Sliding elusively, it shines down from the circling reader boards, a never-ending, always moving, felt presence.

In some respects, I feel as though I am trapped in a perverse version of ‘Groundhog Day,’⁶ and I’m intrigued with Linda’s ability to keep herself safe in this environment. She has a self protective orientation which is apparent in the guarded way she interacts with her callers. This doesn’t mean she short-changes people. On the contrary, she always seems to take whatever time is necessary to listen and advise each individual (her average call handling time in the last Performance Appraisal round was five minutes, a statistic she was reprimanded for). Yet I notice a subtle enveloping of self. She employs a sophisticated and effective technique for maintaining her distance – a ‘way of being’ her callers would not be aware of. Although difficult to describe, perhaps the best illustration of how it plays out is when it doesn’t happen. There is one interaction, the only call of the day when she lets her guard down.

Mid afternoon she takes a call from a woman enquiring about assistance to get a mammogram and biopsy done privately because a growth has occurred so quickly her G.P. has advised the public system wait will be too long. The caller sounds vulnerable and anxious. Linda gently discusses the personal details before asking if she may call the specialist on the woman’s behalf to check if he will invoice her, explaining this will assist her to get an earlier appointment. The caller is extremely appreciative, and Linda puts her on hold while she rings the number given. She discovers the doctor has moved to another specialist centre and goes back to her caller explaining this, and

⁶The film “Groundhog Day” is a fantasy about a wacky weatherman forced to relive one strange day over and over again, until he gets it right.

giving her the updated phone number “for your future reference.” Another call ascertains that the clinic will indeed invoice. Linda then explains to the woman the procedure for bringing this account into one of Frontline’s Service Centres, letting her know she has made an appointment with her Case Manager to this effect.

“And if that time is inconvenient for any reason, we can reschedule,” she offers.

A relieved voice replies, “Oh no, that will be great. Oh thank you so very much for that.”

“You are very welcome, good luck and all the best.” Linda closes the ten minute call with empathetic heartfelt expression. Turning to me she remarks, “see. That was going above and beyond this call centre’s duty, but that’s my one customer service call of the day. It sucks!”

“What do you mean by that?” I ask, genuinely puzzled. I’m intrigued to learn Linda thinks ‘it sucks’ that this level of customer service cannot be given to everyone.

“It sucks that you can’t give this level of service all the time, but we’re told that’s not our job. It’s all time driven; I don’t think it’s a caring organisation at all. We don’t put people first. If we did the Case Managers would do their jobs properly and we’d have half the phone calls we do now!”

These comments completely contradict her previous admissions that in an unsupported environment to give this level of service every call would be very destructive personally. They also fly in the face of how she organises to protect herself each day. Nevertheless, her passionate and contradictory stance throws into sharp relief the complex nature of the many difficulties and dilemmas CSRs face each day on the phones at Frontline.

By late afternoon the call volumes have eased a little and a perceptible weariness has descended over the centre. The ever-present conversational hum murmurs on in the subdued atmosphere, and the reader boards relentlessly roll out the day’s legacy. It’s 4.14 p.m. they inform, seven thousand, seven hundred and sixty three calls have been “offered,” six thousand, seven hundred and twenty one answered, and one hundred and five “abandoned.” Do organisational researchers ever abandon time (or worse,

people) in the field? I wonder. I'm thankful Linda is an eight-hour day staffer, unlike some CSRs I've shadowed who put in ten hours a day on the phones here. It seems my silent fatigue filled sentiments are shared.

"Oh look at that, nearly time to go home," Linda breathes quietly. Then laughs aloud, "start late, finish on time!" Her unexpected cheerfulness lifts me. And I'm looking for a second wind, knowing my day is far from over. She begins her log-off process nattering all the while to Sara, who is still taking calls on the other side of the partition. Jotting down their conversations I'm aware Linda's official finish time is four thirty, and I am perplexed by this their longest non-work related interaction of the day. My curiosity obviously shows.

"Wind down time ..." she glances, then grinning to me in explanation, "I save up my rest breaks⁷ especially for this end of the day." The penny drops. I've seen many CSRs use their rest breaks strategically, often adding them on to break times. Linda's creativity is yet another way she corrals a few snatched minutes of time to suit herself.

Linda and Sara's conversation roams through life outside the centre. The saga of the hot water cylinder resurfaces, as do school holiday concerns about their children. Although it's only Wednesday, plans for the coming weekend are also discussed, along with the ability to finance the odd night out.

"As long as it pays the mortgage, this working full time ... but the lifestyle still sucks," laments Sara between calls. "Do you think we could run out now and they'd notice?" she quips mischievously.

"I saw Andrea (a Service Manager) running around with an audit report⁸ awhile back" Linda replies. They giggle and roll their eyes in mock horror, including me in the camaraderie and collusion. Their cheery mood is catching and I too chuckle knowingly at the audit charade. It's common knowledge that those not in their seats at

⁷Occupational Health and Safety (OSH) rest breaks appear on screen at regular intervals. These comprise both micropause reminders and longer interval breaks during which a 'clip art' character runs through various stretch exercises CSRs are supposed to undertake at this time, or as close to it as possible.

⁸CSRs are randomly 'audited' by their Service Managers during the day. Using a 'real time' facility in the Centre's Management Information Systems (MIS), managers check to see that staff rostered to be logged on and taking calls, are in fact doing so. If a CSR is shown to be 'missing' they are required to account for their whereabouts and sign the audit report to this effect.

audit time are usually “in the loo” or “refilling the water bottle.” It’s also common knowledge that my presence in the centre has been gleefully celebrated a couple of times by CSRs fortunate enough to use entries from my day’s notes to show they actually were in the loo at audit time!

At four twenty-five, ruefully noting how precise I’ve become at observing time during my days in the centre, I follow Linda’s lead and pack away the clipboard. By four twenty-nine her working day is done and we’re strolling out the door. The late afternoon sun is still warm and the air fresh. It feels good to be outside again. We walk for a while in silence, each inhabiting our own thoughts in this transitory space. Relief and tiredness intermingle. My empty hand released now from its controlling pen continues to throb in protest.

“Meet you by the petrol station. Okay? My car’s a blue Mazda, UY number plate.”

“Cool. Wait for me. I’m right down by the river car park and the traffic’s a bit mad. I’ll take heaps longer getting to your place without tailgating you.”

Linda nods acknowledgement and laughs as she sets off in the opposite direction. I’ve yet to get lost following anyone after work, but unfamiliar with this part of the city I find the logistics at the end of the day somewhat nerve racking. Despite my initial misgivings, it turns out to be an easy ten minute drive to Linda’s new home in a nearby suburb and I’m feeling more relaxed as I park alongside the long driveway the blue Mazda has just disappeared down.

Two teenage girls reclining on a wide verandah lift their heads momentarily as I walk up the back path. Already inside, Linda’s head appears around an open ranch slider door.

“Renee, Cara, meet my shadow.” The girls look vaguely curious. “Remember, this is the lady I was telling you about ... from the University.” Linda’s slightly exasperated tone is directed toward the smaller of the two girls, but both acknowledge me with indulgent grins before resuming their conversation on the merits of Oprah’s guests that afternoon.

“Make yourself comfortable, I always get changed first thing.” Linda gestures towards a sofa in the spacious lounge before disappearing from sight. I flop down gratefully, intending to do just that. But as usual I’m ambushed by machinations about whether or not to retrieve the clipboard from my satchel. Experience has taught me that while the clipboard provides me a researcher’s cuddly blanket comfort, affording the ability to record as events unfold; its presence always changes the interactive dynamics. No more so than at this end of the day. Today I decide not.

Instead, I sit as any friend might while Linda, looking much more relaxed out of her formal work wear, busies herself making a cup of tea, all the while chatting through the open door to Renee. In amicable conversation, peppered with banter and laughter, they discuss the plumber’s visit, Renee’s latest drama class, and how the school holiday assignments are coming along. It is obvious mother and daughter share a strong and loving relationship because their conversation bespeaks more of good mateship than parent-child interaction. I too am included in their discussion. Knowing I have sons of a similar age, Linda is curious to know how school holiday commitments are managed at my place. We swap stories as Renee and Cara chip in with knowing teenage asides before the girls eventually wander off to resume their late afternoon sunbathing outside.

“You and Renee seem such good friends,” I remark as Linda settles onto the sofa alongside me.

“Yeah, we always have been really, and since my son Mark went flatting a while back we’ve got even closer ... girls together I guess,” she laughs. “She’s a great kid.”

“She hardly seems a kid. I mean she’s pretty sensible and mature for fifteen.”

“Hmmm ... me and the kids have been on our own for a long time now, I guess we’ve all had to be grownups in one way or another for ages. Bit of a laugh being a grownup really” she muses, “you know I often print off some of the emails that come round the call centre to show Renee how much we are treated like naughty children at work.”

The turn of conversation surprises me, although its theme is familiar. I enquire hopefully, “Do you keep any of them?” Many CSRs have made similar comments

about being treated like children by some of the managers at Frontline, and I've certainly seen instances of this, but I'm keen to learn more.

"Yeah. I think I've still got the one from last week about our mufti days⁹ being canned." With furrowed brow she walks across the lounge and into her open plan kitchen. "We're not allowed mufti anymore, it's been taken away from us. That's what happens to naughty children when they don't dress properly." Leafing through a pile of papers on the kitchen counter, she pounces gleefully on the email handing it to me with a flourish. "Here you are. It's all yours."

I glance briefly at the text. A sentence about hosting visitors in the centre springs out at me. "That whole officials and visitors thing is a pretty big deal isn't it?" I offer.

"If the expectation is to bring people in, then they should be proud of the way we work, not the way we look" she remarks acerbically.

"How was it today?" I segue, cowardly backing away from the implicit challenge in her voice.

She lets the awkward moment pass and returning to the sofa, smiles again. "It was really cool. I pretty much forgot you were there after a while."

"Really? Didn't do your day differently at all?"

This time she laughs out loud. "Well ... I was probably more tolerant and less up and down today. I get pretty pissed off with the ones who don't speak English, I guess I've got personal issues with them coming to New Zealand and straight away applying for emergency benefits ..." Her voice trails off into thought before she resumes. "And I sometimes find it hard doing this job being a former DPB.¹⁰ Because I'm still a solo mum, if my fridge packs up there's no assistance for me." She shrugs, "still it was my choice to come off the benefit. That's why I bob up and down a bit. I suppose you noticed the head throwing and the tongue clicking?"

I nod, "and the eye rolling ..." We laugh together.

⁹ Like many organisations Frontline had a policy of casual Friday. Called mufti days, they were stopped during the course of this research due to management concerns about the standard of dress worn by some people.

¹⁰ Domestic Purposes Beneficiary.

“It’s my way of dealing with it,” she grins.

“I know I’ve asked you this before, but after today I’m curious again ... what do you like about the job?”

“Pays the bills,” she answers frankly. Then she softens, “oh it’s not all bad. I like the flexible hours and it is nice and handy working so close to home. Yeah, and they were very good to me when Renee was sick a while back. I was so stressed out, she had glandular fever and it just seemed to go on forever. One of the Service Managers even suggested that I go and see if I could get on a sickness benefit and take a break. Now that would have been nice,” she laughs, “except I figured I’d be swapping one set of hassles for another. Me and Renee we’d be cool, not the bank manager though.” She chuckles before resuming in a more sombre tone. “But nothing changes. They asked me that in my latest PA¹¹... “Why do you come to work Linda?” I said “I hate the job but I need the money.” You know me Susan, I’m one of those save the world types, I really like helping people, but I’ve learned the hard way not to be like that in this place. You know what my Service Manager asked?”

I shake my head.

“If you need the money, wouldn’t you want to get to the top pay scale?” Well, even if I could, I’m not prepared to put in all the after-hours time ...” Again her voice trails off and she gazes upward before meeting my eyes directly. “You don’t get recognised for doing your job well, you’ve got to do extra. There’s no bonus points for the people who do what they’re paid to do and answer the phones really well, you’ve got to do extra,” she reiterates. “So until I get a written warning” (which she seemed to feel was inevitable) “I do what I do, and I do it my way.”

I feel a wave of sadness wash over me. It all seems such a waste ... her gutsy determination ... and unnoticed ability. I’d wager she could be a handful, but there was no doubting the good job she did, albeit playing to a completely different set of rules. Perhaps she senses my despondency.

“Would you like to stay for dinner?” she asks kindly.

¹¹ Performance Appraisal

“Linda I’d love to,” I answer genuinely, “but I have to pick up my nine year old from after school care by six.” I glance down at my watch. “Actually, I’d better be making tracks.”

“No worries,” she smiles, “another time ... but come and have a quick look at my garden before you leave.”

In the soft early evening light we stroll around the compact and lovely gardens encircling her home. She motions toward a newly turned flower bed beneath a large Maple tree.

“I have some wonderful plans for this patch.” Her hands fly in sweeping gestures as she describes in detail her vision of colour and shape, and the flowers and shrubs she intends to plant. “I spend my weekends here, pottering away, and I come out most mornings to feed the birds, starts my day off on the right foot. Trouble is I often don’t want to leave,” she sighs.

I’m no gardener, but her joy in this spot is obvious and it feels good to be sharing it with her.

“Thank you so much for today Linda. It was so busy I hope my tailing you wasn’t too much of a problem?”

“Oh you’re very welcome, nah it was cool. I had a good time” she grins leaning into the driveway gate.

“See you soon and say bye to Renee for me.”

She nods still smiling.

At the end of the driveway I glance back to see her still standing there relaxed against the gate, gazing back into her garden.

* * *

“That’s a good story, but is it really research?” (Ceglowski 1997, p.188).

Introductions and Disruptions

I cannot believe you dare begin

Isn't it usual

A doctoral dissertation

When introducing; to locate, contextualise

In such undisciplined fashion.

Give the reader some clues

The academic apprenticeship requires

As to what's about to unfold?

A thorough and systematic exposition

So I'll begin as I mean to go on

Of demonstrable research competencies.

Questioning

You begin with a question

Assumptions

Bounded and delimited

What is research? What is data? What is (re)presentation?

Referenced by

What do you think? How do you feel? What are you learning?

Existing bodies of knowledge

Do come back here

And need only repeat a traditional time-honoured

To 'where we started'

Controlled academic process

And 'know this place for the first time'

Again

CHAPTER TWO: Setting Out

Making and Mapping Meaningful Connections in an Always In Process World

**Ancient maps labelled unexplored territories with the warning "Here ther be
beastes and monsters."**

(Yvonna S. Lincoln 1997, p.51, in *Self, Subject, Audience, Text: Living at the Edge,
Writing in the Margins*)

**"Nothing is hidden" (no.435). And what we seek is "just that understanding
which consists in 'seeing connections'"**

(John Shotter 2002, p.2, citing Wittgenstein, in *Approaches and Meetings: Dynamic
Understandings From Within Living, Indivisible, Complex Wholes.*)

**"You must have come for a reason ... You can't get in without a reason" said the
sentry shaking his head ... "Wait a minute maybe I have an old one you can
use." He took a battered suitcase from the sentry box and began to rummage
busily through it mumbling to himself ... "No ... no ... this won't do ... no ... h-m-
m-m ... ah, this is fine," he cried triumphantly, holding up a small medallion on a
chain. He dusted it off, and engraved on one side were the words**

"WHY NOT?"

(Norman Juster 1961, p.34, in *The Phantom Tollbooth*)

Dialogical Selves: Researching and Living the Underlined 'in' ...

We do not need to 'see' the world from within a framework. In locating us in an as-yet unformulated realm of merely responsive understandings, in situating us primarily in a conversational world of embodied, situated, feelingful or sensuous activity it opens up for study those interactive moments in which we can attempt both to formulate ourselves and or our circumstances in many different ways (Shotter 1997a, p.41, my emphasis).

"What's your research about Susan?" It's such a common taken-for-granted question, sometimes asked with polite disinterest, sometimes with engaged curiosity.

"It's not 'about' anything!" I typically reply. "Aboutness assumes distance. It implies the static Archimedean standpoint with its long lever and faraway view. My research stays up close and personal, working, as Robert Chia (2003) would say, "within the *flow* of living experience" (p.960 original emphasis). I begin with the premise that people and their worlds are always emerging; that we are continuously being created in participative processes and connections. So, my research is in process; relationally participating in each unique interaction in ever unfolding dialogues and embodied conversations. It's definitely not 'about' anything."

The politely disinterested look at me sideways, discomfort and/or pity writ large on their faces and my reply tends to kill the conversation stone dead. The curious engage, and all manner of possibilities and tangents open. It is just as John Shotter succinctly notes above. For in each dialogical instance our 'selves' and our circumstances are formulated in different interactive ways.

Similar processes occur throughout my opening story, "Bums on Seats." A reconstructed day-in-the-life glimpse of 'the conversational world of embodied, situated, feelingful or sensuous activity' in the busy public sector call centre where much of this research takes place. Unlike 'aboutness' forms of research, I will not attempt to analyse or explain the embodied conversational domains this study inhabits through any predetermined or overarching framework. My aims are different. For this research participates in a shared ever-moving world, without, as academics are fond of doing, "tending to privatise or appropriate its resources to a world of our own elite invention" (Shotter 1998a, p.79).

Aims and Aspirations

This aim of this dissertation is to work with/in connection. Specifically, I set out to understand the vague, open and ever-moving dialogical processes that relationally construct and connect people, our ‘selves,’ in the ordinary everyday flow of life, work and research, at a particular organisational case site. At the same time, my research process is in connection. Firstly, the knowing emerging is being co-created with the many people participating ‘on the ground’ as the work evolves. This includes the twenty-four CSRs and managers at Frontline, who are the ‘official’ research participants. It also includes others in the organisation and beyond, who have ‘unofficially’ conversed and contributed to the research in countless ways. This written version extends a sense of connection to its audience (which includes members of the above). I walk my talk by following Peter Clough’s (2002) premise, and writing “*at once* a dissertation *on* process and connection and a work *of* process and connection: my “methodology is thus embodied in the text itself” (p.2, original emphasis).

Working with/in the constantly evolving understandings and confusions of a dynamic research process and the expansive confines of everyday life and work in an organisational setting, this research is:

An interweaving
of
self-constructions
and
relational connections
in
the ambiguities and contradictions
of
embodied lives lived
as
meaning 'full' wholes

Attitudes and Assumptions

... the puzzle now is how to account for our lives together as an unfolding, never fully complete, *living movement* of some kind – with meanings, and the understandings of meanings, as being ‘shown’ in such movements in some way. We need what I shall call, *relational-responsive* forms of understanding, rather than our current *referential-representational* forms, if we are to grasp the nature of lives lived in practice (Shotter 1998a, p.84, original emphasis).

Before I detail the relational-responsive ways of researching and forms of understanding I work with/in here, some explanation of the assumptions and ‘metaphysical attitudes’ (Chia 2003) that inform them is necessary. For, as John Shotter contends above, an ontological position that privileges movement, emergence, and ever-unfolding relational interaction is very different indeed from ‘representationalism’ (Chia 2003) – the still dominant western academic tradition which in:

Privileging an entitative conception of reality generates an attitude that assumes the possibility and desirability of symbolically representing diverse aspects of our phenomenal experiences, using an established and atemporal repository of conceptual categories and terms for the purposes of classification and description. For it is only when portions of reality are assumed to be fixable in space-time, and are relatively unchanging, that they can be adequately represented by words and concepts (Chia 1999, p.215).

When ‘portions of reality,’ for example individuals and organisations, are assumed to be ‘fixable in space-time’ their existence is not only seen as separate and independent (as bounded entities) they can also be characterised by ‘physicalist properties’ (Hosking 1995). As entities, individuals and organisations are assumed to have knowable, definable and stable characteristics that classify “what they are and how they can be known” (Hosking and Haslam 1997, p.86). For example, autonomous individuals can be classified according to observable properties like character traits, identities, and knowledges. Under this schema, I could be characterised as a stable, sociable postgraduate student with some organisational expertise.

Organisations too are attributed observable properties. These often include identity features, size, structure, mission, hierarchy and management systems (Addleson 2000; Chia 1996, 1999; Hosking 2000; Schultz, Hatch, and Holten Larsen 2000). Representationalism is a metaphysical attitude whereby:

Our understanding of the social world is conceptualized through overly dominant static categories that obscure a logic of observational ordering based on the representationalist principles of division, location, isolation, classification and the elevation of self-identity (Chia 1999, p.210).

With these assumptions and attitudes in place, it follows that processes and relations are assumed to occur between independent bounded entities. In an ‘entitative’ (Hosking 1995) understanding of relational process, “some-one with knowable, defining, and stable characteristics, knows and influences some-one and/or something” (Hosking 2000, p.148). Because entities are assumed to be observable and knowable, the emphasis tends to be placed on inputs and outcomes rather than processes. Definable inputs from a particular person or organisational system are monitored and measured to calculate definable outcomes. This means that “*results* or organized states rather than the complex social *processes* that leads to these outcomes or effects” (Chia 1995, p. 581 original emphasis) are privileged. Just as it is at Frontline’s call centre, “the tangible nature of everything, from information to “job performance,” leads to an emphasis on observation and measurement as a means of recording [that is, representing] the world and how it works” (Addleson 2000, p.239). Such attitudes are well developed in the mainstream organisational behaviour (OB), human resource management (HRM), and organisational analysis (OA) literatures (Hosking 1995). They also underpin many current academic and practitioner conceptions of organisational learning and change (Allen-Meyer 2000; Beer and Nohria 2000; Chia 1996, 1999, 2003; Duck 2001; Easterby-Smith, Burgoyne, and Araujo 1999; Gherardi 1999; Kotter 1998; Kotter and Cohen 2002; Schwandt and Marquardt 2000; Senge 1999; Tsoukas and Chia 2002), proving remarkably resilient. In a recent discussion Karl Weick and Robert Quinn (2004) noted that stage models of organisational change in which the entity undergoes some form of change process “have been surprisingly durable over the years. Lewin’s (1951) three stages of change – unfreeze, change, refreeze – continue to be a generic recipe for organizational development” (p.178). In many respects this is not surprising, because:

This reduction into parts and the proliferation of separations has characterised not just organizations, but everything in the Western world during the past three hundred years (Wheatley 1999, p.29).

Using the machine metaphor of seventeenth-century Newtonian physics, where the whole is deemed knowable by a sum of its parts, this reduction and separation allows a sense of predictability and control reflected in the positivist-empiricist laws that still govern the structure and function of much organisational research. Robert Chia's point about the central task of research with this orientation is well made.

In an applied field such as management studies, therefore, the central task is to first make empirical observations of practice, theorize these practices in terms of established conceptual schemas and systems of explanation, verify these principles empirically, and then offer them as written recipes to an eager practitioner audience. The literature on management theory is replete with terminologies, typologies, factor analyses, conceptual proliferations, and even ethnographic studies that purport to explain the goings-on in organizational life (Chia 2003, p.960).

Yet by attempting to justify and explain, that is, to retrospectively use words, concepts and theories to talk about the 'goings-on in organisational life,' such entitative and structured attitudes and assumptions miss the rich possibilities occurring in the flow of participatory involvement where always in-process selves, "*realized through the act of experiencing*" (ibid, p.968 original emphasis), are ever-emerging. Ironically, entitative approaches miss "the fundamental insight of twentieth-century physics ... *relationships are more fundamental than things*" (Senge et al. 2004, p.199 original emphasis).

Peter Senge and his colleagues maintain that, although this "alternative worldview" (p.200) is slowly gaining some credibility, it is yet to "penetrate the social world" (p.199). At the level of organisational practice this may be so, particularly as the efficiency focused machine metaphor continues to be powerful and pervasive (Addleson 2000; Capra 2002; Estes 1996).

Over the past ten to fifteen years diverse and developing movements in the social and organisational academic literatures have seen a shift away from entitative and mechanistic assumptions towards relationally responsive attitudes embracing many of

the process ideas emerging from the ‘new sciences’ such as quantum physics, and postmodern biology (Capra 2002; Reason and Goodwin 1999; Sandelands 1998; Wheatley 1999). The scientific insights from chaos and complexity theory, and from new discoveries in biology about interconnected emergent networks, and creative, non-linear living systems are “leading towards a science of qualities based on participation and intuition ... and the emergence of complex wholes [that] can be applied to social and organizational life” (Reason and Goodwin 1999, p.281).

Such insights, more akin to improvisational art forms than to machines, have inspired novel ways of thinking about human systems, and organisations in particular, as living, adaptive and constantly changing (Crossan et al. 1996; Dusya and Crossan 2004; Feldman 2000, 2004; Humphreys, Brown, and Hatch 2003; Kamoche, Cunha, and Cunha 2003; Pinnington, Morris, and Pinnington 2003; Watson and Harris 1999; Weick 1998, 2004; Weick and Quinn 2004). These ideas about fluid social interaction, although relatively new in the field of organisation studies, have historical footprints in the philosophy and sociology of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century pragmatists and symbolic interactionists. Particularly in the work of William James, Charles Cooley, and George Herbert Mead who formulated ideas about interconnected, relational and social selves “formed by and changing with everyday life” (Holstein and Gubruim 2000, p.17).

Within a broad postmodern movement called social constructionism¹² there has emerged a particular processual approach (or ‘thought style’¹³ as Dian Hosking (2004) would call it), that replaces representationalism’s entitative concern with “looking back upon a fixed and finalized version of the world, in which an *accountable order* is to be discovered” (Shotter 1997a, p.22 original emphasis), with a living participatory involvement that:

¹² The term social construction although widely used, is diffuse. It refers to a loosely assembled body of knowledge with many themes all of which begin with the assumption that ‘reality’ does not exist independently of its social construction. Rather, the many social constructionisms ask “*how* people work together to produce the realities that we all live by” (Campbell 2000, p.9 original emphasis). Some variants emphasize socially constructed products, others centre processes, but all share an emphasis on language as formative, that is, “as forming or constructing persons and worlds” (Hosking 1999, p.119). For an overview see Kenneth Gergen (1999).

¹³ Staying with/in ideas about complex ever emerging wholes, the term ‘thought style,’ first coined by Ludwick Fleck (1979), is picked up by Dian Hosking and used to invoke a style of thinking that is processual, “bigger than a theory, but ‘softer’ and ‘weaker’ than a paradigm” (Hosking 2004, p.259).

[P]rivileges an ontology of movement, emergence and *becoming* in which the transient and ephemeral nature of what is 'real' is accentuated. What is real for postmodern thinkers are not so much social states, or entities, but emergent relational interactions and patternings that are recursively intimated in the fluxing and transforming of our life worlds (Chia 1995, p.581/2 original emphasis).

An 'ontology of becoming' assumes social interdependencies and relational processes. It assumes that all knowledges and knowings are on-going local and particular constructions where "individual selves and ways of organizing are only by-products of perpetually shifting constellations of relations, never fundamental stable unities in their own rights" (Chia 2003, p.969). These attitudes and assumptions not only recognise and encourage emersion "in inquiry as it is lived" (Lather 1997, p.233), they also recognise and encourage that location and its (re)presentation as valid in and of itself.

Instead of third-person explanatory reports 'about' research there is a movement towards reflexive first-person tellings of a whole range of everyday activities within which researchers and researched actively co-create their participative worlds (Chandler and Torbert 2003; Ellis 2004; Humphreys, Brown, and Hatch 2003; Marshall 2004; Shotter 2004; Tillmann-Healy 2001; Watson 2000; Watson and Harris 1999). This work allows a sharply nuanced experiencing of "inquiry *in action*" (Marshall 2004, p.307, original emphasis) within the conversations, connections and relational interactions where our "knowledging" activities emerge and develop (Shotter 2003a). It explores the implications:

[O]f viewing research processes both as processes of construction (rather than a means to produce data) and as relational processes in which 'the researcher' is inevitably actively involved, *co-constructing* particular people and worlds. This little bit of polyphony invites researchers to do something other than 'report' products and processes – *joining with* is now invited through some form of collaborative or participative action (Hosking 1999, p.119 original emphasis).

Becoming ... Always Becoming ...

“So I expect this inquiry, the knowledging of this dissertation, is emerging and developing in the interactions and conversations (thinking/talking/writing) you are having with these ideas, research practices and literatures?”

“Absolutely!” (All PhD students talk to themselves by the way ... I think it has something to do with the solitary nature of the process at times). “This emerging dissertation is one of the by-products of my dialogical ‘shifting constellations of relations’ (Chia 2003) with the written words of others. This is why I use the first names of the scholars I cite (talk with?). In communicative relationship I address them as whole people; friends even. For after months, years, in their textural company, they seem more than lofty acquaintances. Many of their words and ideas challenge and change me. And in the flow of participatory involvement, I in turn seek to challenge them.”

To live within a community which one senses as being one’s own, as ‘mine’ as well as ‘yours,’ as ‘ours’ rather than ‘theirs,’ a community for which one feels able to be answerable, one must be more than just a routine reproducer of it; one must in a real sense also play a part in its creative reproduction and sustenance as a living tradition... What part might academic tool or image-makers’ play in promoting its greater possibility? (Shotter 1993, p.16).

Primed with an understanding of the attitudes and assumptions that underpin and ‘softly’ guide a relational-responsive ontology of becoming, the puzzle still remains how to do so? How, as John Shotter (1998a) asks, are we to account for our unfolding, never fully complete living movements and their ever emerging relational meanings? For, as Susan Smith (2000) remarks, “it is easier to document what is done than to appreciate what is happening in the ‘doings’” (p.635).

Becoming With/in Stories ...

In this dissertation I have chosen to use stories as the primary medium in which I both document, that is recreate what was done, and reflexively appreciate becoming, that is, explore complex happenings in their ‘doings.’ Stories work on many levels. To begin with, at its most fundamental level research is about making meaning, and human

beings have made meaning in story since the beginning of time. Stories are the medium of our being and knowing, of our doing and telling. “As social beings we live storied lives” (Rosenwald and Ochberg 1992, p.8). We dwell with/in stories.

Our identities – who we are and what we do – originate in the tales passed down to us and the stories we take on as our own. In this sense stories constitute “our medium of being” (Schafer, 1981). Storytelling is both a *method* of knowing – a social practice – and a way of telling about our lives (Richardson, 1990) (Bochner 1997, p.435, original emphasis).

Because stories constitute our ‘medium of becoming,’ staying with/in the flux and flow of this creative conversational way of knowing enables me to work with/in always emerging social processes and relational connections. At the same time, stories as a ‘way of telling,’ enable my re(construction) of the “once-occurrent” (Bakhtin 1993, p.2) events and relationships that (re)make us in the research process. Stories bring to life the underlined in. They keep us in the ‘conversational world of embodied, situated and feelingful activity’ and open up those ‘interactive moments’ in which we ‘formulate ourselves and our circumstances in many different ways’ (Shotter 1997a, p.41). Most importantly, when well crafted, stories avoid the academic’s tendency to explain everything. For as Walter Benjamin succinctly observes, “it is half the art of storytelling to keep a story free from explanation as one reproduces it” (Benjamin 1970/1955, p.89).

As social practices, stories also invite participation, dialogical connections and communicative relational processes. They are, as Richard Kearney (2002) points out, “open-ended invitations to ethical and poetic responsiveness” (p.156).

Stories gather people around them, dialectically connecting people... Storytelling is a relational activity that encourages others to listen, to share, and to empathize. It is a collaborative practice and assumes that tellers and listeners/questioners interact in particular cultural milieus and historical contexts which are essential to interpretation (Kohler Riessman 2002, p.696/7).

The idea and explication of stories, in the context of a research process, also allows me to draw attention to the creativity and artifice inherent in all forms of meaning making. While representationalism privileges particular kinds of texts, for example

the conventional research report “which appears to possess some kind of authoritativeness or representativeness, to be academic or ‘official’” (Fox 1995, p.4), these writing practices exercise the power of convention and obscure the fact that:

Genres of writing are practices, which writers engage in to stage authority by presenting knowledge in conventional forms... [W]riting cannot neutrally represent ‘reality’ but rather that writing itself constructs the reality that it proposes to represent (Rhodes 2002, p.99).

At the conclusion of my opening story ‘Bums on Seats’ in chapter one, I pose Deborah Ceglowski’s (1997) question “that’s a good story, but is it really research?” (p.188). The question challenges conventional research’s dominant representational forms. Because “knowledge represented in conventionally accepted genres is less an achievement of a representation of ‘reality,’ and more the exclusion of other possible meanings” (Rhodes 2002, p.103). The stories and poems I weave throughout this dissertation highlight and critique the politics of power and difference between various writing genres. Scattered amongst more conventional forms of academic prose, they interrupt and disrupt to “make visible the underlying labour of sociological production and its sales pitch (conventional rhetoric)” (Richardson 1992, p.26). This does not mean I am opposed to using ‘conventional rhetoric.’ What it does mean, is I use it self-consciously, as one among a number of creative strategies or genres. Even though powerful voices in the academy chatter conventional standards, legitimacy and reputation, promoting ‘tribal belonging’ and cautioning “I cannot be a member of the tribe unless I behave ‘properly’ ... doing something ‘properly’ is a way of not doing it differently” (Burrows 2001, p.143).

In this dissertation I do things differently. Inclusively I recognise:

It isn’t an either/or situation. Experiential, academic, and poetic truths are all helpful in different ways for understanding the nature of a situation. Each has a unique contribution (Kilbourn 1999, p.31, my emphasis).

Paul Stoller (1997) calls this sensuous scholarship.

Scholarship in which experience and reality, imagination and reason, difference and commonality are fused and celebrated in both rigorous and imaginative practices as well as in expository and evocative expression (p. 91).

I use various ways of ‘telling’ to work the multidimensional aspects of this interplay. I weave conversations with academic voices (more conventionally called ‘quotes from the literature’) into conversations with my research colleagues (more conventionally called ‘participants’), moving in and out of different representational registers and domains in the hope of creating an open “conversational space [that] allows contradictions, inconsistencies, anomalies and conflicts to be visible” (Byrne-Armstrong 2001, p.71) across broad and inclusive interpretive domains.

Regardless of writing genre, all the stories (experiential, academic and poetic) work with dialogue taken from my research conversations and field notes. The events and relationships detailed stem from the “practical activities, daily doings and contested truths” (Plummer 1995, p.24) as experienced during many months spent in the organisation on which this study is based. From my involvement within ever-moving relational processes and connections, I have crafted impressionist tales using a number of ‘literary’¹⁴ conventions (metaphor, imagery, dialogue, and dramatic recall to name a few) to evocatively bring the call centre and its cast of research characters into life.¹⁵ I self-consciously mix genres to create a method of knowing and a way of telling, based both on the systematic observations of social science, and stylistic conventions more commonly used in fiction. John Van Maanen stresses, “the main obligation of the impressionist is to keep the audience alert and interested” (1988, p.119). Indeed, my intention is certainly to engage you my reader in relational worlds, to allow you, as far as possible to see, hear, and feel as those participating saw, heard, and felt (Sparkes 1995). Because:

Qualitative researchers need to be storytellers ... To be able to tell (which, in academia, essentially means to be able to write) a story well is crucial to the enterprise. When we cannot engage others to read our stories ... then our efforts at research are for naught (Wolcott 1994, p.17).

Artful stories can also provide valuable learning. Recent research into the aesthetics of organisational storytelling has shown that audiences are drawn to, and learn effectively from stories that resonate with felt meaning, induce feelings of

¹⁴ I use the term ‘literary’ guardedly as I agree with Marilyn Strathern’s (1987) assertion that all research reports can be called “persuasive fictions” (p.251). As such all employ certain literary strategies, making the term by no means unique to any particular genre.

¹⁵With one obvious exception – me – I have used pseudonyms to protect participants’ anonymity. In some instances I also use composite characters.

connectedness and are enjoyed for their own sake (Taylor, Fisher, and Dufresne 2002).

I begin with the premise that research is relationship (Ceglowski 2002), and this includes its written dimensions. “Words are ‘relational tools’. Their *use* does not depend on individuals alone” (Shotter 1997a, p.26 original emphasis). Language in all its various forms “words the world into existence (as Laurel Richardson 2000 puts it, citing Rose (1992), p.923). With/in story I seek to draw you, my audience, into relationship with this research. To “slow you down and provide you with a chance for contemplation and empathetic response” (Kilbourn 1999, p.29), in the hope that new meanings co-constructed in this (con)textually interactive relationship will offer learning that connects across a number of dimensions.

To engage with research represented in creative form is a creative act in itself. The invitation to the reader in creative forms of representation is different from the invitation in a traditional piece of research ... The use of the language of ‘writer’ and ‘reader’ does not fit in such a model. What were once passive readers can now be invited into an experience, through the lens of their own world (Brearley 2000, paragraph 4).

Author and Audience(s):‘Voices’ In Conversation

When it comes to writing, one of the most important aspects of a research experience is the choice of audience. Generally a doctoral thesis, in its original form, is destined for a very small audience, typically consisting of those who supervise the work and those who examine it. Broader audiences are usually reached by writing conference papers and reworking aspects of the research into articles for professional and academic journals, and the like (Day 2002, September). Therefore, it came as no surprise when those with many years more research experience counselled, “Write for your audience,” a stance premised on the expectation that one writes multiple versions for different audiences. This seemingly uncomplicated advice highlights another important relational connection; one that shapes presentation (how the text looks and sounds), content, and authorship (how the text will be inhabited and by whom). As Yvonna Lincoln (1997) remarks, “the conscious imagining of who might read our work, will have some influence on who we are in the text (p.41).” It will have a similar influence on who we are not. My affinity for a more nuanced, holistic and

relational stance with my ‘imagined’ audience, made a compartmentalised approach difficult, and ultimately inappropriate.

The writer writes and the reader reads – or so it appears. And there the matter rests for most. But in truth, this simple proposition is a mask for a vast system of ambiguities and entanglements (Sven Birkerts 1994, p. 110).

Arguably one of the most vital and ambiguous of those entanglements is the relationship between author and audience. Yet this is a relationship that often does not receive a lot of attention. “In conversation there is an obvious relationship with the people with whom we are speaking. In writing this sense of relationship is not so apparent or obvious” (Horsfall 2001, p.83). Nevertheless relational processes ‘make’ authors and audiences in similar contextual, albeit mediated ways. Charles Bazerman (1988) notes “we should not be fooled by the distance travelled by written language ... writing and reading ... are still highly contextualised social actions, speaking very directly to social context and social goals” (p.22). These relationships contribute to making authoring as Stanley Deetz (2003) claims, a “deeply social” act (p.121).

The words, genre, routines, conventions and places of speaking/writing, while resources for the author, are socially produced, shaping authors, providing sayings beyond those known or intended by authors, making possible the very sight/insight of the author. Further, the call to ‘writing’ is always a response to real situations at best only partly the making of the would-be author. At best the author always speaks from and to a social/historical place of which the author is made as well as trying to make (ibid).

Perhaps unusually for a doctoral project, my research design is premised on the possibilities this socially produced interaction offers. From the beginning in its evolving to original (that is, completed) form, this research was designed, carried out, and is now being written amidst ongoing relationships in various interconnecting life worlds – personal, academic, organisational, familial – all of which in differing and dynamic ways constitute its audience, author and subject matter. I have found the relevance and resonance of this way of working means I am easily able to ‘bounce’ ideas and written material around with colleagues, participants, family and friends. In so doing, the study is moving and taking shape in fluid relational dialogue(s) across diverse and multiple audiences. More formally, my written work-in-progress is given

not only to my academic supervisors, but also to my research participants who are encouraged to ‘talk back’ their feelings, perceptions and comments with me.¹⁶

When I initially approached Frontline’s call centre management I did so in an action research frame of mind. Philosophically opposed to the idea of researching ‘on’ people primarily for the career benefits of the researcher, I ambitiously sought a more complicated, and for me, more rewarding way of going about things. The appeal of action research lay in its two broad and essential aims: to improve (often on many and varied levels), and to involve (all participants in the inquiry) (Dickens and Watkins 1999). Yet neither aim can be achieved if knowledge created through a research process grounded in the experiences of all those involved, is presented in such a way as to exclude some of them from its collective story. This is more than just an issue of access. It is also an issue of relationship, of accountability and ethics.

As deeply engaged social scientists, the way we represent the world to our colleagues and related audiences contributes to our ongoing relationships within these life worlds. Our words constitute forms of action that invite others into certain forms of relationship as opposed to others (Gergen 2002, p.13).

Our words and actions constitute the relational domain of embodied language, which in all its myriad forms is one of the most powerful ways to communicate. This possibility, so taken-for-granted in everyday social interaction, tends to overshadow its equally effective ability to shut out and silence those not privy to particular language contexts or games. An example of this is the traditional academic style of writing which creates rarefied relational distance.

Finalised by the past tense, the analytic synthesis of abstract ‘data’ presented in retrospective professional voices of intellectual authority, sets authors apart from everyday life, their subject matter, and their audiences. Accountability is first and foremost premised on the requirements of particular disciplines, and the words contribute to orderly forms of life for the initiated schooled in the appropriate conventions within these boundaries.

In their formality, their cryptic phrasings, and their certitude they imply an author who is a bounded autonomous entity – different from and superior

¹⁶ I go into this aspect of my methodology in more detail in Chapter Three.

to the reader. The writer is the source, the seer, the knower, the audience is positioned by the writing as passive or ignorant (Gergen 2002, p.14).

John Shotter (2004a) suggests this form of ‘aboutness’ writing is monological in that it is unresponsive to others and works only in terms of the writer’s point of view. He calls the process and the products of this exclusive culture of monologue and mastery “textual violence,” highlighting an important ethical dimension hidden in its relational stance. “Such a style of writing hides its politics of ethics, it hides the fact that it treats people as indistinguishable, isolated ‘atoms’ of disembodied, unlocated subjectivity” (1997a, p.28).

Neither I, nor any of the other voices that contribute to this research, are ‘isolated atoms.’ Rather, we are emerging in living interaction with each other. As author of this text I am in dynamic, messy, contingent and often unpredictable relationship with a research process, its products, and all the many people involved in its unfolding. Dialogue with, and accountability to, all these ‘participants’ is integral to the knowing being produced here (Gottschalk 1998). Socially constructed stories “contextualised in relation to multiple local-cultural-historical acts and texts” (Hosking 2004, p.271), creatively (re)present this fluidity. Inclusively using everyday language, because as Eero Riihonen (1999) notes, “the *living* interaction that is the source of connectedness uses living everyday words and expressions” (p.140, original emphasis). They narrate the indeterminate realities emerging within the complex, interactive everyday “jumble of experience” (Game and Metcalfe 1996, p.76).

This is no simple task. Laurel Richardson (1997) asks, “Is it possible to both serve the host community and serve yourself in [a PhD] text that bears your name as author?” (p.111). She argues that to do so will require a “genre breaking reworking of research methods and a deep rethinking of who/what constitutes the author/subject of research” (p.115). To do this Yvonna Lincoln (1997) contends “[w]e will have to find ourselves and our voices, since breaking out of our scholarly “native languages” and learning new ones to match our new commitments will not be easy” (p.42).

I’m drawn to the possibilities offered by Laurel and Yvonna’s calls to ‘break’ from familiar genres and languages, and see the finding and writing of our ‘selves’ and our ‘voices’ as a useful strategy to do this. However, as I have already noted ‘selves’ and ‘voices’ are multiply positioned and always in-process; always becoming. This means

they are not as easily ‘found’ as more traditional research accounts would have us believe. Unlike the entitative, autonomous individuals that inhabit many research tales, whose carefully (researcher) chosen words strategically illustrate a particular stand or worldview (Sparkes 1995), this research is peopled by an untidy cast of complex, dynamic and multidimensional characters. Constantly negotiating the messy everyday ambiguities of work, life and research, they are socially and contextually located, relationally engaged human beings, always in the process of making each other within the flow of day-to-day experience.

My task in understanding and authoring the lives that inhabit this text is to (re)present the myriad dimensions of relational becoming in as many of its nuanced interwoven colours and textures as possible. For as Haridimos Tsoukas and Robert Chia (2002) point out, we still don’t know a lot about the fine-grained micro-processes of people’s dynamic, emergent becoming in organisational settings.

In taking on this challenge I stay up close and personal with/in this research process by framing this account as a non-linear “unfolding, never fully complete living moment of some kind ...” (Shotter 1998a, p.84). I work dialogically in an open-ended “enlarged conversation” (Goodall 2000, p.14); an interpersonal, textual conversation that occurs simultaneously with and amongst its ever-moving participant ‘voices,’ and its reading audience.

Me, Myself, I ... A Life ‘Passing Through’

John Marks writes that “One’s own story is interesting in that it has something to do with a life that ‘passes through’ the individual” (1998, p.6). The life which passes through us is indicative of the ‘geology’ of the collective, the aggregates in and through which we live, rather than the genealogy of the Individual or Subject (Harrison 2000, p.496).

I am mindful that no matter how I choose to write, or how I attempt to relate and converse with my audience, as the author of this text (or narrator of these socially constructed stories) I occupy a privileged position. While fashioning this research as conversation and inviting dialogue, I am ultimately responsible for what is written down. After all, I am the educated, middleclass, forty-something, Pakeha

woman/wife/mother/student¹⁷ who is crafting the story. These historically located and always partial and in-process identities made and remade in relationship with others, are part of the ‘life that passes through me,’ and they shape my point of view. Therefore, making “my*selves”¹⁸ (the multiple voices and embodied silences of my different identities and subject positions) as visible as possible is another textual strategy I employ.

Nonetheless, it is important to note that my particular “ways of seeing are also ways of not seeing” (Burke 1954, p.70). My situation and life experiences will both enable and inhibit particular kinds of insight or knowing, and my multiply positioned subjectivities will always produce “a distinctive mix of insight and blindness” (Rosaldo 1989, p.19). Indeed many people at the call centre were very aware of this positionality and its limitations. In relation to the callers, other staff members, and the work in general there was a fondness for remarking, somewhat ironically at times “you just don’t know what you just don’t know.”

Consciously showing this situated knowing, and speculating on the not knowing, is one of my reasons for inhabiting the text as I do. Another is to critique the disconnection between research and everyday life common in many academic texts (Cosslett, Lury, and Summerfield 2000; Cotterill and Letherby 1993).

Removing research from the context of the relationships in which it is embedded mystifies it and places it in an ivory tower that can be reached only by the anointed. That research is a part of everyday life is disguised, maintaining the barrier between everyday living and research (Horsfall, Byrne-Armstrong, and Higgs 2001, p.3).

In doing this I am inspired by the practical possibilities offered in American philosopher Ken Wilbur’s integrative theories and models. Because like him:

I believe, a little bit of wholeness is better than none at all, and an integral vision offers considerably more wholeness than the slice-and-dice

¹⁷ I could go on, but prefer to avoid the ‘taxonomic urge’ (Chia 1996) to tidy my variously located selves into neat and static categories, particularly as an exploration of identity-in-process is central to this research.

¹⁸ The textual construction of my*self in this way uses Eileen Day’s (2002, September) convention, it signals the construction of the self through the use of multiple voices (para. 5). For none of us exists independent of our relationships with our various selves; as Paul John Eakin (1999) notes “there are many stories of self to tell and more than one self to tell them (p.xi).

alternatives. We can be more whole, or less whole; more fragmented, or less fragmented; more alienated, or less alienated – and an integral vision invites us to be a little more whole, a little less fragmented, in our work our lives, our destiny (Wilber 2001, p.xii).

In order to reveal the complex interplay occurring within everyday living and research, I apply the ‘wholeness’ Ken Wilber advocates to my own processes by writing ‘my*selves’ into the picture.

But my most important reason for being present in the text is based on ethics and accountability. In this dissertation I am arguing that selves are created in ‘relational engagement’ (McNamee 2000). To make a credible contribution to the research conversation I am part of crafting here, I have a responsibility to be present as both a central character in the process, and as the “self-examining narrator” (Goodall 2000, p.23) of the stories as they unfold. To contribute to such a research conversation in an inquiring, embodied and mindful way cannot be done from a distance. After all:

In life’s conversations, whom do you trust – the person who never discloses her or his own feelings, who has no interesting life stories to offer in exchange for the details of yours? Or do you trust the person who emerges in the talk as someone living a passionate and reflective life, someone willing to share with you its joys, its pain, its speculations, its ambiguities? (ibid).

There are professional and personal risks in choosing to work this way; in positioning my variously situated selves so visibly. Not the least of which are the oft-repeated academic charges of ‘confessional’ irrelevance and self-indulgence (Collinson 2002; Jipson and Paley 1997; Mykhalovskiy 1997; Skeggs 2002). Regarded in some quarters as a “tightwire activity in the academy” (Jipson and Paley 1997, p.6), these risks are matched by my equally valid concern that my family and friends understand my disclosures and still speak to me at the end of the process! Of self-reflexive practice, Beverley Skeggs (2002) asks the pertinent, classic, and always appropriate sociological question “in whose interests?” (p.369). It is a good question, and one I ask myself each time I consider if, and how to use both my own and other people’s disclosures. That said, I remain convinced as Charles Altieri (1996) does that “as an ethical mode, autobiography paradoxically provides a counter to fantasies of powerful, autonomous selves, because it forces us to confront how determined we are by

contingent forces that we cannot control” (p.57). It is as John Marks (1998) notes, an always in-process indicator of the life that “passes through” an individual (cited in Harrison, 2000, p.496).

While the important ethical, ontological and epistemological interests I have outlined above are prime motivators for my autobiographical stance, this way of being in the text also serves another purpose. The social, political and theoretical dimensions of personal experience have long been recognised, with the social science critiques of feminist, black, post-colonial, and queer scholars being key exemplars (for example see, Bonner et al. 1992; Collins 1990; hooks 1992; Jaggar and Bordo 1992; Minh-Ha 1991; Okely 1992; Plummer 1995). In working these dimensions through a critical self-reflexive lens, “*autobiography does indulge the self of the writer by treating the writer’s experience as worthy of inquiry*” (Mykhalovskiy 1997, original emphasis).

In treating my experience as ‘worthy of inquiry,’ my presence in the text can also be seen as a form of first-person action research. This orientation regards systemic, critical self-in-society awareness as a crucial and necessary basis for all inquiry (Marshall 2001; Reason and Bradbury 2001). By “living life as inquiry” (Marshall 1999, 2002) through the action and reflection of first-person research, I not only get to explore the relational processes that fascinate me in a deeply grounded, and embodied first hand manner, I also gain greater understanding in the flux and flow of everyday knowing and experiencing how these relational processes ‘re-author,’¹⁹ that is, how they ‘make’ me along the way. The joy of this “coming to know perspective on [my]selves, contexts and others” (Goodall 2000, p.137) is what keeps me going in the face of significant challenges. It’s not easy fashioning a creative intellectual life amidst the hurly-burly of my everyday responsibilities and realities (some of which I signal on the following page) within an institution (the university) steeped in more distanced ‘traditional’ research practices and protocols (Blumenfeld-Jones 2002; Brearley 2000; Burrows 2001; Ellis 2004). However, as Martin Mulligan (2001) puts it ... “above all if the research you are doing fails to bring you enjoyment and/or satisfaction then think again. As the French like to say ‘Life is too short ...’” (p.142).

¹⁹ I was introduced to this concept by Hilary Bryne-Armstrong (2001) drawing on the work of Michael White (1995).

While Doing this PhD²⁰

my son, the eldest, was arrested
my daughter, the only, learned to skate
my husband, worried about redundancy
was promoted
and all but disappeared into corporate life

Peter Blake, was killed
in the Amazon, by pirates

my mother, the stoic, dealt to cancer
my son, the middle, went to uni
my brother-in-law, the only
left my sister
broken-hearted
Helen Clark, became our first
elected woman prime minister

my son, the youngest, turned eighteen
one spring September day
and celebrated, sanctioned entry
into an adult world.
half the planet away
an autumn morning, the day before
some said, that world was changed forever

I almost drowned, in a knowledge wave
I tried on Buddhism, and found a fit
I bought a lot of shoes

²⁰ I am indebted to Laurel Richardson's (1997) wonderful exemplar "While I was Writing a Book" used as my template for this poem (pgs. 203-204).

‘Once Upon a Time’ ... Backgrounds, Border Crossings and Tensions: Working With/in the Flux and Flow of Becoming.

“‘Once upon a time’... A tale was spun from bits and pieces of experiences, linking past happenings with present ones and casting both into a dream of possibilities ...” (Kearney 2002, p.5).

The genesis of this study probably began over fifteen years ago when, as a young single mother of three preschool boys, I came across an article by sociologist Claudia Bell in a January 1986 edition of *New Zealand Women’s Weekly*.



In the article Claudia took a novel approach to the New Year resolutions present in almost every women’s magazine by suggesting that “1986 becomes the year that New Zealand women begin to write journals.”²¹ What’s original about this I hear you say – haven’t women have been keeping journals and diaries for hundreds of years? However Claudia is a sociologist, and her take on this age old practice, alongside her assertion that we are the “experts” when it comes to chronicling our own lives, not only intrigued me it also fired me into action, instigating an enjoyable habit of documenting the contextual interplay of my life-in-the-world that I continue to this day.

²¹The article (reproduced on the following page) is pasted inside the front cover of the first journal (of many) I created following Claudia Bell’s suggestion. Not yet schooled in bibliographic conventions I noted its date only as January 1986. Although I could have undertaken an archive search to ascertain volume and page numbers I chose not to, preferring to maintain the integrity of the original representation.

A WOMAN'S PLACE



CONGRATULATIONS to all those people who made resolutions last year, and stuck to them. Well done!

(Those of us who are already perfect didn't have to, of course!)

Whether you made resolutions again this year or not, I have a suggestion. My suggestion is that 1986 becomes the year that New Zealand women begin to write journals.

No, I don't mean a daily ordeal of sitting down and obediently recounting the day's events, as if life is a shopping-list of unrelated activities. Rather, I am suggesting a unique record of oneself, 1986.

What on earth for, you may ask. Because, I reply, some day someone may want to read about Women, 1986. It might be our daughters and nieces and friends and grand-daughters in 10 or 20 or 30 or 100 years. (Think what a treasure we would own, if our grandmothers had left us such a record!) Or it might be ourselves, next year. Our lives are important to us, and to people near us. They are also an important part of New Zealand social history (herstory, in the Newspeak).

So I have this happy vision of all New Zealand women trotting off to buy themselves each a large solid book, with alternative lined and blank pages. In this they will write what is happening to them in 1986. Not every day, but when they feel like it. There is no need for guilt if sometimes it isn't touched for a week or two or three. No one has to fill a page every day.

And, along with our stories, the story of New Zealand, and the world. Headlines and newspaper items that interest us, and form a backdrop to our lives. The state of the nation, traced alongside the state of us. Not in detail, but to provide a context. And small, perhaps bizarre, news items that intrigued us.

Comments on books we read, with perhaps reviews showing what others thought. Notes on films and special television programmes, and what they said to us. Photographs, sketches, bits-and-pieces to keep forever.

A New Zealand exhibition of books by artists showed that books do not have to be all words and pictures. Pieces of fabric, wallpaper patches, pressed leaves and flowers — all are objects that surround us, details we live with. What we wore, what we had in our houses and gardens at different times of the year, what we cooked, ate, read, did at work and socially, where we went on holidays, what we talked about with our friends — and why we did, and how we felt about it — all explained by the Experts: us.

If you think this implies that we are all women of leisure, with lots of spare time, then the time this takes is being over-estimated. Half an hour now and then to make an entry, and cuttings collected as they are found, is little effort to make for creation of illustrated autobiographies.

Why bother? Because this is a form of social history. Records of this type render women visible. The official stories of history do not tell nearly enough about what most people actually did, every day. We can tell it ourselves.

My hope for 1986 is that women will keep journals. I'm hoping, most of all, that those women who think, 'Oh, but nothing interesting to write about ever happens to me' will be assured that the fact that they are women living in New Zealand now, doing various things, is important enough to record.

— CLAUDIA BELL

Claudia's prompt was prescient. The journal collages I have compiled over the years provide me with an invaluable record of the psycho-social complexities of my work and life lived within a rapidly changing world. As my children grew older and I enrolled in and completed degrees in sociology and education, I was also able to use the very embodied, emotional, reflexive, self-in-society practice of journal keeping to shape my intellectual interests, and questions. Somewhat ironically, the practice gave me a longstanding basis on which to challenge the disembodied prose of academia's status quo. Of course, "any literary form imprisons lived experience, yet without form or structure it would be impossible to convey any experience" (Ronai 1992, p.123). Conveying my experiences through the abundant layers of cuttings collected, poems written, and photographs and feelings portrayed over the years, allowed me to understand living within ever unfolding relational worlds in richly nuanced and multifaceted ways.

Buoyed by these insights I began to use them in my academic life and for a while regarded my Masters thesis as the culmination of this process. In this study I focused on the paid and unpaid work of women, mothers in particular, to show how changing but limited definitions of what counts as work in New Zealand's free market social and economic policies, both misrepresented and masked the multidimensionality of contemporary women's (over)work. I also considered how more holistic definitions and values encompassing life and work might enable a more gender equitable future (Copas 1999).

At the completion of my Masters degree I left academia for a short time. However, keen to extend the theoretical and political dimensions I'd already explored, I was drawn to doctoral work and the chance to empirically explore how life and work might interplay in an organisational setting. A preliminary search of the literature revealed that much has been written about the 'worklife' experiences of women, particularly those in professional and managerial positions (see for example - Buxton 1998; Ellis and Wheeler 1991; Hertz and Marshall 2001; Kaltrieder 1997; Kofodimos 1993; Marshall 1995; McKenna 1997; Williams 2000). It also showed the experiences of men are beginning to have a presence (Braun Levin 2000; Coltrane 1997; Friedman and Greenhaus 2000; Levine and Pittinsky 1998). Yet the stories I was eager to learn more about, the voices of those (the majority) negotiating multifaceted working lives at less lofty heights of an increasingly insecure

employment hierarchy seemed to be rather more scarce. As luck would have it - for someone considering embarking upon a PhD - the gap in the (academic) storyline just happened to be in the area that interested me most. So this study was born, although in very different form to what it has shape-shifted towards.

Flash Back: Life and Work Conundrums and Connections

Research is a convoluted and iterative process, full of ‘emergent visions’ (Bateson 1990). Ideas, improvisations and discoveries, swirl and spiral shaping creativity, and refocusing and redefining an always moving experiential process. The puzzles and conundrums about work and life I was eager to explore in doctoral research were topical and plausible (I was funded and several organisations were keen to take part). They provided an important context and springboard for what has unfolded and so it’s important to detail these beginnings here.

Some time ago, when I first began thinking about this research and putting those thoughts into action, I confidently opened this chapter with what I then claimed to be the “central thesis of this research.” I unequivocally named this touchstone the “inseparability of life and work.” Already in relational process mode, I took issue with a common perception that ‘life’ and ‘work’ could be envisaged and enacted as separate spheres of human existence and endeavour (Berg, Kalleberg, and Appelbaum 2003; Friedman and Greenhaus 2000; Galinsky 2001; *Harvard Business Review on Work and Life Balance* 2000; Kaltrieder 1997). But in making this claim I was not aware of the thought styles and relational language I would subsequently find in the social constructionist literatures, where ontological primacy is given to connection and flow; to an always in-process becoming of people and their worlds. Instead, my suggestion that ‘life’ and ‘work’ were inseparable and interactive was based on a ‘life question.’ That is, the living experience often lurking behind many research conundrums (particularly in the so-called ‘social sciences’). I wondered why, when my life, just like the women in Mary Catherine Bateson’s (1990) study, is an on-going improvisation, an ever-moving, merging and emerging of personal, familial and professional priorities and responsibilities, joys and challenges; why is it that in other worlds (those of organisations, of academia, of government policy) ‘life’ and ‘work’ are so often divided into separate categories? And why are we always being encouraged to ‘balance’ these artificial separations?

I immersed myself in a raft of writing and found these separations (the ubiquitous spatial and temporal distinctions, and the on-going (re)configurations of what constitutes ‘work’ and ‘life’ in the academic, practitioner and popular literatures), have fuelled a preoccupation with managing what is now commonly called ‘worklife’ issues and ‘worklife balance.’ Aided and abetted by government policy, organisational initiatives, human resource specialities, diversity consultants and the like, this preoccupation is commonplace in the Western World (for example see: Franks 1999; Fredriksen-Goldsen and Scharlach 2001; Friedman and Greenhaus 2000; *Harvard Business Review on Work and Life Balance* 2000; Hertz and Marshall 2001; Hochschild 1997; Meiksins and Whalley 2002; New Zealand Ministry of Women's Affairs 2002; Parasuraman and Greenhaus 1997; Rapoport et al. 2002; Revington 2002; Shellenbarger 1999; Wedemeyer and Jue 2002; Williams 2000).

I discovered that while it is becoming more common for those working in the field to signal the increasingly anachronistic aspects of treating life and work²² as separate arenas (for example see, Franks 1999; Gerson and Jacobs 2001; Pringle and Mallon 2003; Rapoport et al. 2002; Valcour and Batt 2003), the majority of authors and practitioners continue to argue for various forms of work and life ‘balance’ as a way of counteracting complex and competing demands on limited individual and organisational time and resources. This framework, premised on the traditional assumption of separate competing spheres, with life on one side, work on the other, and some sort of ‘balance’ between envisaged as an ideal state, both describes and maintains a powerful disconnection, a ‘zero-sum game’ (Friedman, Christensen, and Degroot 2000) that drives many of our everyday practices, our organisational cultures and policies, and our social norms.

Glance into history and it becomes apparent that life and work have long been thought of as separate spheres. The legacy dates back to the nineteenth century development of industry, and the physical disconnection of work and home – a divide that still holds firm today. In the developed world our current post-industrial penchant for ‘flexibility’ has created fluidity in some arenas, but more typically, institutional and

²² You may have noticed that throughout this section I privilege ‘life’ over ‘work’ rather than following the more typical work and life or ‘worklife’ protocol used in these debates. Beyond semantics, and in agreement with philosophers like John O’Donohue (1997) and Alan Watts, (1966), and educationalists like Parker Palmer (1993), I feel that undertaking and understanding the complexities of one’s lifework is more important than ‘balancing’ one’s artificially separated ‘worklife’.

organisational policies and practices concerning time and place continue to be powerful delimiters separating life from work (Ciulla 2000).

Nonetheless, all is not as clear cut as it seems, because the separation of life and work is at one and the same time notional and real, as concrete as it is chimerical. Janus-faced, these contradictory true and false dimensions coexist uneasily. They play out in the everyday going about of complex working lives, where embodied human beings traverse and transgress real and imaginary boundaries all the time. In both subtle and not so subtle ways, these ‘border crossings’ surface many dimensions of inseparability and interplay (Campbell Clark 2000).

Armed with a conviction that “work is as integral to life as fishing,”²³ and the sense that “paid work is a part of life – a necessary one for most adults and often a meaningful and rewarding one as well” (Rapoport et al. 2002, p.16), I took an integral vision of becoming ‘a little more whole, a little less fragmented in our lives’ (Wilber 2001, p.xii) and ventured into this complex and convoluted territory. In many respects I did so without a map.

But I did have a plan! Interested in developing a more integral understanding of the ‘bigger picture,’ the inextricable fluidity the separate categories ‘life’ and ‘work’ deny, I decided to use a kaleidoscopic approach engaging multiple refractions of the concepts and practices of relationship, identity, and reflexivity.²⁴ I would work with ideas and emerging actualities of relationship, identity and reflexivity using the organisational setting of my case site and the storied lives of its inhabitants (including my own) as both a ‘topic and resource’ (Scott 1998). My objective in working with/in our everyday interactive worlds was to collaboratively develop more refined understandings inside the flux and flow.

Importantly, like Suzan and Jeremy Lewis (1996), I believe organisational inhabitants who holistically understand their constantly moving worlds are better placed to create working environments based on synergy and broader conceptions of organisational and social wellbeing than are considered at present. Of course doing so requires a considerable rethinking of the well established and narrow ‘cost-benefit’ approaches

²³ As one of the founding directors of marketing and consulting company RCubed, a joint winner of the 2002 New Zealand Equal Opportunities Trust ‘Walk the Talk’ Worklife award succinctly put it (cited in Revington 2002, p.19).

²⁴ I develop these conceptual lenses in Chapter Four

that currently treat employees primarily as human ‘resources’ or human ‘capital’ (Copas 1999, 2001). A holistic and integral approach offers a different way to recognise and appreciate the value of people as human beings. Or as this research process is teaching me, of recognising and appreciating people and organisations as constantly moving human becomings ...

Proposals, Predicaments and Possibilities

My initial research proposal²⁵ outlined three collaborative multi sector ‘worklife’ case studies to be undertaken with predominantly entry level service workers in New Zealand call centres.²⁶ In it I took the authoritative tone increasingly required by the academy of such documents. I carefully and systematically laid out the rationale for the work, summarising its major objectives, signalling the methodology/methods I would use to achieve them, and providing the obligatory optimistic timeline in which to accomplish it all. While well read and academically conversant with the area in which I wanted to work, I did all of this before ever having actually set foot inside a call centre!

The reading, thinking and asking of many questions that preceded my writing such a proposal were an important and necessary part of clarifying my intentions at that stage. However, “[t]he production of knowledge is not a clear and systematic process; it is whimsical and unpredictable” (Byrne-Armstrong 2001, p.70), as a great deal of time now spent in call centres has shown me. With the benefit of this experience I marvel at my initial naïveté (or was it arrogance and ignorance?). I now wonder if PhD research proposals should come with health warnings much as other dangerous substances do ... My sense is, that at the very least, space should be provided for the caveat, “you don’t know what you don’t know,” so plan time and save energy for ensuing eventualities around this all important factor.

By the end of the first year, what began as a three sector proposal had transformed into a one site, multilevel (CSRs and managers), in-depth case study in the public sector. It became apparent fairly early on that the emerging relationships, organisational concerns, and life and work processes being co-constructed would overfill the pages of multiple dissertations if I were to continue with three sites as

²⁵ See Appendix 1

²⁶ How the project came to be located in a call centre is discussed in the following section.

originally planned. Those participating in what was to be my first case site did so enthusiastically, and the richness of the life and work conversations I was part of, along with the lives being shared, irrevocably deepened and changed my research focus highlighting the relational dimensions I now privilege.

For a while I danced on a fault line. Comfortable with how the research was unfolding and taking on a life of its own, but not yet reconciled to letting go of the template so thoroughly detailed in my original research proposal, it took me some time to accept that the dilemmas change presents are on-going and inevitable in a process world. That living “between mystery and mastery” (Flood 1999, p.83) will always be part of working with/in the tensions of ‘coming to know’ evolving on many levels. Eventually like Hilary Bryne-Armstrong:

I began to see this change not as a problem but as a strength; not as an issue separate to the research but as the research itself; not as something separate from the researcher but as the learning of the researcher herself; epistemology as ontology ... knowing as being (ibid p.68).

Or, from my newly emerging perspective, ‘knowing as becoming.’ For as the research shape-shifted and evolved, I turned to the relational constructionist literatures in order to develop new ways of understanding the processes that were constructing the work. In many ways my academic (dis)location as an interdisciplinary student aided this process because it sped up my realisation that adding in knowledge(s), or different ways of seeing, creates more space for multiplicities of becoming. I explicitly chose to undertake this research across faculties, Business and Arts, and disciplines, Management and Employment Relations and Sociology, in order to take advantage of the opportunities this way of working presented for a wider view. At the same time, boundary riding and border crossing betwixt and between each disciplinary context has made me more aware of the particular ways of seeing and doing on offer. Developing this critical awareness counteracts the pitfalls of unthinkingly taking on what John Shotter (1998) calls each “discipline’s evaluative stance” (p.35).

A crucial part of this stance is, as Foucault (1973, 1979: 187-92) calls it, a discipline’s gaze: that is, a way of intently looking at its subject matter that is interwoven into its methods and procedures for gaining knowledge (ibid).

Rather than looking intently from any one particular viewpoint, or concentrating on only one way of doing things, this doctoral project involves the mixing and adding together of many aspects. It wasn't long before I realised my interdisciplinary beginnings had transmogrified into a more subversive transdisciplinary mix.

Transdisciplinary formations... are doubly impure, not only mingling discipline with discipline in a promiscuous mix, but also disciplinarity with non-disciplinarity, with the disturbing weight of "immediate experience," "imaginary themes," and "immemorial beliefs" that are the Other, the shadow of disciplinary (privileged, expert) thought (Hodge 1995, p.37).

In various ways and on several dimensions fecund promiscuity abounds here. Life AND work; researcher AND researched; knowing AND becoming; Management and Employment Relations AND Sociology; heart AND head, poetry, story AND academic prose to name some of the more obvious. My hope is, that by mixing and dissolving these 'boundaries of becoming,' I am able to demonstrate the integral stance I am advocating as I go along. I am not advocating integration (for example, an integrated self, or an integrated take on life and work), but I am advocating an INTEGRAL (or more holistic) way of looking at, and working with, complexity and multiplicity. And to make it even more interesting, I'm juggling all these tensions and dimensions inside a set of emerging expectations of what is required to 'do' a doctorate.

"So what you are asking for is trust, for us to trust you that you can do what you want to do and do it appropriately to the task?" (As one of my supervisors kindly asked early on in the process.)

In many respects, I often feel rather like some of the CSRs do each day on the phones, as they juggle complex relationships and multiple expectations, both of their own and the organisations making, in an attempt to 'do what they want to do and to do it appropriately to the task.'

Call Centres: On Networks, Connections and Serendipity

At this point it seems appropriate to return once again to the call centre. For no 'mapping' of this research would be complete without a brief overview of this central location, and the story of how and why this research came to be carried out in a call centre.

In line with my initial research proposal the academic and organisational rationale for this setting was relatively straightforward and timely. Call centres are important in twenty-first century New Zealand. They represent a rapidly expanding organisational form based on new communications technologies, are at the forefront of changing labour processes, and employ growing numbers of people in the service sector. At the time I began planning this research, the government agency Trade New Zealand was actively promoting New Zealand internationally as a viable and competitive call centre destination through its Call Centre Attraction Initiative (CCAI). One of my supervisors, Dr Wendy Larner, was researching the gendered labour market implications of this initiative (Larner 1999, 2000, 2001). My interest in the connections between life and work both linked to and extended this on-going work.

Organisationally, call centres have been characterised optimistically as ‘the workplaces of the future’ (New Zealand Herald Call Waiting 1998), and more critically as the ‘factories of the future’ (Cameron 2000; Purcell and Kinnie 2000). Although it is difficult to generalise, because there are wide variations in the organisation of work in different centres and sectors (Taylor et al. 2002), much call centre work is often mundane and stressful, and staff turnover (or ‘churn’ as it’s called in the industry) is relatively high. In line with overseas trends, New Zealand call centres employ a predominantly female workforce, and recent international research had identified a ‘business case’ for work-family flexibility to counter high staff ‘churn.’ However, these policy recommendations continue to be framed around an individualised and traditional notion of separate work and life spheres (Belt et al. 2000). I hoped my research proposal to work collaboratively with organisations toward a more holistic understanding of life and work connections, in order to better manage them, would provide an incentive to take part in the study. So it proved to be. For how the research came to be located at ‘Frontline’ was also remarkably straightforward, although as is often the case, good timing, networking and serendipitous ‘connections’ were important in realising the academic and organisational rationales for the work.

During the course of her research, Wendy established a key contact with a national call centre recruitment manager in a multinational personnel company. Early in my PhD process she introduced me to this person, and through this contact I obtained access details to a number of potential research sites. Around the same time I left

information about my research proposal with New Zealand's Equal Employment Opportunities Trust (EEO). The networking connected serendipitously shortly thereafter when a Service Manager from Frontline, one of the organisations identified by the personnel company as a possibility, rang EEO to inquire about 'worklife' equity issues and was told of my research. EEO liaison not only oiled the wheels with the organisation in question, they also contacted me with the Service Manager's details. A number of phone calls and meetings ensued with management from the largest (and for me most geographically accessible) of Frontline's four regional call centres.²⁷ Their initial interest was matched with facilitative commitment to the project, and the rest as they say ... is about to become history in the stories that unfold in the following pages.

But first an ironic twist, courtesy of the 20/20 clarity of hindsight. Had I begun this research 'adventure' (as one of the participants would call it) already primed with knowing of the ontology of becoming I would learn along the way, it is unlikely I would have chosen a call centre as a case site. Such technologically driven organisational forms are usually tightly monitored and time pressured working environments, factors which often diminish possibilities for relational processes and connections. I expect I would have looked elsewhere. Perhaps to the growing knowledge intensive industries where creativity and innovation depend on optimising relationships and team working. Operationally, being in a call centre probably made it more difficult to undertake this research. Yet paradoxically, the difficulties of the site have thrown the importance of relational processes into sharper and more powerful relief. For despite some of the logistical hurdles, the richness of participative action, reflection and learning that eventuated in this study, compels me to believe that privileging relational process and working with/in an ontology of movement, emergence and becoming does indeed show, as Peter Senge (2004) and his colleagues recently claimed, that *'relationships are more fundamental than [any]thing.'*

²⁷ I go into the setting up of the study in much greater detail in chapter three.

Mapping the ‘Adventure’ Ahead

My poetic ‘disruption’ in chapter one noted that conventional doctoral dissertations (which this is not) “repeat traditional time-honoured, controlled academic processes.” Typically (and I make no apologies for caricature, for ‘recipes’ are readily available (for example see, Dunleavy 2003; Perry 1998)), the written version comprises an introduction, a literature review that ‘grounds’ the research ‘problem’ in existing bodies of knowledge, a methodology/research methods chapter, a theory chapter, the research ‘findings,’ and finally, a conclusion drawing the work to a close with ‘implications’ and ‘recommendations’ for future research.

There are traces and critiques of all of the above woven into this work.

In the next chapter, written in two stanzas I work with contexts, scene setting and character development, moving through several layers and iterations. The first stanza begins with the political economic context of public sector restructuring as it applied to Frontline’s organisational predecessor, the ‘Department.’ Here I discuss the legacies and landscapes of what is now the social policy ‘business’ in New Zealand. I then move to the organisational level and explore how changes in technology and service delivery provided impetus for centralisation, cost reduction and the economies of scale that brought the development and widespread use of call centres to prominence. I situate this case site within the operational environment of the call centre industry, pointing to continuities and differences between private and public sector models, and discuss Frontline’s somewhat unique positioning as an important service provider of significant scale and complexity.

Having set the political, institutional and organisational context for the research in a reasonably assured academic fashion, in the chapter’s second stanza I change gear and deconstruct my own assuredness. I become more tentative, speculative, refracted and crystalline as I work with/in the processual layers of ever emerging collaborative practice. Detailing the conversations and the complications involved in working this way I discuss how ‘coming to know’ is a rich relational process that permanently problemizes traditional discussions of methodology and their ensuing lists of research methods (Wray-Bliss 2002). I close the chapter by introducing the cast of characters who people these pages.

Chapter Four takes improvisational dance as its metaphor and ‘plays’ with the theory/practice boundary. I show how a contextual moment-by-moment sense of emergence enables a richer understanding of our multifaceted, holistic and always in process lives. Staying with/in my research process as it unfolds, I foreground the often overlooked or taken-for-granted embodied and relational processes that make and remake the everyday realities of life, work and research at Frontline. Finally, I refract this sense of emergence through the interconnected and kaleidoscopic lenses of relationship, identity and reflexivity, introducing and developing each lens as a precursor to the stories that follow in part two.

The second part of this dissertation, “Stories Told” hones each lens to focus on one aspect of the triptych in each of its following chapters.

In Chapter Five, ‘Relationship Stories,’ we first meet Jasmine. About to become a new CSR, her employment interview sets the scene for stories unfolding within the dynamic interplay of people and technology, organisational systems and human relationships. The dilemmas and difficulties, the camaraderie and subversion of working in tightly monitored and time pressured environments is told by the CSRs and managers through their conversational relationships with each other and with me.

Chapter Six stories the many emergent processes and permutations of people’s identities as they unfold doing the ‘business’ of public service; which is the fundamental rationale for Frontline’s existence. For everyone, the complexity, ambiguity, and relentlessness of the service encounters are as many and varied as the identities involved in creating them. We learn how “helping people,” the primary motivator for all those participating in this study, manifests and is thwarted by the organisational culture and ‘style’ of the call centre, which is in turn an indicator of Frontline’s organisational identity and the changing conceptions of what constitutes public service in New Zealand.

Chapter Seven introduces a form of reflexivity called ‘radical.’ This way of working is then used to unsettle and explore the often taken-for-granted assumptions, feelings, actions and words that make relational connections, thereby making selves within those relational connections. I join with CSRs Matalena and Eric, and together we construct and participate in those “aspects of our activities in the present moment that

matter and that make a difference in our lives” (Shotter 2002a, p.292). In doing, so we raise expansive and inclusive possibilities for new ways of understanding each other, our knowledges, practices and experiences. That is, new ways of developing relational potential and becoming more human together.

Chapter Eight concludes this dissertation as it began – conversationally ‘chewing the fat’ amongst the resounding echoes of relational processes and connections that have challenged and changed many of us along the way.

* * *

CHAPTER THREE - First Stanza
On Coming to Know What is Known ²⁸
'Unpacking' the Research Context and Exploring
a Value Chain.

Don't you just love the word "unpack"?

It's so postmodern, it's so preposterous, it's so ubiquitous,

It's so unnecessary.

It's the Volkswagen, the Visa, the Vose of late-twentieth century

[Make that early twenty-first century]

Verbiage.

(Stephen Brown 1998, p.367, Unlucky for some: slacker scholarship and the well-wrought
turn)

²⁸This phrase is a play on Edward Wray-Bliss's (2002) critique of methodology in which he questions the way research design and methods are often listed as a series unproblematic and authentic techniques for arriving at particular authoritative interpretations.

don't establish the
boundaries
first,
the squares, triangles,
boxes
of preconceived
possibility,
and then
pour life into them, trimming
off left-over edges,
ending potential:
(A.R. Ammons, cited in Wheatley 2002, p.116)

MISSION ²⁹

"To put independence within reach of all New Zealanders"

VALUES

[...] are a team of people who are:

Professional		high energy
Passionate	operating with	discipline
Performance focussed		style

VISION

People's potential unleashed = New Zealand's potential increased

²⁹With the omission of the organisational acronym this 'Mission, Values and Vision' stanza is reproduced here as it appears at the opening of Frontline's "Code of Conduct." At the commencement of their employment all staff must read and sign an acknowledgement of understanding of this document. The stated purpose of the Code's enforceable principles is, "to set the standards of behaviour and obligations that relate to all employees of the Department."

“Welcome to Frontline” Potential, Values, Movement

It seems apt to begin this chapter on my ‘coming to know’ by juxtaposing textual forms that allude to the power of potential. Ammons’ poem cautions against establishing boundaries, seeing preconceptions (‘squares, triangles, boxes’) as anathema to possibility. Whereas, the no less poetically presented opening to Frontline’s Code of Conduct defines preconceived parameters (‘professionalism, discipline, style’) in order to maximise possibility. Potential it seems may be very differently realised depending on the basic beliefs or values that guide its unfolding.

It is the same with any research project. While the demand on the research community is primarily focused on seeking new knowledge and insight (Kakabadse, Kakabadse, and Kouzmin 2002), each inquiry is motivated by a will to know that is profoundly influenced by the values with which that curiosity interacts and is aligned.

Not to put too fine a point on it, we live, breathe, and excrete values. No aspect of human life is unrelated to values, valuations and validations. Value orientations and value relations saturate our life experiences and practices from the smallest established microstructures of feeling, thought and behaviour to the largest established macrostructures of organizations and institutions (Fekete cited in Connor 1993, p.31).

At the outset, it is important to locate this research in what is arguably its largest context, the interwoven institutional, organisational, and personal value systems and processes that shape and influence it. It’s important because, as Hubert Hermans (2001) points out, “the microtext of concrete dialogical relationships cannot be understood without some concept of macroframes ([political] organizational, ethnographic)” (p.264). It’s also crucial to note that, like any other ‘system’ on this planet, belief systems are dynamic, exhibiting many variants of both stabilisation and change over time (Wheatley 1999). There is perhaps no better example of this dynamism than the organisation in which this research is being undertaken. For historically and today Frontline is a crucible of energetic ever-emerging political, organisational and personal value systems. Sometimes ambiguous and overlapping, often competing and contradictory; always interesting, they form the moving macroframes in which this project is embedded. To elaborate:

I began working with Frontline at the dénouement of a period of significant political and organisational change in the public sector.³⁰ The organisation, the largest government ‘human services provider’ (Bennington, Cummane, and Conn 2000) in the country had, according to its CEO at the time, “*service centres in every city and town, and a relationship with over a third of the adult population of New Zealand*”³¹ With an emphasis on regional and local service delivery networks, Frontline offers a complex range of what it calls, “*work and income support services and products*” in the areas of employment and training, youth and students, retirement, families and children, housing, health and disability. Using a “*one-stop shop approach*,” its activities include assessment, information, referral, administering payments, and a comprehensive brokerage in human services across a number of sectors (including health, justice, and education). It also carries out specialist services such as debt management, benefit control, international affairs and veteran services. In addition to its four regional call centres, it has a national head office and over 170 local service centres employing approximately 5000 full-time equivalent staff across New Zealand.³²

Frontline is certainly on the front line; at a crucial interface for economic and social policy delivery affecting the lives of around 900,000 New Zealanders. This presence makes the organisation an extremely visible exemplar of the public sector reforms that have been occurring since the mid 1980s in the wake of a political sea change characterised in New Zealand and elsewhere as a neoliberal inspired transition from the welfare to the managerial state (Boston, Dalziel, and St John 1999; Brodie 1996; Clarke and Newman 1997; Kelsey 1995; Pierson 1994; Rudd and Roper 1997). Although the political impetus for this movement was squarely based on economics (with governments’ maintaining they could no longer afford to fund the welfare state), it was underpinned by a swing from the more collective and ‘protective’ values of welfarism to the individualist ‘productive’ values of the market (Clarke and Newman

³⁰I began research in the organisation in 2000.

³¹I will italicize each time I quote from official documents gathered during the course of this research to signal the source and draw attention to the language used. This statement from the Chief Executive Officer’s (CEO) memorandum entitled “The Way We Work” was retrieved from the organisation’s intranet in February 2001.

³² Information in this section was derived from the 2000/2001 Departmental Plan and Quarterly Profiles.

1997, p.49). The National Government's Minister of Finance in her first budget speech in 1991 expressed the changing mood very well.

The redesign of the welfare state is integral to our strategy for growth ...
The only sustainable welfare state is one that is fair and affordable. Our current system is neither. Real welfare is created by people and families through their own efforts (Ruth Richardson cited in Boston, Dalziel, and St John 1999, preface v).

In a relatively short period of time state welfare protection, no longer considered either affordable or appropriate, became reframed and renamed as state 'dependency,' and a raft of policies were implemented to encourage the populous to be self-supporting and provide for their own needs (Goldfinch 1997). The discursive emphasis on independence, performance and increasing New Zealand's potential in Frontline's "*Mission, Values and Vision*" statement which begins this chapter, shows how this productive orientation, one that 'empowers rather than serves communities' (Clarke and Newman 1997, p.49), has come to be framed in a key government agency.

A similar economic rationale, and 'market' driven values of productivity, efficiency and cost effectiveness, also provided the impetus for redesigning the institutional apparatus of government, resulting in a prolonged period of public sector restructuring. Beginning with the fourth Labour government elected in 1984, and continuing apace during the National led administrations of the 1990s, the deregulation, corporatization, and privatization of state functions and assets considerably altered New Zealand's bureaucratic landscape and its management (Kelsey 1995; Lerner 1997). Frontline, in its current rendition, is but one organisation in an entire framework that has undergone significant and sustained change.

These reforms are often described in general (if idealistic) terms as a shift from an expensive, monopolistic, provider dominated culture of bureaucracy, to a cost effective, competitive and performance based, user dominated culture of the market (Clarke, Gewirtz, and McLaughlin 2000; Clarke and Newman 1997; Considine and Lewis 2003; Pollitt 2003). In New Zealand successive governments' introduction of commercial imperatives, along with private sector business and management models (a shift that has come to be called 'New Public Management' (Boston, Dalziel, and St

John 1999; Flynn 2002)), was somewhat unique. Here, a radical agenda for reform proceeded at pace, driven by a very coherent set of economic values and theories emanating from the Treasury, which “moved beyond its normal brief of economic advice and management to that of model builder for the entire government machine” (Wistrich 1992, p.121).

New Zealand’s ‘model builders’ were indeed fervent, and there is no argument that deep-seated and fundamental changes have occurred. However, “[t]he idea that there’s been a wholesale shift from ‘old’ public administration, characterized by bureaucracy and hierarchy, to a ‘new’ public management, characterized by efficiency responsiveness and flexibility, has been challenged” (Newman 2002, p.78). In fact many aspects of this study dispute such a simplistic and linear view. Nevertheless with that proviso in mind, I find the notion of a shift from ‘old’ bureaucracy to ‘new’ management useful for outlining the mix of values, features and languages that form the historical context for the organisation at the centre of this research.

The Social Policy ‘Business’: Legacies and Landscapes

In many ways, the redesign of New Zealand’s welfare systems can be seen in microcosm, through the restructuring of Frontline’s progenitor, a government agency I will call the ‘Department.’ An entity now consigned to history, the Department was responsible for what had been called the social security and social welfare of the country’s citizens (McClure 1998). Such collective and protective language as ‘social security’ and ‘welfare’ appears almost archaic in today’s governmental environment. Yet interestingly, Frontline, the twenty first century version of the former Department, still operates within the strictures of legislation using these terms (the Social Security Act 1964, and the Social Welfare Act 1990). In the following brief overview, I show how the values and languages motivating a move from a welfare to a managerial state play out as the government’s largest social policy provider takes on the guise of corporate enterprise. Detailing this process is important in setting a context for this investigation, because the complicated legacy that has ensued swirls in multiple ways around the organisation and the everyday working lives of its participants.

Public sector restructuring began in earnest during the term of the fourth Labour government from 1984 - 1990. During this period Labour deemed government should

be more responsive to the market, and set about dividing the state's commercial, policy making and service delivery functions as a way of achieving this. Key legislation enacted included the State Sector Act (SSA) 1988, which provided a framework to dismantle the country's traditional 'Whitehall' system of governance. Under the SSA the administration of, and responsibility for government departments and government 'business,' was shifted from Permanent Secretaries to newly appointed Chief Executives, now employed on fixed term contracts subject to performance targets (Wallis 2001). During this time, the Department continued to be identified as part of a core public service and as such remained relatively unscathed. Although, along with other areas so categorised, it was subjected to processes of managerialisation and marketisation which meant it was required to "operate more efficiently, generate revenue and develop a customer orientation" (Cheyne, O'Brien, and Belgrave 1997, p.42).

Major structural and organisational change to the Department began in earnest with the election of a National government in 1990. The new administration had a similar pragmatic free market approach to its predecessor, from whom it inherited a stagnant economy and ballooning budget deficit. These economic factors provided much of the impetus for National's "new morality" (McClure 1998, p.234), one which championed self-sufficiency and individual responsibility as the cornerstone of social policy development and delivery. A no-nonsense morality, it maintained the state had little business in peoples' lives, and that the limited dealings it did have were to be conducted in a business-like manner. So the stage was set.

In 1992 the core functions of the Department were divided three ways. Community funding, income support, and child welfare activities were separated, renamed and reframed as individual 'business units.' In line with the ongoing corporatisation of government administration, each sought to re-brand itself and establish its own particular organisational culture. For example:

The New Zealand Income Support Service (under its new General Manager) quickly severed its links with the old 'dinosaur' of the Department of Social Welfare; the NZISS developed its own independent culture and removed the Social Welfare title from its letterheads and advertisements (ibid, p.251).

Dinosaur or not, an overarching structure still called the Department remained. A year later a new Director-General, appointed in 1993, attempted to draw the disparate units closer together under a common ethos entitled “From Welfare to Well-being.” The concept, symbolised by a new departmental logo showing reaching hands offering ‘a hand-up’ rather than a ‘hand-out,’³³ emphasised the government’s policy focus on shifting people “out of welfare and into work” (Rudd 1997, p.250). In line with these values, new processes and practices were implemented to deliver a faster and more (cost) effective service, in an attempt to move people through and out of the system as quickly as possible. New initiatives included the development of ‘customised’ case management, which paired staff with individual ‘customers’ (as former ‘beneficiaries’ had now come to be called) on a one-to-one basis. In addition to being a mechanism for regular case review, its purpose was also to provide consistent service to its ‘customer’ base. To make possible the relational dimension case management sought to maximise the Department’s offices began to be remodelled into open plan spaces. In part, this was done “to lessen the sense of separation and hostility between staff and applicants, [and] the feeling of them and us” (McClure 1998, p.253).

However, it was more than just an exercise in improving workplace functionality. The refurbishment of the Department was also an exercise in ‘branding.’ It heralded the establishment of an organisational identity (Hatch and Schultz 2002), and the creation of new pseudo-marketised ways for both staff and ‘customers’ to be (Brereton and Temple 1999; du Gay 2000a). Adding a moral quotient to social policy, and delivering it via corporatised state policy mechanisms, was not unique to New Zealand, other Western democracies - including Australia, the United Kingdom and the USA were engaged in similar processes (Brodie 1996; Fraser and Gordon 1997; Ironside and Seifert 2002; Pierson 1994). However, given the size and scope of the Department in a small country like New Zealand, it was an extremely visible process, as offices in each city and town were remodelled along corporate lines.

A particular ‘corporate culmination’ occurred for the Department with the appointment of a new Chief Executive Officer (CEO) in 1998. A determined believer

³³ I tell a ‘logo story’ in chapter four, where an image of the reaching hands can be found (on page 110).

in a corporate “can do” approach (Hutchinson et al. 2000), and a strong advocate of “a management style where image and identity matter” (Espiner, cited in Wallis 2001, p.5), she took up her position to lead a new organisation formed by the merging of the state’s employment services with those of income support. Created in a highly politicised moral climate, in which the National led coalition government’s emphasis on moving people into self reliance through paid work reigned supreme, the new organisation - Frontline – became inextricably linked with the attitudes and values espoused by its political masters.

The special feature in the case of [Frontline] was that the structural solution was a political solution. The [organisation] was not set up, as most are, to provide people and processes to implement whatever policies are directed to it: *in this instance [the organisation] was the policy* (Hutchinson et al. 2000, my emphasis added).

With its new CEO at the helm, Frontline was launched with a high profile and wide-ranging campaign to advertise its new services. **A bright new stylised logo that unlike the former ‘helping hand up’ bore no direct resemblance to the organisation’s purpose or function**³⁴ was introduced, in conjunction with the by-line “We’ll be working for you.” Frontline promised “a better, more streamlined and integrated service,” (according to the full page colour advertisements the organisation placed in daily and community newspapers up and down the country). And it embraced a corporate model as the means to achieve this. Like many other corporate entities, no expense was spared in establishing its revamped presence in the ‘marketplace.’

In the first year after its formation, its budget allocated inter alia, “\$1 million for ‘rebranding’, \$80,000 for staff ‘roadshows’, \$1 million for refitting offices, \$79,000 for a corporate wardrobe” (Roughan cited in Wallis 2001, p.7).

To actually deliver ‘a better, more streamlined and integrated service’ to its newly named ‘customers,’ as well as make the cost efficiencies demanded in the new political environment, required considerably more ‘enterprising up’ (du Gay 2000)

³⁴I use double asterisk highlights to mark this sentence because my initial contention that the new logo ‘bore no direct resemblance to the organisation’s purpose or function’ was strongly contested by the call centre manager on reading the first draft of this chapter. Aspects of our subsequent discussions, the emerging knowing, and its relational dimensions appear in chapter four in a section beginning on page 110 entitled, ‘Walking the Talk: The Logo Story’.

than image and identity alone could deliver. New organisational strategies, structures and systems were needed. These too were designed and implemented using business models with their concomitant values and languages. The establishment and development of Frontline's call centre being a case in point. So it is to this I now turn, as I continue to lay out the value laden legacies and landscapes through which this study roams.

“Welcome to Frontline” - the Call Centre as Strategic Organisational Interface

Frontline's “*Call Centre Blueprint*”³⁵ begins with a letter from the National Service Delivery Manager. Addressed to the organisation's Service Managers, it congratulates staff “*in meeting the challenges of establishing the Call Centre environment.*”³⁶ The letter goes on to stress that, “*we must continue to focus on leading business practice in the Call Centre Industry...*” Maintaining, “*The Blueprint standards are not optional.... As always, my expectation is that you and your staff will work strictly within the standards of practice and performance contained in the Blueprint. This will assure me and stakeholders in our business that we will deliver what we say we will and that customers will receive consistent, quality service, regardless of where their call is answered.*”

Further into the document, in a chapter headed “Call Centre Objectives,” the purpose of the call centre and its relationship to its major ‘stakeholders’ is laid out.

[Frontline] has an agreement with the Minister of Social Welfare which specifies the levels of performance to which our services are to be delivered. This is known as the ‘Purchase Agreement’ and it contains most of our business accountabilities...

To assist the business to meet these levels of performance the Call Centre has been established as a “first point of contact” for most of [Frontline's] customers who contact us by telephone... The Call Centre is a crucial and integral part of our service strategy. It is [Frontline's] front line and has a purpose and entity in its own right.

³⁵Call Centre Blueprint - December 2000

³⁶ Frontline's call centre was relatively well established in the context of such organisational forms. It had been operating for four years at the time this research began.

Achieving our “**Service Level**” performance standard means:

- *Our Call centre delivers a professional, quality service that fulfils the expectations of our customers, our business and other parties (such as Government).*
- *We create opportunities for ourselves to find better ways of working and securing other business.*
- *We create opportunities for our customers; helping them where necessary to make timely and accurate lifestyle decisions. We are the gateway to opportunity for all parties.*

So it was, that the introduction of call centres, as part of new ‘business’ oriented service delivery strategies in the public sector, logically followed similar developments in the private sector. Like their commercial counterparts, these initiatives were part of a thoroughgoing reorganisation of customer service work embodying two often incongruous logics – rationalisation and customer orientation - (Korczynski 2001, 2002).

In the private sector, these logics were driven by the commercial imperative to gain and/or maintain competitive advantage. They fuelled a new rationale designed around the desire to ‘add value’ to service encounters by satisfying each customer’s request, with a smile, fast!

The driving force behind the decision to establish call centres, either as a rationalisation of back office functions or as entirely new creations has been the pursuit of competitive advantage” (Taylor and Bain 1999, p.102).

The ability to do this by concentrating, centralising, routinising, and remotely delivering tele-based functions, like sales, banking, reservations, and technical support was “facilitated and accelerated by a convergence of technological innovations and cost-drivers” (Ferlie et al. 1996, p.3). Uptake was quick, particularly in industries such as banking, insurance, utilities, travel and communications, and there has been massive and sustained growth worldwide over the last decade, in both the number of call centres, and the size of their operations (Bain and Taylor 2002).

The public sector was equally responsive in establishing call centres. However, the rationale was somewhat different, as pursuit of competitive advantage is generally absent in this arena. Despite the managerialist penchant for ‘enterprising up’ (evident in the language of Frontline’s *Call Centre Blueprint* above), many government agencies, both local and national, still maintain monopoly status. In this sector the introduction of call centres was arguably driven by cost effective rationalisation strategies, implemented to enable the service work associated with (often significant) public contact to be carried out more efficiently. In a key ‘service delivery’ document, Frontline stated that the mission for its call centre was the “*shortest path to full resolution for the client*” and its purpose, “*to deliver a fast and cost-efficient service providing easy access to accurate information, action and advice about income support and employment assistance.*”³⁷

In both the public and private sectors the reorganisation of service work via the rise and ongoing rapid expansion and development of call centres is linked to technological development and software innovation, beginning with the introduction of highly integrated information and communications technologies (ICTs). At the most basic level a call centre can be defined as:

...a dedicated operation in which computer utilising employees receive inbound – or make outbound – telephone calls, with those calls processed and controlled either by an Automatic Call Distribution (ACD) or predictive dialling system. The call centre is thus characterised by the *integration* of telephone and VDU technologies (Taylor and Bain 1999, p.102, original emphasis)



Calls are routed to call centre agents, or Customer Service Representatives (CSRs) as they are typically called, via the ACD system. This means that CSRs, as the interface between the organisation and its public, spend each working day in constant interactive contact with callers via a telephone headset, VDU monitor,

³⁷ Regional Business Plan Service Delivery Contact Centre 2000/2001. NB: In line with multi-channel developments in the industry (the expectation for ‘e-commerce’ and greater use of the internet and email etc) during the course of this study Frontline renamed its Call Centre a ‘Contact’ Centre. However, I will continue to use call centre terminology as the vast majority of service interactions in the organisation continue to be made via the telephone.

and computer keyboard. Usually all the information they require to pass on or complete the call successfully is on hand because:

Software developments [also allow] for extremely complex routing of calls, as well as the integration of customer data, products and process information across the entire range of organisational activities and services (Shire, Holtgrewe, and Kerst 2002, p.4).

A sophisticated level of organisational and informational integration operates at Frontline. Here, the National Call Centre comprises four geographically separate regional centres technologically linked as one 'virtual call centre' (there are three in the North Island, and one in the South). An up-to-the-minute ACD system places all incoming calls to the organisation in what is called a 'single, universal queue' to be answered by the first available CSR at any of the four centres.

Technology not only controls the direction and pace of incoming calls, it is also used to carry out real time performance measurement and monitoring of workflows. This form of 'surveillance' (Kinnie, Hutchinson, and Purcell 2000) is another important characteristic of the call centre environment. The pervasive nature and use of Management Information Systems (MIS), as surveillance technology is more commonly called, has led some commentators to regard call centres as 'electronic sweatshops' - the 21st century equivalent of Dickens' Dark Satanic Mills (Ferne and Metcalf 1997). While there's no doubt that (often tightly) prescribed tasks are constantly monitored, measured and evaluated in this setting, the power ascribed to technology in this totalising viewpoint has been seriously questioned in recent research (see for example, Bain and Taylor 2000; Baldry, Bain, and Taylor 1998; Callaghan and Thompson 2001; Houlihan 2001; Knights and McCabe 1998). At Frontline, as elsewhere, the reality is messier, more complex, and less oppressive than some commentators would have you believe.³⁸ As George Callaghan and Paul Thompson (2001) note, although the "electronic sweatshop' is good newspaper copy [it] is a long way from the still contested reality of the contemporary call centre" (p.35).

³⁸ As many of the stories in chapters five and six assert.

It should be noted that all call centres are not the same, though. Aside from the complex, multifaceted and monitored ICT environment, which is a defining characteristic, the industry is remarkably heterogeneous. Many differences exist in relation to a number of important factors. These include: the size of the operation, the industry sector, the nature and complexity of the services or products involved, the nature and complexity of the call cycle times, the operational environment (inbound, outbound or combined), and the pattern of industrial relations at the site (Bain and Taylor 2000, 2002; Holtgrewe, Kerst, and Shire 2002; Taylor and Bain 2001; Taylor et al. 2002).

The National Call centre at Frontline is substantially an inbound operation (although staff are required to make outbound calls occasionally). At the time I began this research it employed over 400 people and was responsible for answering approximately 100,000 calls per week. *“That’s 20,000 New Zealanders we interact with every day.”*³⁹ People use the organisation to access either work services or income support services, and often both. As “Bums on Seats,” the ‘day-in-the-life’ story in chapter one showed, these interactions randomly range from the mundane to the very complex. In addition to wide parameters involving a complicated range of service options and payment types, during calls CSRs also frequently have to negotiate two separate computer systems. While the organisation is working towards a full integration of its computing platform, the two systems (using different formats and criteria designed for the separate agencies that merged to form Frontline), were still being used during the time this study was evolving.

Within this operational context, CSRs are expected to deal with each call inside a set of performance criteria guided by a *Service Level standard* that aims to have 80% of calls answered within 20 seconds, and a *Quality Control accuracy standard* of 95% accuracy for all processing. Further, it is expected that stated call times will be adhered to as much as possible, with *“the average time for a ‘general benefit’ call [being] 2 minutes 45 seconds.* And finally, in an average work day of 7 hours 35 minutes, a CSR *“can be expected to be available to answer calls for an average 6*

³⁹ National Call Centre Business Plan 2000 to 2001

*hours per day. The rest of the time is taken up with meetings, training, coaching, breaks (tea, comfort and OSH), and project and other work.”*⁴⁰

These criteria form the core of CSR evaluations which are carried out during a regular performance appraisal cycle called “*Building [Frontline] Achievers*,” which is linked to a staff development and bonus payment scheme.

Arguably, given these parameters, the organisational weighting appears to be on the efficiency side of the call centre’s governing rationalisation and customer orientation logics. Yet interestingly, at Frontline all of the foregoing is directed by a set of “*Guiding Principles*” contained in a service delivery document that states:

We put people first

We are fair

We act with understanding and care

We get it right

*We deliver*⁴¹

Herein lies a value laden conundrum. A dilemma at the heart of many call centre operations in both the public and private sectors. There is often a fundamental conflict between the efficiency driven measures needed to productively and cost effectively achieve the “*shortest path to full resolution for the client*” (remember this is Frontline’s stated call centre ‘mission’), and the time and consideration needed to be “*fair, get it right, and act with understanding and care*” (that is, act via the stated organisational principles guiding each interaction). Arguably, the ‘dual presence’ (Korczyński 2001, 2002) of these contradictory logics is exacerbated in the process of ‘enterprising up’ social services. For all the talk of business models and business accountabilities in Frontline’s organisational ‘blueprints,’ the fact remains that this organisation provides “*public rather than consumer goods*” (Langan 2000, p.164 original emphasis), In many ways, the values and languages driving the processes that construct this call centre as a “*first point of contact for most of [the] customers who contact us by telephone*” tend to disguise this crucial distinction.

⁴⁰ All data in this section is derived from the Call Centre Blueprint

⁴¹ In “Service Delivery Contact Centre”: Regional Business Plan 2000/2001

Unlike their private sector counterparts who are primarily concerned with ‘keeping the customer satisfied’ in order to gain/maintain competitive advantage and stay profitable, thereby creating shareholder return on investment, public/social service providers must negotiate a more complex and multidimensional terrain. While they are required to satisfy service users (the ‘customer’ constituency that New Public Management has moved to centre stage), they must do so inside a legislative framework that also vouchsafes important responsibilities to the public interest. At Frontline – a newly ‘corporatised’ social service provider - issues like social justice, equity, ‘customer’ satisfaction, ‘business’ efficiency, and social service delivery make for strange bedfellows.

Despite the considerable success of market-like reforms in increasing the efficiency of governmental bureaucracies, there remains a sense that something is wrong. For people who are concerned about the quality of public service and attention to issues of social injustice, fairness in governmental action ... and so on, something about running government like a business does not feel right (Box (1999) cited in Harrow 2002, p.146).

In many instances the complex negotiating of multiple and sometimes incommensurate value systems required to run government as a business falls on the people who work on the front line. It is the managers and CSRs, going about their everyday working lives, that tend to bear the brunt of this complicated and multidimensional agenda. And indeed, as this research will show, for them it often ‘does not feel right’ ...

* * *

CHAPTER THREE - Second Stanza

On Coming to Know What is Known, Research Processes and a Cast of Characters

What you can plan
is too small
for you to live.

What you can live
wholeheartedly
will make plans
enough
for the vitality
hidden in your sleep.

To be human
is to become visible
while carrying
what is hidden
as a gift to others.

(Exerpt from 'What to Remember When Waking' David Whyte 2001, p190)

“Welcome to Frontline” – ‘Coming to Know’ in the Call Centre Milieu

Having set the political/institutional/organisational context for this research in a reasonably assured academic fashion, I now want to change gear and deconstruct my own assuredness by becoming ... more tentative ... speculative ... refracted and crystalline ... as I work with/in the levels and layers of the research life values and processes involved in my ‘coming to know what is known’ during the course of this study.

Doing research, or rather ‘becoming’ in a research process, is a rich, messy, multifaceted, privileged and sometimes relentless affair. How we ‘go on’ in the process impacts directly on what we learn. Yet there is often no sense of the many important, ongoing, and ambiguous relational connections conveyed in discussions of research design and methods. In fact, there is often a disconcerting tendency to separate the technical business of research from its personal, social and contextual circumstances (Cooper and Woolgar 1996; Hollander 2004). (There are notable exceptions, including some, but by no means all, feminist research, and indigenous peoples’ research (see, for example, Reger 2001; Smith 1999). Ed Wray-Bliss recently noted how:

Authors’ discussions of methodology in their empirical papers reproduce realist conventions by being brief, formal and serving to further authorize particular representations they produce ... Methodology is discussed as a series of unproblematic formal techniques (formal interview, documentary investigation, observational research, triangulation) – suggesting the authors are skilled researchers trained and experienced in the use of a variety of analytical techniques (Wray-Bliss 2002, p.19).

I conveyed exactly this stance when, mid way through the study, I applied for further funding, describing my in-process research thus:

To date, data has been gathered in four separate phases.⁴²

In phase one I collected documentary evidence of the centre's organisational structure, philosophies (including C.E.O. statements of formal organisational culture and 'style'), labour policies and practices. This material included employment contracts, recruitment procedures, Human Resourcing (HR) policies, health and safety measures, performance appraisal mechanisms, departmental structure and reporting processes and the like. During this phase I also attended and observed a number of management and CSR team meetings, and invited staff to take part in the study.

In phase two I conducted unstructured in-depth interviews with research participants. The interviews asked open-ended 'who are you' questions about personal and professional life, motivations, hopes and goals, as well as questions about life and work practices and how these were experienced and managed on both a day-to-day basis and in a more global sense (the 'bigger picture'). Every interview was transcribed verbatim and each person received a copy of their interview as soon as possible after it was conducted.

On completion of the interviews, phase three involved 'shadowing' participants across the course of a typical worklife day. Exhibiting significant goodwill and trust towards me, all participants agreed to take part in this intensive stage. Each observation lasted between eight and twelve hours and in most instances included a period of time spent after work in either domestic or transitional settings. During this time I took detailed notes of all life and work interactions and processes as I observed how participants dealt with the day's events both inside and outside the organisational systems and setting.

Following the observations, in phase four I facilitated three focus groups – two involving the CSRs and one with the members of the management team. Building on some of the issues being raised by the research process, the focus groups discussed various interconnections between life and work including how these related to being an effective CSR or manager in the call centre. The groups were asked to define what it meant to be an effective CSR or manager, and to discuss some of the organisational enablers and barriers to becoming one. The focus groups have also been transcribed verbatim and added to the individual interview data sets.

It can certainly be argued that this particular 'brief, formal' representation of my work was appropriate to the competitive task of applying for research funding. In a political environment that is also increasingly 'enterprising up' the 'business' of doing research (Chandler, Barry, and Clark 2002), how many funding bodies would really care to know the invariably complicated 'bigger picture?'

⁴²This passage is taken verbatim from my 2002 application for the Bank of New Zealand Research Fellowship.

How many would respond favourably to the diffuse language of always in-process selves. Of unpredictable, unfolding ‘conversations’ and embodied relational constructions, as opposed to the concise control implied by researcher ‘conducted’ interviews? In some ways my assuredness paid off, for I was the successful recipient of the fellowship. But I found this (de)contextualising unsettling. It did little justice to my rich and restless research life experiences. So here then is another version of the course of events. This time it comes complete with what I call its moving quadruple “P” quotient. That is, with its problems, politics, positionings, and power relations included.

“Welcome to Frontline” – Conversations and Complications

In chapter two I briefly outlined the chain of events that facilitated my coming to research at the largest of Frontline’s four call centres. To recap; assisted by staff at New Zealand’s Equal Employment Opportunities Trust (EEO), my initial contact was with a Service Manager from the organisation who was interested in improving the call centre’s EEO policies and practices. Following an introductory telephone discussion with her, in which I briefly outlined my research interests and goals, we arranged to meet at the centre to discuss more formally how my proposal might fit with the call centre’s needs and objectives. To this meeting I took a comprehensive written outline detailing the rationale and main aims of the research, its investigative design, and an overview of perceived benefits to the organisation by becoming involved. In part these were detailed as follows:

The main aim of the research is to understand how people organise and manage the connections between paid work and life outside the workplace, and to identify what sorts of things would help manage these connections better. The study will investigate the views and experiences of both employees and management through a collaborative action research process, involving interviews, observations and focus groups. Action research promotes broad participation in the research process and supports initiatives leading to more satisfying outcomes. The research design and process is intended to facilitate both knowledge and communication with a view to improving organisational culture and practices through the development and refinement of equitable ‘worklife’ systems.⁴³

⁴³This Introductory Letter is reproduced in full in Appendix 2

My proposed research outline, at this point rather authoritatively entitled “*Beyond ‘Family Friendly’ Policies: Towards ‘Worklife’ Organisational Solutions,*” struck a chord with the Service Manager. She readily agreed to present it to the Call Centre Manager for further consideration. Although speculative on my part, I believe my research ‘pitch’ at this stage fitted with some of the organisational concerns that had prompted the Service Manager to contact the EEO Trust. In living up to its guiding action research principles, the work has undergone many changes in both orientation and name as it has developed from these early beginnings. However, it was this initial formulation that resonated with call centre management who were enthusiastic about the research design, and the potential learning it might offer. Following another successful meeting a month later with the Call Centre Manager, I was given the go-ahead to begin work gathering organisational policies and documents, and to invite staff to participate in what I’d called a “Collaborative ‘Worklife’ Research Project”.⁴⁴

I had designed an information leaflet for distribution in the centre that set out how the research intended to explore, understand and improve the work and life experiences (including labour processes, attitudes and practices) of customer service and management staff. The leaflets specifically styled as ‘invitations to participate’ were initially distributed around the centre by the Service Manager who had been my first contact with the organisation. In a memo accompanying the leaflets she expressed her enthusiasm for the project, noting staff would be given time off the phones to attend interviews and focus groups. Further, she urged, “*Volunteers do not need to have children ... just a life out of work!!*” And that, “*discretion is assured and you will find Susan Copas to be a really nice and friendly person.*” This introductory process created an interest in the project and my presence in the centre. By the time I attended CSR team meetings a week or so later, to ‘officially’ introduce the study and to ask for participants, there was a reasonable level of awareness and people were curious to know more.

In each team meeting questions centred on the research process more than its work and life framing, with the observation or ‘shadowing’ phase generating the most interest and anxiety. There was a general mixture of reticence and hilarity (or perhaps

⁴⁴ See Appendix 3 for a copy of the invitation to staff to participate in the project. This ‘invitation’ leaflet also doubled as the ‘Participant Information Sheet’ Ethics Committee approval required me to provide.

it was reticence masked by hilarity) about how it might be/feel to have me trail around after someone all day at work, and then continue to follow into after work settings and activities. To allay obvious concerns, I light-heartedly promised not to follow anyone into the bathroom (banter around the possibility of this scenario came up at every meeting), and more seriously I emphasised both the collaborative and confidential nature of the research process. This seemed to provide some reassurance. But what did I mean by collaboration and confidentiality? And could I really deliver either as effortlessly in this context as I hoped and claimed at the outset? My assurances certainly bear some examination.

Firstly, in constructing the research as collaborative I was influenced by a deeply values based action research framework. This position seeks to include as many diverse voices as possible in a highly participatory way in the research process, and promotes action leading to a more just or satisfying set of outcomes for all concerned. To paraphrase Victoria Marsick, this way of being is oriented to a particular set of values that might be characterized as ‘modern’ in that they are deeply humanistic and committed to a neo-progressive view of human development through participative inquiry toward a ‘higher order good’ (2002, p.519).

Action research also challenges the traditional academic stance that positions the social scientist as a privileged observer and analyst, and instead “rests on the belief and experience that all people – professional action researchers included – accumulate, organize and use complex knowledge constantly in everyday life” (Greenwood and Levin 1998, p.4). Aside from my own learning and the credential involved in carrying out this research, I was motivated by a desire to work with people by pooling their many different ways of knowing in order to facilitate improved workplace practices, and deeper personal understandings about the integral nature of life and work. I saw collaboration as an ethically desirable way to work to achieve both ‘useful’ knowledge and practical research and life outcomes. However, I had limited prior experience of actually working this way in organisations, and was about to discover “both the utility and difficulty in applying abstract ethical guidelines to endeavours which are not just academic research *on* others as subjects but rather inquiry *with* others to improve practice” (Haney and Lykes 2000, p.280, original emphasis).

Given my philosophical rationale and experiential background, realising collaboration in the time pressured call centre environment presented me with an interesting array of processes and problems. To begin with, there is an important difference between collaborative research design and collaborative research process. As I've already mentioned, I took a comprehensive plan of how I proposed to go about the work (a glimpse of which is provided above) to the initial meetings with Frontline management. Although originally keen to attempt a collaborative design process, in discussion with my supervisors I decided this was not feasible for my doctoral study. Time constraints and staff availability worked against joint development at the design stage. I also chose to pay attention to one of my academic supervisors, who counselled that "in the context of a PhD you need to demonstrate you are a researcher who can conceptualise and carry out a project." Nonetheless, a compromise taking these issues into account seemed workable. Consequently, although this study was initially shaped by my interest in life and work and my design for exploring it further, its open-ended conceptualisations and inductive methods created space for those participating to raise and work with their concerns. This initial stance created opportunities to explore emerging relational processes and connections as I began to 'inquire with' those taking part.

Complex relationship and trust building formed the mainstay of this research process. Participation was fostered via the notion of 'relational engagement,' a position that sees 'research as conversation' co-constructed "within a context that respects the coherence of multiple communities and facilitates dialogue rather than debate" (McNamee 2000, p.23). At Frontline, the CSRs and managers taking part in this study could be defined by Sheila McNamee's term 'multiple communities'. More often than not though, established organisational culture differentiated between the two using the language of 'them' and 'us'. This perceived relational barrier, combined with rigid time constraints intrinsic to the call centre environment, meant initiating research conversations between the groupings was difficult. For example, at the completion of the separate focus groups my initial design proposed a work-in-progress roundtable discussion involving both CSRs and managers. Yet despite the best of intentions from all concerned, this did not take place. Instead, research interactions typically occurred with individual CSRs and managers and amongst subsets of each

cohort. As the study progressed I also assumed the not always comfortable role of messenger (or bearer of information and perceptions) between each of the groups.

Despite the lack of ‘multiple community’ engagement with CSRs and managers together at any one time, the many and varied research conversations I was part of were integral for creating and sharing insights, information and selves. At the outset, I based this process on the fairly straightforward principle of reciprocity (of my sharing with those who were sharing with me during the course of the research). However, in practice I soon realised the multifaceted relationships and complicated situations which ensued were anything but simple.⁴⁵ I quickly learned that “[b]uilding relationships over time as one does in many participatory research processes heightens one’s sense of mobile identities or multiple selves” (Haney and Lykes 2000, p.288). Such mobile multiplicity also heightened my sense of vulnerability (in positioning and exposing my various selves). As the ‘outsider,’ the ‘researcher’ in the call centre I found that “personal involvement with the “subjects” in the field continually poses moral and ethical dilemmas” (Punch 1998, p.169). These dilemmas highlighted the politics and power relations that seem to go hand in glove with collaboration as a process for ‘coming to know what is known.’

According to the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*, to collaborate can mean either “to work jointly,” or “to cooperate traitorously with an enemy.” Put the two meanings on either end of a continuum and the difference between configures a very slippery surface. On various occasions during the course of this research I came to feel as if I was engaged in a precarious exercise of skating around from one edge of this spectrum to the other, often in danger of losing my balance or falling off (and therefore out of collaboration) completely. A number of times I ruefully reflected that despite the best of intentions, unless great care is exercised, collaboration can in practice be a recipe for what Morwenna Griffiths has called “secrets and lies” (Griffiths 1998).

At their best, the collaborative relationships I established in the call centre provided me with much pleasure and collegial satisfaction. For example; I worked together with a CSR and the Call Centre Manager to resolve a difficult workplace situation that

⁴⁵The principle of reciprocity, of going on together, with its many selective intonations in different contexts and situations is woven throughout the stories in chapters that follow in Part Two.

was impacting heavily on the CSR's attitudes and performance at work, and also affecting her personal relationships at home. At their most difficult I felt my integrity, both personally and professionally, was on the line as I juggled various conflicting agendas. As when my need to take time with/in research processes and relationships conflicted with the managers' need to get impressions and 'answers' from me quickly. At the same time some of the CSRs were beginning to see me as an advocate, expecting me to (re)present their concerns to management. The multiply inflected, complicated collaborative processes and relationships I became immersed in during the course of this research often tested my philosophical resolve as to their efficacy. The experiences taught me the value of constantly and honestly clarifying and reworking collaborative aims and intentions with all those participating during the life of this evolving relational research.

In a similar fashion, the premise/promise of confidentiality has also presented me with some thorny ethical and practical issues in the course of carrying out and writing this research story. I came to the project with a belief that 'life' and 'work' were ultimately inseparable, part of an integral, but very complex system in which we live our lives. This orientation invariably meant I had to confront and deal with what are often called 'boundary' issues (Mauthner 2000), in particular with the tensions surrounding our public and private worlds. Of course, the well known concept of boundaries between public and private worlds is yet another aspect of 'life' and 'work' separation, and as such it poses a parallel problem for me because:

It is difficult, in practice, to identify unambiguously where exactly we can see the public and where the private. It is easy enough to suggest that the private can be typically characterized as relationship-centred home life, while the public can be typically characterized as the instrumental goal-oriented life of the workplace ... But there are major difficulties beyond this ... 'Private' ways of being could be occurring at times, perhaps in a subdued way, in the workplace. The public sphere of markets could not operate without collective social behaviour and connectedness, and the workplace can be a place of intimacy (Edwards and Ribbens 1998, p.13).

My difficulties are just as Rosalind Edwards and Jane Ribbens claim. In countless conversations and observations at Frontline I encountered a muddy and multifaceted mix of various public and private 'selves' co-constructed and interacting in diverse

situations and settings. In the process I was privy to many personal and arguably ‘private’ confidences in the semi-public context of research observations and conversations. This challenge was further complicated by my working with both managers and CSRs. In doing so, I also gained multiple, often ambiguous and conflicting perspectives on life and work in the call centre, its organisational culture, processes and human relationships. How then to vouchsafe confidentiality, respect and preserve the private nature of some stories, and at the same time construct public arguments about the everyday indeterminacy and intermingling of public and private worlds based on many of these interactions and disclosures?

In many respects it can be argued that to promise confidentiality in any research endeavour is disingenuous. While there must be safeguards to protect the identity of participants, by its very nature research involves finding out and telling tales. It is concerned to reveal information, not keep it secret. In collaborative action research the sharing of information, insights, opinions, and stories is central, because such mutuality provides the rationale for the research process and forms the basis of the hoped for learnings. In this study many of my ethical difficulties, vis-à-vis respecting confidentiality (and protecting identity) as well as sharing life and work information, were compounded. This was because the reciprocal process of establishing rapport, developing ties and building trust occurred independently between me and each group of CSRs and managers. It did not occur collectively across the entire participant group.

Working in the field, I was faced with confidentiality and disclosure problems on two interacting fronts; between the organisational groupings of CSRs and managers, and across the public and private domains of everyday life and work practices. Profoundly aware of this on a day-by-day basis, I developed well-honed political and moral acuity as I danced on a fault line between sharing and silence.

[A]cute moral and ethical dilemmas may be encountered while a semiconscious political process of negotiation pervades all fieldwork. And both elements, political and moral, often have to be resolved *situationally*, and even spontaneously... (Punch 1998, p.159 original emphasis).

In meeting these challenges situationally and often spontaneously onsite at the call centre, I became ambivalent about confidentiality. Instead, I developed a preference for anonymity, and (over time) formulated a number of principles and strategies to negotiate each situation as and when it occurred. Although my first loyalty was to respect the confidences of each and every research participant, I learned by removing identifying details and combining stories and perceptions anonymously I could often share valuable insights along the way. For example, on one occasion I observed a senior manager from the National Office of the organisation tell CSRs involved in a junior management development programme:

“The management - employee relationship is not dissimilar to the parent - child relationship. We need to be setting boundaries. Your employees are your kids... To a certain degree they are like kids and they will push the boundaries... Set the boundaries, manage the boundaries and tell people where you are coming from ...”

The manager concerned was aware of the work I was undertaking in the centre and after the session I spoke with him for some time, questioning the merit of using a parent-child analogy with the trainee group. I used many anonymous examples of how CSRs felt they were treated like children during their working days, how this was counterproductive and resented, and how many believed there were other ways of doing things. I shared a number of ideas CSRs and managers at the call centre had offered; ideas that developed autonomy and accountability inside a more respectful adult-to-adult manager and employee relationship. Our conversation was amicable and fruitful, and we both went away with a better understanding of the possibilities and constraints involved in, as he put it, “changing the organisation’s somewhat narrow ‘do as you’re told’ focus on Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) to more of a focus on people.”

In comparable fashion, when crafting the research stories in the chapters that follow I am more inclined to sharing than secrecy. I apply similar multilayered and contextual principles and strategies around confidentiality and in doing so I have adopted a number of tactics for disguising participants’ identities. Firstly, I use pseudonyms. Secondly, at times I use composite characters, combining people and narratives to

illustrate a point.⁴⁶ Thirdly, when specific disclosures could lead to participant recognition I use unattributed stories and examples, leaving out all identifiers (gender, organisational designation, or any socio-demographic details). Finally, I'm realistic about the efficacy of the "cloak of anonymity" (Punch 1998, p.176) for the 'insiders' reading this account. They know as I do, who they are. Everyone has a copy of their own interview transcripts, and I know I have no control over any claims of (mis)recognition others might care to make. In some circumstances it was impossible to disguise a character – for example there was only one Call Centre Manager taking part in this study, and at times his words in that particular subject position were important. However, my hope is that while some stories may make some participants uncomfortable, the spirit of goodwill, collegiality and reflexive learning that characterised the collaborative tenor of this project will prevail.

'Coming to Know' on the Front Line and Beyond

Designing an inclusive research strategy presented me with other challenges too. Firstly, as a qualitative researcher I wanted to study the social and organisational worlds of the CSRs and managers in order to understand the meaning of their working lives in their own terms (Janesick 2000). Secondly, as an action researcher I wanted to craft effective methods that would enable significant levels of participant involvement and learning (Bray et al. 2000; Stringer 1999). Thirdly, as a reflexive researcher I believed "the self is a key fieldwork tool" (Reinharz 1997, p.3). Therefore, I wanted to work in a way that allowed 'elbow room' not only for the many selves or attributes I brought to the field to be acknowledged (I am more than a 'researcher'), but also for the selves that were created in relationship in the field to be understood and expressed. Fourthly, as a postmodern researcher I wanted to work in a situated and fluid way across boundaries; to let the relational, the aesthetic and the analytic intermingle co-constructing both the field and the text (Brady 2003). And finally, with one eye on the requirements of a doctoral process, I wanted all of the above to be seen as valid. (Interestingly, at the beginning of this process I couched my perception of validity in a more traditional academic way, stating in my original

⁴⁶ Composites work well in storied research because "they are simultaneously totally true and entirely fictional. They take real-life material and present it in make-believe form" (Booth 1996, p.249). As with all the (re)constructions in this dissertation, composites "are not offered as accurate descriptions of empirical reality, but for their interpretive or heuristic value" (ibid).

research proposal, that my ‘multi-method’ approach would enable “themes, patterns and discontinuities to be identified,” and that “cross-referencing and triangulation of data sources would ensure rigour” (a.k.a. social scientific validity)).

Whew!! Could one research strategy, no matter how layered and multi-method possibly achieve all this? With one crucial displacement I believe so, and in the chapters that follow I hope to show how. But at this point, here in extended quotation is my sine qua non. This is the key that allowed me to believe I could have and do it all, both in the field during the actual process of becoming with/in a research process and in the written (re)presentation, that follows.

I propose that the central imaginary for “validity” for postmodernist texts is not the triangle – a rigid, fixed, two-dimensional object. Rather, the central imaginary is the crystal, which combines symmetry and substance with an infinite variety of shapes, substances, transmutations, multidimensionalities, and angles of approach. Crystals grow, change, alter but are not amorphous.

Crystals are prisms that reflect externalities *and* refract within themselves, creating different colours, patterns, arrays, casting off in different directions. What we see depends upon our angle of repose. Not triangulation, crystallization. In postmodernist mixed-genre texts, we have moved from plane geometry to light theory, where light can be *both waves and particles*.

Crystallization, without losing structure, deconstructs the traditional idea of “validity” (we feel how there is no single truth, we see how texts validate themselves); and crystallization provides us with a deepened, complex, thoroughly partial understanding of the topic. Paradoxically, we know more and doubt what we know (Richardson 1997, p.92 original emphases).

For those of us involved in holistically researching the lives we are living in the living of them, our task is to relationally understand how we come to know in each particular situation and circumstance.

Individuals live [their] stories; through them they construct others and are interactively constructed by them, as active meaningful, knowable subjects acting in meaningful and knowable ways (Edwards and Usher 2000, p.41).

Those involved in this interactive meaning ‘full’ process must continually ask and (re)assess, “how do we know what we think we know [at this moment]”? For one’s audience the question is “on what basis should we accept your assertions of claims to know?” (Bray et al. 2000, p.104) To meet these challenges I use the possibilities offered in Laurel Richardson’s crystallization metaphor to ‘show and tell.’ ‘Crystallization’ allows the interweaving of various ways of coming to know for ‘my*selves’ and others with/in an unfolding research process. Just as light can be ‘*both waves and particles*’ so the stories and poems reflexively crafted in the second part of this dissertation reflect and refract the ‘symmetry and substance’ of ‘coming to know’ and of not knowing. Here, socially located, partial, fluid and always in process selves “embedded in the voices of the text ... by themselves seek *verification* persuasively in the lived world of the reader” (Clough 2002, p.14/15 original emphasis). Also, as Tony Booth (1996) maintains:

Standard tests such as reliability, validity, and replicability are neither appropriate nor adequate when lives are not consistent, biographical truth is a will-o’-the-wisp ... Narratives may be better judged by aesthetic standards, by their emotive force or their capacity to engage the reader emotionally in the story being told, *by their verisimilitude rather than their verifiability and by criteria of authenticity or integrity concerned with how far stories are true to the lives of those they portray* (p.253, my emphasis).

In this research process each participant had the opportunity to engage with the stories I (re)created as they were being written. Draft chapters were emailed, and people were encouraged to respond to the stories, and to the lives portrayed. The chapters were received appreciatively. For most participants, being offered a chance to respond was enough. Like Ed Wray Bliss (2004), I took the silence that generally ensued, to be a “non-oppressive silence ... an outcome of consent not suppression. [The participants], offered the chance to respond, can of course remain silent, and if they choose to do so this is an informed decision, an active choice” (p.144).

Yet I believe this ‘active choice’ was mitigated by timing on two counts. Firstly, when the chapters were unfolding I was no longer ‘resident’ in the call centre. On the infrequent occasions during the writing process when I did return, complimentary informal comments were often made about the perceived salience of the emerging

narratives. Secondly, doctoral research is a lengthy process, and call centres are high turnover workplaces. This meant that over the four years this study took to complete, the attrition rate of the participant group was significant. (Indeed of the original 18 CSRs and 6 managers, only 5 CSRs and 2 managers remained by study's end).

Of those who took up the 'right to respond' (Wray-Bliss 2004), all identified with the stories, finding both authenticity and verification in them. Here is a typical reaction:

"Just thought I'd let you know that I've finally finished reading the chapter. I think you did an awesome job with it – undoubtedly described this place to a "T". The faces have changed heaps since you were last here, but you know this place they come and go ... and speaking of going I've been applying for work in [another city] in the meantime I've changed roles I'm now a CSR/Quality Coach/do anything CSR project participant ... yip I'd say right about now you'd be saying "WOW." Just thought I'd let you know I loved reading it – I'm not one for big elaborate words but I enjoyed reading it and look forward to reading the next chapter. Keep in touch and take care." ('Nikki', a research participant, responds to "Bums on Seats" in chapter one, via email).

Research is Relationship: Much More Than a List of 'Methods'

Having introduced some of the on-going challenges involved with 'coming to know what is known' during this study, I want to briefly describe each phase of the research process in a more nuanced way than I have done so far, before introducing the 'cast of characters' that made the project possible. To paint a more holistic picture, I pick up on Ed Wray Bliss's (2002) point about the need to reflect on the personalised and interdependent co-construction of knowledge each contextually located phase or 'method' facilitates (p.23).

I began the first 'documentary phase' of the study in mid September. This was at a time of year when the call centre was beginning to gear up for the busiest period in its annual workload cycle – Christmas. As mentioned earlier, my access to the workplace was facilitated by the Service Manager who was my initial contact with the organisation. With the assistance of support staff she arranged a centrally located workstation for me in one of the centre's six CSR team groupings. Light-heartedly, she promised that either she or a nominated support person would be available

“whenever you need us.” As time is arguably by far the most precious commodity in a call centre environment, this was quite an assurance. I’m sure there were occasions when she rued the undertaking, for it was a promise I kept her to.

My physical location in the centre proved a great vantage point. Although each workstation was partitioned from its neighbour, the CSR alongside me was curious about my work and eager to chat as much as possible between calls. At the beginning of the research process this long-standing staff member proved to be a marvellous source, introducing me to a wide range of informal organisational culture, processes, and gossip. Being seated in the middle of the centre (a large open plan space) also meant I was able to observe people and processes from one end of the place to the other as I went about gathering documents and information. Similarly, it meant that others observed me, and I soon became a recognisable addition to the landscape. It wasn’t long before most people in the centre were familiar with me and where I came from (“the university”), although curiosity remained for some time about what I was actually doing.

During this phase of the work I was given any and all hard copy information I requested (policies, manuals, Management Information Systems (MIS) printouts etc). I also had my own organisational ID card and log-on access to all the organisation’s computer applications including its intranet (which proved to be a very valuable source of material). This level of access gave me an ‘insider’ status that did not go unnoticed a little later in the process. As when a CSR I was ‘shadowing’ was surfing through one of the systems and noted “hey, you have your own email account and everything in here.” Still, at this point I was the new kid on the block. I spent my days immersed in paper and process. Making copious use of the printing facility I had been given to copy documents, attending management and CSR team meetings as and when they arose, and keeping a research journal of the observations and reflections I was making each day. During this beginning phase most CSRs appraised me with guarded curiosity. In contrast, the majority of the managers seemed to regard my presence in the centre positively. Indeed, some often volunteered unsolicited material and support. I have no doubt that their facilitative attitudes gave me access to material, people and processes that would have been difficult (if not impossible) to connect with otherwise.

I assumed the proposed benefits to the organisation, on which I ‘sold’ the research, accounted for some of the goodwill. However, another possible rationale for why my ‘life and work project’ was viewed favourably emerged during this early period. I’d sat in on some pre-employment interviews to source a new intake of CSRs who would be offered temporary contracts over the busy Christmas period. Keen to have some of these ‘soon to be trainees’ involved in the research, I asked one of the Service Managers about the outcomes a few days later. During this conversation she mentioned another PhD student, also wanting to research the organisation, had applied for one of these temporary contracts. Curious, I asked what the research was about and if this person would be part of the new intake. The manager replied:

“I dunno what sort of research, something to do with welfare. Anyway we had another look at that one and thought she had ulterior motives – didn’t think that would be very positive. It was decided it would not be good for the Department to employ her.”

In many ways this reluctance was not surprising. Frontline had long endured a negative profile. It was a favourite target, both in the media and in the political arena, where various parties, including the incumbent Labour Government, regularly attempted to score political points at its expense. In recent years the organisation and its high-profile, rather flamboyant CEO had never been far from the headlines. No more so than at this juncture, for the CEO had just begun legal action in defence of her employment contract, which the State Services Commission had signalled it would not be renewing. Situated in this wider political context, my research was arguably less threatening. It sought collaboration and improved organisational outcomes, and perhaps in the process might even provide more favourable copy.

Whatever the rationale for participating, the fact Call Centre Management did so with enthusiasm, providing me with comprehensive logistical support, full access to staff, and to all the organisational systems, is a key example of research interdependency that is sometimes overlooked in the ‘methods list.’

The weeks rolled by. I continued to ‘hang out’ at the centre delving into documents day after day, becoming a somewhat conspicuous ‘fly-on-the-wall’ at various meetings, and striking up conversations wherever and whenever I got the chance.

Slowly, staff began to sign up to take part in the study. The ‘worklife’ shadowing phase was still a sticking point for some CSRs, who generally felt uncomfortable with the idea of being observed for so long both at work and in the after work period. This was not surprising, as monitoring both people and processes was de rigueur in the call centre. Further, monitoring was known and experienced as a management function, and initially CSRs probably suspected my ‘worklife’ observations were in some way aligned with management. They were understandably wary. However, by the end of October, 16 CSRs and 4 managers were on board ⁴⁷ and I was ready to organise and begin the interview conversations.

Unfortunately, my timing wasn’t great. In any call centre arranging for staff to have time off the phones is a complex affair, involving a number of variables around forecast call volumes and daily workforce and workload planning. In this particular call centre organising time and space for interview conversations was a logistical nightmare. The centre was moving into its busiest period of the year and call volumes were increasing dramatically. This meant a strict adherence to schedule was required and closely monitored (this is, the six hours or so a CSR is expected to be available to answer calls each day). Space was also at a premium. Aside from the actual call centre ‘floor,’ a sick room, and the bathrooms, there were only two other rooms in the call centre complex and these were virtually used to capacity for meetings and training (both for new staff and incumbents). As a consequence this research stage had to be carefully planned, and I was required to ‘book’ both participants and space in advance (in one of the training rooms for typically non-negotiable periods of time.⁴⁸)

I estimated each interview conversation would take approximately an hour and booked accordingly. With three exceptions (two managers, and one CSR) this proved to be the case. The managers had a great deal more discretion with their time than the CSRs, and my conversations with them tended to be scheduled near the end of the working day. This meant that on the occasions we went ‘overtime’ it was relatively easy to stay put and keep on talking. Not so with the CSRs. While all relished the opportunity talking with me presented to be ‘off the phones,’ most were equally keen

⁴⁷ As already noted the participant group eventually rose to 18 CSRs and 6 managers. The group is introduced in the concluding section of the chapter.

⁴⁸ One interview conversation did take place in the sick room, as no other space was available. This was particularly trying as the call centre’s only fridge was also in this room and staff frequently came and went during the conversation in order to access it.

to get back to the floor on time. Many were concerned about the impact any overrun would have on their day's statistics, a closely monitored numeric linked to performance and ultimately remuneration. To a lesser extent, some were also concerned about their team-mates, who were, in-effect, carrying the extra workload in the research participant's absence. On the one occasion when a CSR interview ran over the allotted hour, we were shooed from the room by a new training intake, and continued our conversation in a vacant upstairs room we surreptitiously commandeered (a space that belonged to a completely different subdivision of the organisation).

It can be argued that more than anything else call centres are about 'time' (Callaghan and Thompson 2002; Deery, Iverson, and Walsh 2002; Houlihan 2001). In subtle and not so subtle ways the pervasive nature of this variable was evident throughout this research process. By using the conjoint term 'interview conversation' I give some hint of the relational development I was trying to achieve at this stage of the process in talking about, and reflecting on, the complex, and multiple dimensions of life and work with each participant. There were many occasions when research participants took control of the interview situation and talked freely about numerous aspects of their lives; a process Daniel Bertaux (1981) argues makes for a "good life story" (cited in Booth 1996, p.241). But it was always with one eye on the clock. In this, as in all facets of the study, time was always against us. Of course this is true for any research project seeking a relational dimension, but no more so than when the study is located in a busy call centre.

Eventually, all twenty five⁴⁹ interview conversations took place over a period of about five months. I used a pre-prepared interview schedule⁵⁰ as a loose guideline only. I prefer to call the ensuing conversations 'semi-structured,' using the term advisedly, because in many instances the open-ended nature of the questions meant conversations took on a life of their own, much as Peter Collins remarks:

Even the apparently most 'unstructured' interview is structured in a number of sometimes subtle ways. The interviewer in the very act of

⁴⁹ I talked with the Call Centre Manager twice: the first time in his capacity as Call Centre Manager to discuss management in and of the centre, and on the second occasion to talk about his life and work experiences.

⁵⁰ See Appendix 4

initiating the interview necessarily determines the nature of the event [although not always] ... and as the interview progresses an internal dynamic develops, a storyline emerges that becomes increasingly complex (Collins 1998, paragraph 1.3).

One academic formulation would see the increasingly complex storylines, and the various complicated selves that developed and emerged during these conversations as 'data' to be analysed and written up subsequent to the process. As I've already signalled, I prefer to see this relational engagement and conversation (McNamee 2000), as the very 'stuff' of emerging work and life selves, and it will be presented as such in the chapters that follow.

Despite the time limitations, each interview conversation added to a growing relational familiarity between me and those taking part in the project. So much so that by the time I began the worklife shadowing most participants had much less anxiety about being followed around for hours on end. Indeed, many were looking forward to it. I also suspect this belief was aided and abetted by the experiences of a CSR and manager I shadowed much earlier on in the proceedings. Both staff members were leaving the call centre but wanted to take part in as many aspects of the research as possible. To accommodate them, I reworked my step-by-step 'research phase' process for coming to know the organisation and the research group.⁵¹

My interview conversations with this particular CSR and manager occurred early on in the 'document gathering' phase of the research, with the respective 'worklife' shadowing taking place the day after each conversation. At this stage I had not been in the centre long and my presence was still a novelty, becoming even more so on the days I followed these two around. Each observation was punctuated by numerous interactions and comments from other staff members as the call centre watched the watcher and her 'guinea pig' in-process. Typical comments to me and the participants included ...

⁵¹ One had resigned; the other was transferring to another of the organisation's call centre sites. In total I observed 23 members of the research group, unable to shadow one CSR due to the conflicting demands of our respective life and work schedules.

“Now Lisa we know you’re not happy about leaving and we all know it’s ‘cause Susan’s following you around all day.” (A manager to the participant CSR)

“Jennie, will you stop smiling so much, it’s so unlike you and you’re scaring the staff!” (Another Service Manager to the participant manager)

“Now that you’re going Jennie this is the ideal – no holds barred - opportunity for you to say how you see the role and what needs to be done.” (A National Office manger to the participant manager and me)

“Lisa! What’s the matter with you today? You are all over the place. Get back on the phones.” (A manager to the participant CSR)

The attention created by extensive note taking and my close one-on-one presence generated much good humour and animation from both participants and other staff producing a significant ‘observer effect.’ (Here I’m using the term ‘observer effect’ in its traditional research methods rendition. While action research aims to have an effect on research participants and outcomes, such visibility at this stage in the process was not a consequence I had in mind.) Curiously, this effect did not occur to any such extent later in the process when my presence in the centre had become more taken-for-granted. In reworking the scheduled observations to stay in-sync with the study’s inclusive framework, I inadvertently set up a ‘star for the day’ expectation that took time to moderate. In hindsight, the ramifications of modifying the process convinced me of the efficacy of my original plan to undertake the observations further down the track when the novelty of my presence had worn off, and I had become more of a ‘known quality’ to most people.

In her research shadowing female design engineers, Joyce Fletcher (1999) warned the shadowing process may indeed exacerbate ‘observer effect.’ However, Joyce was attempting to be invisible, “staying in the background and not getting involved in conversations directly, even with the shadowee” (p.42). In contrast, my research rationale was to interact and be involved with participants as much as they deemed feasible each day. Once I moved beyond the two early observations noted above, I no longer found a traditionally defined observer effect to be an issue at the call centre. By the time I carried out the ‘worklife’ shadowing as planned, I was well known and trusted within the organisation. Although there were sometimes comments like

“who’s got the shadow today?” in many respects I was able to get on with it, much as my opening story ‘Bums on Seats’ describes. Indeed, I would argue that the difference in ‘observer effect’ at different temporal moments in this study not only highlights the personalised, interdependent and emergent co-construction of knowledge, it also shows how these factors shift and change over the relational life of a research process.

When designing the research I had chosen to use worklife shadowing because, like Joyce Fletcher, I saw this “systematic unselected recording of events in their natural surroundings” (1999, p.40) as a particularly useful way to gather a descriptively rich and uninterrupted picture of life and work in its unfolding. With no predetermined categories (unlike self-report diaries), shadowing allows a micro-level of detail about how people actually ‘do’ life and work as opposed to how they talk about what they do (for example in the interview conversations). However, while ‘doing’ life, work and research with others, I/we are also ‘becoming’ our selves in relationship together. Our identities, the many dimensions of who we are construct the process. In the field complex relational connections with research participants soon taught me the benefits (and pitfalls) of taking note of, while taking part in, this holistic and interactive people making process.

By the time the focus groups took place some months later, I had long begun to appreciate the multiple layers of meaning ‘full’ construction involved in relationally researching life and work; so had many of the participants. There was a heightened awareness of the contingencies of context, relationships, identities, and in some instances the ‘performances’ (Alvesson 2003) of the participants, myself included. This meant the focus group reflections about life and work in the call centre and beyond were characterised by an experientially complex and rich voicing of numerous points of view. Building on the previous work, the purpose of each group was to discuss the weaving of life and work in terms of identities, motivations and experiences. Participants discussed the personal attributes and identifications they brought to the work they were doing. They defined what being a successful and effective CSR or manager meant to them, and discussed some of the organisational enablers and barriers to this. Finally, they pondered what might be done in this workplace to holistically support and develop their working lives further.

At the conclusion of the three research stages (interview conversations, worklife shadowing and the focus groups) there was an intermingling of scepticism and optimism for any organisational outcomes.

“That somebody who doesn’t know anything about the Department or the Call Centre or the work and so forth, coming in brand new and having that opportunity to have a look at a certain point in time what is happening here at such a minute, microscopic level, is a real advantage to us. And I think what we’ll get out of this is a tool which will really enable us to help push through a whole bunch of changes.” (Manager)

“I’ve found today really beneficial like... [CSR name] I was looking forward to it a lot just because there’s so many people – if you can imagine just what the six of us getting together and having our ideas you can imagine what everyone else is probably thinking exactly, along the exact same lines, and they are probably thinking like [CSR name] am I the only one that’s thinking this way?’ So I can’t wait to find out what happens with it and I hope that there is an improvement – you know a positive change.” (CSR)

“I need to know that there’s good in there [the research]. Because then I can use it and I can cope and I can move on. I can feel like there’s a bit of light at the end of the tunnel if I know that there’s positivity in there. If it’s all bad that’s too immense for me.” (Manager)

“Yeah I think yeah something could come out of it. Where it could be...I mean to try and make it a better working environment is a major, is a real major.” (CSR)

“There are things wrong that they need to adjust and they need to look at and I hope that they’re not so – what’s a good word for it? So blind and not.... Like they’re gonna just ignore it, not ignore it, but yeah but don’t do anything about it.” (CSR)

However, there seemed to be a general appreciation of the process and the personal and professional learnings garnered along the way.

“I really enjoyed the sessions, especially the first session we had – that opened up a lot of closed doors for me, and that enabled me to move on.” (CSR)

“I did too. I like the sessions, I liked you following us around. That was cool. But yeah it does open you up to think ‘flip I’m not the only one that thinks that.’” (CSR)

“I know there’s going to be a lot of learning in here for us ... I find that very comforting.” (Manager)

“I have really enjoyed it too. I was a pull in at the end because [my Service Manager] said ‘oh we haven’t got anybody in our team to do it’. And it’s been quite worthwhile because as you are an outsider we can really talk to you. Whereas we can’t freely talk – I mean we might mumble between ourselves about different issues but we don’t go in-depth about anything really.” (CSR)

‘Really talk’ they most certainly did. To conclude this chapter I introduce the people whose wholehearted and multifaceted participation, forms the heart of this research. Until this point, I have predominantly referred to members of the research group by their organisational designations, as CSRs or managers. Of course they are all a great deal more besides.

In keeping with a many-angled ‘crystalline’ approach, I present a brief binocular introduction. Firstly, I introduce the cast in its organisational context using conventional ‘social science-speak’ in a form resembling Robert Chia’s (1996a) representationalism. Remember, this way of representing the world based on:

static, discrete and identifiable ‘things’, ‘entities’, ‘events’, etc...
underwrites the dominant academic predisposition which takes unproblematic commonsensical notions such as ‘the organization’, its ‘goals’, ‘culture’, ‘environment’, strategies’, ‘life-cycles’ etc., as theoretically legitimate objects of analyses [and interest] (p.33 original emphasis).

I briefly note some categories, ages, family stages and employment profiles because they impart a certain amount of general demographic and organisational information. I also want to make the point that they do little more. Presented as ‘discrete and identifiable things,’ this static snapshot is somewhat of a smokescreen, because it obscures the fact that these limited and limiting categorisations were moving even as I collected them. In the always emerging process world of ‘becoming’ such ‘facts’ soon become redundant.

As I've already noted previously, in this dissertation I'm attempting to work a different vision. In this study, the organisation will not be "dissected as a cadaver, a logical structure of inert elements, extinguishing the life in the social connection that exists between people" (Sandelands 1998, p.17). Rather, my version breathes emergent life into organisational research. So, like Dorrine Kondo (1990) before me:

The reader will find here no organizational charts of company structure, little statistical, so-called objective data, and scant linear, empirical description. With the aim of imparting a vivid sense of everyday life, I attempt to recapture dialogue and events as they occurred on the shop floor and elsewhere – words uttered by "real people" (Kondo 1990, p.46).

It is to the "real people" whose working lives are authored in the following chapters I leave the last words. But first a self-consciously 'representationalist' glance ...

'Coming to Know' A Cast of Characters.

The twenty-four staff members, who participated in this research, encompass a broad range of ethnic identities, ages and life stages. At the time of the interview conversations, participant ages ranged from late teens to mid fifties. A variety of life stages and family configurations are also represented. These include early career singles with no dependents, custodial and non-custodial single parents, and parents in both nuclear and reconstituted families, with children ranging from infants and preschoolers, to those with non-dependent adult children and grandchildren.

The call centre has a diverse cultural profile with three main ethnic groups – Maori, Pacific Island, and Pakeha (New Zealand European) predominating. Overall Maori and Pacific Island staff comprised a majority at CSR level, and Pakeha a majority at management level. Figure 1 compares the total call centre staff percentages in these ethnic groups at the time this research began with those in the participant research group.

Those in the research group also span a number of employment profiles and patterns seen in the call centre more generally. Length of employment ranges from those who have worked in the centre since its development and set-up just over four years ago, to new staff who gained employment during the course of this research.

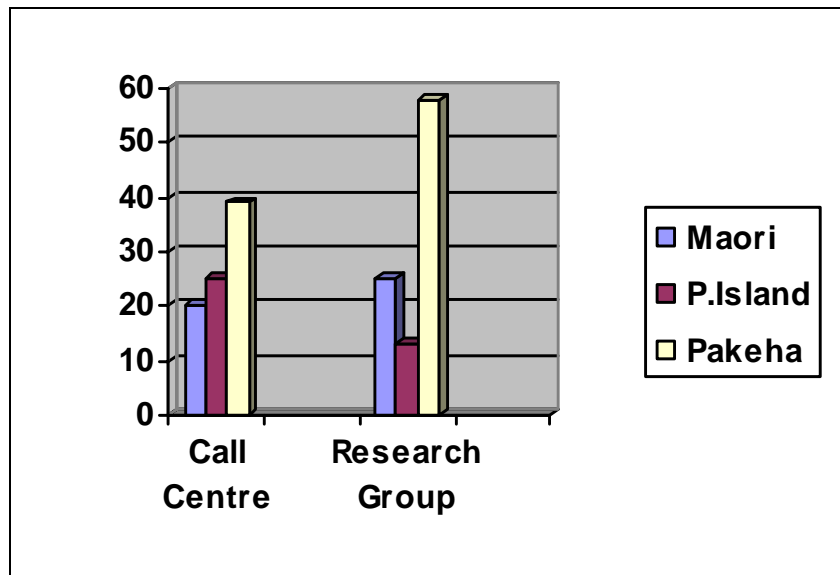


Figure 1

In line with the overall staff profile of the site, the majority of participants in this study are women. However, the number of men contributing does approximate the general male/female staff ratio (90% female/10% male in the centre; 83% female/17% male in the research group). Similarly, both part time and full time employees figure in this study with the majority being full time staff. Again this mirrors a typical employment pattern in the centre (63.71% full time permanent, 27.43% part time permanent, and 8.86% fixed term temporary).

Aggregated ages and life stages, ethnicities and employment profiles all tell something of those who contributed to this study. In conversation other facets emerged, none of which I will attribute to an organisational designation, or socio-demographic profile, but all of which intermingle with those characteristics to make and remake the individuals who inhabit this research. I leave the last words in this chapter with some of them.

“I’m just the daughter, the sister, the big sister, the cow. [Shared laughter] The chef, the cook ... I am sort of like the oldest child I suppose ... but that doesn’t mean I get ... I mean yeah ... I’m just a kid at home really.”

“I’m serious, I’m quite a serious person and my husband’s not, he’s a very laid back fun type person that’s probably what attracted him to me – or me to him and he’s

always telling me “you can’t joke” and I go “I don’t get the jokes that you have” because to me they’re stupid.”

“Cause I mean outside of work I'm not scary, I'm just very, I think I'm very confident in what I do possibly and I have a lot of skills in a lot of different areas so in some places that can be quite frightening to people. So I do come across as extremely confident in what I'm doing and that's only because of experience and nothing more. So I think sometimes that too frightens people ...”

“I’m a Dad, I’m a husband, a coach. Yeah I coach netball and I’ve coached my daughter’s netball team right from when she was eight and basically taken it through and I’ve learnt heaps and they’ve learnt heaps and now I’ve got a really nice little unit of young people.”

“I get a lot of satisfaction from working on projects, coming up with new ideas and new ways of doing things. Improvements - it’s important to me, if someone was to take that away from me then I would not be a happy person at work.”

“I’ve never suffered from ambition. I don’t think you could call me ambitious but now I’m more interested in where, I’m more interested in the fact that I have a career, before it was just a job. More interested now and I think possibly that’s just a natural extension that the kids are that much older as well. We can start thinking about things, it’s not just day-to-day grind anymore. We can start thinking about where we’re going with our life at home ... Because they are getting easier to manage. At times, I think about it, and you know babies are so time consuming. But also we’ve got to the stage where between us we earn more money now than we ever have before. So we can start thinking about what we’re doing with it as opposed to every week its just pay the bills, feed the kids, pay the mortgage ... It doesn’t feel like quite so much of a treadmill. So I think I’m blossoming Susan. Emerging is a good word isn’t it!”

* * *

CHAPTER FOUR: Improvisational Choreography⁵²

Dancing with Theory and Practice

The mere observing of a thing is no use whatsoever.

Observing turns into beholding,

beholding into thinking,

thinking into establishing connection,

so that one may say

that every attentive glance we cast on the world

is an act of theorizing

(Goethe, cited in Thatchenkery 2001, p.112)

⁵²Here I take authorial license with the term originally used by Jack and Marilyn Whalen and Kathryn Henderson (2002) to describe the CSR/customer interchange in call centre work.

Emerging

The previous chapter closed with the expression of a particular autobiographical moment by one of the research participants. In lyrical description of interacting circumstances, she creates a multilayered sense of changing life possibilities and purposes. Children are getting older and easier to manage:

“It’s not just a day-to-day grind anymore; we can start thinking about where we’re going at home ...”

Feelings about paid work are moving beyond the sense of doing,

“... just a job,” to being more “interested in the fact that I have a career ...”

Improved family finances add to a sense of optimism.

“We’ve got to the stage where between us we earn more money now than we ever have before, so we can start thinking about what we’re doing ...”

Personal, professional and relational optimism is expressed by the notion:

“I’m blossoming,” and by a sense of emergence. “Emerging is a good word isn’t it!” she concludes enthusiastically.

Emerging is indeed a good word. In this chapter I pick up on these prescient comments in order to argue the theoretical and practical value of a contextual moment-by-moment sense of emergence, for enabling a richer understanding of the multifaceted and integral nature of everyday lives. I use this complex sensibility to nurture a more conscious awareness of always originating lives, and to foreground the often overlooked or taken-for-granted processes that make and remake the everyday connections in work, life and research at Frontline. This ontological approach has much in common with Margaret Wheatley’s (1999) “process world” (p.155), and Peter Reason and Brian Goodwin’s (1999) “science of qualities” with their emphasis on our embedding in a ceaseless, unfolding flow of becoming, which behoves the need to focus on “complex emergent wholes” (p.281).

To holistically focus on such mobile complexity is no easy task. However, in working theoretically with a sense of emergence, at the same time as I think and write this research story into being (that is, the characters and concerns with which this research is interested and involved are also emerging), I hope to cast some light on the processes by which ‘complex emergent wholes’ are endlessly becoming. In so doing I am also, as the title of this chapter suggests, crafting a dance with theory and practice. The metaphor feels appropriate, for just like life, work and research, I believe theory and practice form a lively gestalt. They are interactive and inextricably linked. To separate practice from theory, or vice versa, and set one in opposition to the other is unhelpful. As educator and philosopher John Dewey (renowned for his steadfast refusal to separate thought from action) commented in relation to art

The artist should restore continuity between the refined and intensified forms of experience that are works of art and the everyday events, doings and sufferings that are universally recognized to constitute experience (1934, cited in Janesick 2000, p.380/81)

Dewey’s words are equally applicable to the practice/theory relationship. In crossing, re-crossing, and blurring yet another dualistically constructed boundary I intend to ‘restore continuity’ between practice and theory. The everyday stories that make up this dissertation show that “we read theories into everything” (van Manen 1990, p.45) in order to help us make sense of our lived experiences. In doing so, we are engaging in embodied relational practices that are constitutive of those theories and lived experiences. My research process and stories never lose sight of the fact that it is “living human beings who bring schemata and frameworks into being and not the reverse” (ibid).

Extending my dance metaphor a little further, I use the term ‘improvisational choreography’ to foreground a sense of this practice/theory interplay in our always-emergent everyday lives. For just as the choreographer creates new dances through movement extemporaneously, often intuitively reshaping known steps, so in our everyday social interactions do we rework and recreate known conventions and ways of becoming in new and unforeseen ways.

Improvisation involves reworking precomposed material and designs in relation to unanticipated ideas conceived, shaped, and transformed under the special conditions of performance, thereby adding unique features to every creation (Berliner 1994, cited in Weick 1998, p.544).

Similarly, I could define this dissertation as a ‘performance,’ with the improvisational forms and processes I use as I write this emerging research story into being, foregrounding yet another integral aspect of the practice/theory relationship. Under these ‘special conditions of performance,’ my “[s]taying close to theory allows [my practice of] experimental writing to be a vehicle for thinking new sociological subjects, new parameters for the social” (Clough 2000, p.290).

Languaging Emergence

A constructive place to begin any discussion of moment-by-moment emergence is with/in language. For language is the central means we use to create our lives and the worlds in which we live together.

Postmodern epistemology suggests that the world is constituted by our shared language and that we can only “know the world” through the particular forms of discourse our language creates (Hassard 1994, p.305).

Nevertheless, the notion that we constitute ourselves and our world(s) in language is relatively new. For most of its history social scientific research (like its counterpart in the physical sciences) has adhered to an altogether very different “correspondence theory of language” (Gergen 1999, p.20). In this modernist view language is but a picture of reality, a transparent means by which we communicate that which already exists ‘out there’ in the world. However, during the last three decades or so a wide ranging ‘linguistic turn’ has gained momentum. This movement, encompassing broadly based new theories of science and language (including poststructural, postmodern, and critical epistemologies) has challenged and largely overturned the correspondence view. In contrast, a constitutive view of language recognises that “everyday language... is not so much a series of pictures of reality as a set of instruments enabling people to *deal* with reality. Each word is an arbitrary collection of signs or sounds: its meaning is found in its *use*” (Gustavsen 1996, p.7, original emphasis). In acknowledging that language is an activity that mediates reality rather than mirrors it, this new worldview “reflects an intentionality that allows for both the

constitution of meaning and the instability of meaning” (Schwandt 2001, p.194). Importantly, this framework also recognises that in dealing with reality people are capable of exercising some choice in relation to particular discursive practices. A useful way of understanding this is through the provision and use of subject positioning.

A subject position incorporates both a conceptual repertoire and a location for persons within the structure of rights for those that use that repertoire. Once having taken up a particular position as ones own, a person inevitably sees the world from the vantage point of that position and in terms of the particular images, metaphors, storylines, and concepts which are made relevant within the particular discursive practice in which they are positioned (Davies and Harre 1991, p.46).

The notion of ‘subject positioning,’ as Bronwyn Davies and Rom Harré use it, refers to “a discursive process whereby selves are located in conversations as observably and subjectively coherent participants in *jointly produced* story lines” (ibid, p.48, my emphasis). The emphasis on joint (inter)action is key to understanding the process in which ‘selves’ and ‘story lines’ emerge at any given time. We must always be mindful of context though. After all, “for all our inventiveness and social combinations, we are still creatures of everyday life” (Holstein and Gubruim 2000, p.3). Both the conceptual repertoire and location of subject positions available for individuals to take up will always be mediated by the social arrangements within which a conversation occurs and develops. Yet in the interactive conversational moment neither the individuals nor the setting are entirely separable because:

[T]he organizing centre, so to speak, of the act of speaking shifts. It is located neither within the individual nor out in society at large, but precisely upon the boundary between the two, in the interactive moment of speaking, as speakers are making connections between themselves and their surroundings (Shotter 1995, p.67).

Within this dynamic and relational nexus the concept and practice of ‘positioning’ provides a way of understanding some of the complexities that abound in what John Shotter (1997) calls, “the amazing ‘fractal fullness’⁵³ of the momentary events

⁵³ A fractal structure is a non linear, iterative, deeply patterned and also indeterminate mathematical description of the rich complex wholes seen in the natural world (Reason and Goodwin 1999).

occurring between us” (p.347). But there are two important caveats. Firstly, the selves (or identities) that can be observed in our conversations are not always intentionally brought to emerging story lines by each participant and it would be a mistake to assume such a conscious and individualised process. Our jointly produced realities are much messier relational affairs. Secondly, as complex and always emergent beings, our identities are profoundly uncertain. The selves we make are only temporarily secured in the fleeting moments of their becoming (Bass and Hosking 1998). Within the enablers and constraints of historically located social contexts we are always making it up (that is, emerging) as we go along. The implications of this perspective for both the process and products of research are profound. It means that:

There is no clear landscape of social positions to be charted by an all-seeing analyst; neither is there a conscious agent, whether researcher or researched, simply waiting to be reflected in a research project. Instead, researcher, researched and research make each other; research and selves are ‘interactive texts’ (Rose 1997, p.316).

This is a controversial and contested claim that has had a rocky journey to qualified acceptance in the social sciences (See, Flaherty et al. 2002; Lincoln and Guba 2000 for comprehensive overviews of what has come to be called the 'Crisis in Representation' and its associated problems and possibilities). Nevertheless, the postmodern notion that the world of human existence does not exist independently of human activity and interpretation is arguably now widely established, with adherents maintaining that eventually its tenets, “will simply overtake modernist assumptions of an objective reality, as indeed, to some extent, it has already done in the physical sciences” (Lincoln and Guba 2000, p.178).

In acknowledging this worldview, the thorny task for ‘researcher, researched, and research’ is to avoid being blown about, as Dorothy Smith eloquently puts it, like “motiveless subject(s) at the mercy of the winds of intertextuality”(Smith 1999, p.113). The use of subject positioning provides a useful anchor in this regard. In emphasising language, and the specific discursive practices we use to create and shape our ‘jointly produced story lines,’ positioning points to active in-process subjectivity and the always emerging movement of each interaction. At the same time, it grounds this sense of emergence in the social, in already existing activities and meanings. For

example, as I sit here thinking and typing the words you are reading into existence I am not ‘motiveless.’ Rather, I am actively engaging in an emergent process of identity-constitutive improvisation. Although socially located in the domestic sphere (in my study at home), I am primarily subject positioned as a neophyte academic interacting with and (re)working the ideas and texts of others (I will bracket for the moment the mother/wife who has neglected to take anything out of the freezer for dinner, although as time passes her co-presence is becoming more keenly felt!). The vantage point from which I write references my subject positioning with its particular conceptual repertoire and discursive practices. In doing so, it signals the ‘pre-giveness’ of language.

In other words, the interactive always emerging participants of everyday life use historically embedded language tools and conceptual repertoires already on hand, in creative and novel ways to make meaning within the actual settings and social contexts of their production. As Dorothy Smith notes, “[t]he symbolically constituted world is also a social world, an open-ended territory” (1999, p.116).

Within this multidimensional ‘open-ended territory’ it may be considered rather novel to include my increasing preoccupation with my lack of dinner preparation in an otherwise ‘academic’ text. However, noting such concerns indicates the richer, more inclusive context with/in which I work. Including my mother/wife subject position, and the more traditional gendered division of labour in our household (with its ‘particular images, metaphors and storylines’), signals the multiple and relational nature of positioning in the on-going interplay of work, life and research.

In similar inclusive fashion, the text before you can be seen as the ‘product’ of this research, and of course in one rendition it is. Yet as you read and engage with it, we are also jointly participating in a process of producing new ‘story lines.’ Gillian Rose’s ‘researcher, researched and research’ list (above) of those who ‘make each other,’ can easily be extended to include the reader(s). All of these multifaceted emerging story lines resonate with Mikhail Bakhtin’s dialogic approach to the accomplishment of meaning.

Bakhtin views every utterance as ‘containing’ the speaker/writer’s creative struggle to make a language that is pre-given and determines how she can mean, mean what she wants in the actual local settings in which she speaks

or writes. For Bakhtin, the pre-givenness of language is always in movement as each new moment of people's creative struggle to get meaning done in actual settings of utterance is entered into the pre-given language of those who come later... Concrete utterances are essentially dialogic, an active interplay between past determinations of meaning and their creative shaping to the speaker's or writer's current intentions (Smith 1999, p.113).

Unfortunately, there is arguably little sense of this emergent dialogical interplay, or the 'creative struggle to get meaning done,' in the majority of conventional research texts. On the contrary, despite the impact of postmodern epistemology with its recognition of the constitutive role of language for the way in which reality is perceived, a scan through any number of mainstream academic journals shows a considerable preference for the modernist correspondence, or 'representationalist' rationale. In remarkable contraindication to the prevailing zeitgeist, the bulk of conventional research texts continue to authoritatively communicate findings retrospectively, looking back on a fixed and finalised version of events as though they correspond to some external pre-existing reality 'out there' in the world (Shotter 1997a). Rather than dialogical, interdependent, emerging research stories *of* the world co-constructed in relationship with research participants, these independent, representative research reports tend to tell monological fixed and finalized stories *about* the world as though distanced from it (Shotter 1998a).

This preference for what John Shotter calls a "monological-retrospective-objective" (1998a, p.29) way of conducting and writing research is premised on a number of assumptions. One of the foremost is a powerful professional claim for authorial authority. This is portrayed by explanatory theory(ies) and expert analysis, based on each discipline's will to accountability and truth. In many instances the research requirements for accountability and truth are corralled in the academy by disciplinary languages, expectations and boundaries. As Carl Rhodes' (2002) notes in relation to his own published work:

It is about writing within certain limits because to write that way is set out in the discursive regimes of the academy. For [this article] to have been considered worthy to be published in the journal you are reading it must have met certain conditions, or an interpretation of the conditions that have

been set out in the history of the textual practices associated with academic writing (p.102/103).

Even in those approaches, like Feminist and Critical Management Studies, that subject conventional practices to examination and critique, disciplinary conventions often win out (O'Shea 2003; Parker 2002; Reay 1997; Reger 2001; Wray-Bliss 2003).

[Disciplines] give as well as withhold power, by controlling who may and may not speak on a topic, what must or must not be said, and how a topic must be spoken of for knowledge about it to count (Hodge 1995, p.35).

In the majority of standard research accounts and texts it seems as though the hermeneutic circle is hermetically sealed within the academy, and in this environment representative frameworks about the world 'out there' predominate. Like photographs, the 'pictures of reality' they present separate and freeze truth, knowledge, and selves from the always emergent, relational and interactive processes of their becoming, bringing about a sense of conceptual stasis.

In contrast, the 'pictures of reality' I prefer are those championed by J.K. Rowling in the *Harry Potter* novels.

"Harry stared as Dumbledore sidled back into the picture on his card and gave him a small smile ..."

"You know in the Muggle [human] world people just stay put in photos," said Harry.

"Do they? What, they don't move all? Ron sounded amazed. *Weird!*" (Rowling 1997, p.77, original emphasis)

In this fictional realm, photographic characters constantly interact amongst themselves and with their viewing audiences. Ironically, such a supposedly 'magical' worldview is congruent with the ceaseless relational unfolding 'flow of becoming' advocated here. Beyond monologue, it includes the multiplicity of experience and the dialogical interplay of everyday social interactions in the making. With/in this multiplicity, our situated truths and knowings are constructed, "grounded in the foundational moments in which the social comes into being through language and through the sensory ground which human organisms share" (Smith 1999, p.128).

Likewise, all social and organisational research is conducted ‘through language’ on the ‘sensory ground’ which humans share. From this ever-emerging perspective:

[R]esearch reports are not representations (accurate or flawed) of the world, but contested claims to speak ‘the truth’ [with/in] the world. Research writing becomes narrative work, exploring meaning through the mutable medium of language (Fox 2003, p.86).

This means that the lives we construct, both in the field and on the page, are “but one truth story among many possible stories” (Rhodes 2001, p.9). Carl Rhodes also points out, “in this view research practices operate as ‘proper’ forms of storytelling but nevertheless any particular form cannot claim to be inherently more true than other modes” (ibid).

Nonetheless, it is hard to discern this prismatic and dynamic complexity within the powerful and controlling ‘regimes of truth’ (Foucault 1980) operating in academia’s disciplined discourses. In the majority of conventional research texts the constructed, interdependent, sensory and ever-emerging nature of the ‘truths’ and selves in question often remains hidden (disguised? unattended to?), although there are some important exceptions (See for example the *Ethnographic Alternatives Series* edited by Ellis and Bochner 1997 - 2004>; Lather and Smithies 1997).

There is no doubt that resisting stability by recognising and working with a sense of emergence (both in the field and in the text), is challenging and time-consuming for all concerned, yet neglecting to do so presents even more pressing epistemological and ethical problems. Dorothy Smith indicates a way forward when she joins language with the sensory ground which humans share together, pointing to the interactive and embodied social construction of truths and knowledges. It is to the particulars of this process, as they play out in this research story, I now turn with a view to understanding the lyrical and complex dimensions of our everyday becoming a little better.

Walking the Talk - The Logo Story

You may recall in the asterisked a claim I'd logo bearing no organisation's purpose be found on page 65). contentious. However,



research story creates an opportunity to prove Gillian Rose, Carl Rhodes and others correct by showing how our contested claims to speak 'the truth' emerge through the active coordination of people's subjectivities in social acts with/in which 'researcher, researched and research make each other.' I use the 'logo story' as a way of both doing and showing how complex ever emerging, embodied and relational practices interactively shape the life course of a project and the conversational moments within it.

To recap; in the previous chapter I argued that Frontline's latest stylised logo lacked the explicit connection organization's purpose replaced had to its

This assertion drew a the Call Centre Manager how each draft chapter of the research participants

email he sent expressing concerns over various issues arising in the emerging chapter, I returned to the call centre to discuss the text with him. In the course of that discussion we teased out the specifics of a number of aspects that were troubling him. However, it is the interactive and conversational dynamics of the 'logo story' I want to focus on here.

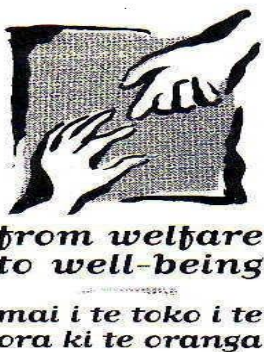
I journeyed to the meeting feeling an uncomfortable nervous anticipation. It had been many months since I was last in the call centre and the ease and familiarity of my everyday presence, with its rhythmic comings and goings, had long gone. My sense of who I was in relation to the research, and how I fitted into the project's process, had

first stanza of chapter three I made about Frontline's new resemblance to the or function (the statement can That claim proved the subplot it created in this

research story creates an opportunity to prove Gillian Rose, Carl Rhodes and others correct by showing how our contested claims to speak 'the truth' emerge through the active coordination of people's subjectivities in social acts with/in which 'researcher, researched and research make each other.' I use the 'logo story' as a way of both doing and showing how complex ever emerging, embodied and relational practices interactively shape the life course of a project and the conversational moments within it.

and relevance to the new that the reaching 'hand up' it predecessor.

sharp response from Sean, (I have detailed elsewhere this dissertation is given to to respond to). Following an



also shifted markedly over this time. Months spent in relative solitude thinking and writing the research into textual form, had compounded my enormous personal and professional investment in the project. There was now an individualised sense of ‘ownership’ making contradictory demands on my collaborative ideals. My relatively comfortable ‘insider’ collegiality had been replaced with an ‘outsider’ anxiety fuelled by the tenor of the email, which instead of the usual bonhomie had curtly requested an early meeting to “talk this through please.”

For a while I drove in silence, all too aware of the complex temporal and spatial dimensions playing out at this moment as ‘researcher, researched and research’ (re)made each other. Unsure where to position Sean on a continuum from colleague to combatant, I desperately tried to stay away from thinking the wheels might fall off the process. At this late stage, such thoughts were almost more than I could bear.

On arrival at the call centre I was greeted warmly by Gina, Sean’s P.A. We chatted about our working lives as I signed in and was duly labelled a ‘visitor.’ Our relational small talk helped calm my nerves and bridge the distance created by my absence in the intervening months. Sean was seated a short distance away in the open-plan Centre Manager’s area. He rose to welcome me with his customary smiling enthusiasm.

“Well hello there stranger.” His eyes twinkled as he spoke. “How are you?”

“I’m very well. Yep, it sure has been quite a while Sean,” I replied.

A subject position is a possibility in known forms of talk; position is what is created in and through talk as the speakers and hearers take themselves up as persons (Davies and Harre 1991, p.62).

In taking ourselves up as colleagues and friends, we jointly created a tenor for the ensuing conversation. Over the following two hours or so our discussion would range, intensely at times, through a number of issues and concerns we each had with the research process and its unfolding outcomes. This conversation, like all others, would be an occasion that would elicit many subject positions - many selves. Discontinuously drawing on (amongst others) the discursive practices provided by our different organisational affiliations, genders, familial and sociocultural backgrounds, we engaged in a jointly created conversational process, using these various subject

positions to make new meanings in the moment, and to negotiate new ways of becoming, that is, new emergent selves. At this particular juncture, all these fluid and changing relationships would both jointly construct, and test the bounds of the facilitative domain of friendship (re)created at the outset.

As we were talking I noticed that Sean had scrawled some pointed comments across various sections of his copy of the chapter. Comments like “this is just an opinion” and “what is your agenda here Susan?” jumped out at me.

“Yeah, I got quite carried away at times,” he commented ruefully, observing I had become aware that his written reactions were less tempered than his verbal. “But let’s talk about that ... for instance this comment you make about the new logo. That’s just an unsubstantiated opinion; we put a lot of thought and planning into that logo. It does reflect our organisation and what we do. There’s even a document detailing it all. I’ll get you a copy of it if you’d like it?”

“I certainly would. That’d be great.”

(Sean was as good as his word and the organisation’s “Identity Standards” was duly sent to me. This information was indeed useful, and some of it is referred to in the identity stories in chapter six).

“But you know” I continue, “The point I’m making here is a comparative one. The old ‘reaching hands’ were pretty explicit as to what this organisation wanted to be known for in the 1990s. You know, a hand up rather than a hand out, work for the benefit and all that. While a lot of effort may have gone into developing the new logo, and it’d be great to see what that is, I still maintain any connection with Frontline’s rationale is stylised, and frankly, not that obvious.”

As I’m saying this, I’m thinking a logo that has a less explicit connection to Frontline’s purported rationale actually makes perfect sense for its latest incarnation. With the change to a centre-left government and a shift in direction following a ministerial inquiry into the fundamentals of the organisation, as well as the various on-going departmental mergers that seem to constantly reshape social policy delivery, it’s probably useful that any meaning the now widely recognised logo carries, remains obtuse.

While I feared this contemplation may be moving into the realm of unsubstantiated opinion that so beleaguers Sean, my musing points to another aspect of the always in-process dialogical construction of reality. Importantly, it demonstrates that what might be called our inner or self-dialogue is never completely our own because even this ‘talk’ is socially constructed and involves joint action mediated by a context and its ‘otherness.’

[O]ur ‘inner’ lives are structured by us living ‘into’ and ‘through’, so to speak, the opportunities or enablements offered us by the ‘otherness’ both around us and within us. Thus our mental life is never wholly our own. We live in a way which is both responsive, and in response, to what is both ‘within us’ in some way, but which is also ‘other than’ ourselves. Why? Because dialogic inner speech is *joint action*, and joint action always creates that third entity – the context, situation, circumstance, etc., that the action is ‘in’ and must ‘fit in’ with (Shotter 1993, p.110 original emphasis)

Neither Sean nor I were ‘fitting in’ very well at this moment because aspects of our jointly created discussion had engendered an uncomfortable tension between us. I sensed Sean remained as unconvinced with my argument about the logo as I was with his. We both seemed to be ‘stuck’ in our respective subject positions; he as organisational insider, and me as academic outsider; with our different angles of view refusing stereopsis.⁵⁴ So the conversation moved on, leaving the still contentious issue hanging, with a tacit understanding that it would probably be ‘resolved’ once I had the additional information he promised to send.

‘Extended Epistemology’ and Ethical Knowing

In some respects, a form of ‘resolution’ is being achieved by revisiting the logo episode. The story reveals the emergence of different appreciations for what the new logo might mean both to the conversational participants, and for the research process more generally. In doing so, it develops a much more nuanced way of knowing, an ‘extended epistemology,’ beyond the distant empirical dimensions that characterise traditional western social science (Gergen 1994; Heron 1996; Heron and Reason 1997). In conversation Sean and I show how “knowing lies not so much in the mind

⁵⁴As neither Sean nor I were listening to each other ‘without resistance’ (Isaacs 1999) at this point, stereopsis is a scientific term that seems appropriate here. It refers to the perception of depth produced by combining the visual images from both eyes (both points of view).

of individual actors, but arises in relationship through participation” (Reason and Goodwin 1999, p.294). Hence, following John Shotter (1993), my deliberate use of the verb ‘knowing’ rather than the noun ‘knowledge’ to describe the process, “emphasizing that such knowing is not a thing, to be discovered ... and stored up in journals, but rather arises in the process of living, in the voices of ordinary people in conversation” (Reason and Goodwin 1999, p.295).

Many aspects of the story demonstrate the multifaceted ways in which we construct and come to know our world dialogically in language, in the everyday ‘process of living’ emerging within a social, contextual and relational nexus.

The social world is narrated or articulated into being through the discursive practices in which we engage and which constitute our experiences as meaningful. This brings to the fore the place and significance of narrative as a ‘world-making’ practice. Social practices, including those of the workplace, those of producing knowledge and those of researching the workplace, can be seen as texts – worlds defined, delimited and constituted through narrative processes. A social practice can be multiply ‘written’ or narrated, it can be ‘read’ or interpreted with single or multiple meanings, and it can be ‘re-written’ or re-presented with different meanings (Edwards and Usher 2000, p.40).

The re-presentation of multiple and different meanings is further enhanced by the participatory nature of this research which opens up interactive moments producing ‘two-sided territory’ (Shotter 1997a). More than just creating space for another voice to speak, such ‘talking back’ codifies the non-academic participant’s ‘right to respond’ (Wray-Bliss 2003) providing important opportunities to influence and enhance learning and knowing, and to explore differences further. Taking an ethical stance that is respectfully concerned with the ‘becoming of others,’ this relational process demonstrates the co-construction of our social realities. For it is only in communicative interaction that we can jointly re-author our knowing, and our selves. In yet another iteration Sean will engage with and respond to what I’m writing here. Perhaps this process will produce another emergent round of understanding(s); it may (or may not, as the case may be) create better understanding of our ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ perspectives on what the logo means.

Bending Time (Forwards)

Email from: Sean to Susan: Subject: Chapter Four

“Hope all is well and you are churning through your next chapter and stories. In chapter four you are still using huge words I see. Come on! Maybe academics could consider raising non-academics vocabularies in small incremental steps instead of writing in a foreign language? Anyway, I appreciated your coverage of our emergent and somewhat convergent discussion and thoughts about the logo. I certainly felt more comfortable about chapter three after our talk.

I was aware of your nervousness with our meeting. I think in honesty the intention of my blunt email was to suggest a bite to our partnership in this work. “Hey! Are you listening to me?” sort of thing ...

Being exposed to the inner workings of this call centre, and indeed the wider organisation over quite a period of time means you’ve picked up our vernacular ... I find your insights and wider perspectives and views relevant and stimulating. Although you felt detached about your past experience of being an insider here, you will always be an insider to me.”

Warm regards

Sean

Such ‘talking back’ reveals the categories ‘organisational insider’ and ‘academic outsider’ to be socially constructed subject positions, in-process and always open to challenge and change. This recognition (and indeed Sean’s response) highlights our interconnectedness, the transforming logic of *both/and*, of a conversational *us* that sees difference less as a problem to be solved or an obstacle to be overcome, and more as an opportunity for engagement, and for greater understanding, learning and growth (Isaacs 1999; Tillmann-Healy 2001). Our conversational ‘talking back’ both encapsulates Sean and me and moves us beyond the *either/or* choices of particular subject positions because:

[a]s we become more self-conscious of not having a unitary or static sense of self but a multiplicity of possible voices, we begin to realize that while

we are partially dependent upon the others around us, we are also partially independent too, while we are partially this we are also partially that – a certain two-sidedness, both this and that, characterizes much of our existence. In locating us in an as-yet unformulated realm of responsive understandings, in situating us primarily in a conversational world of embodied, situated, feelingful, or sensuous activity, it opens up for study those interactive moments in which we can attempt to linguistically formulate ourselves and or circumstances in many different ways (Shotter 1997a, p.40).

Embodied Knowing and ‘Feelingful’ Selves

In drawing attention to the ‘feelingful’ dimensions of conversation, John Shotter signals another crucial aspect to the unfolding flow of our complex emergent lives. We cannot constitute and come to know our world(s) only in language, because our words are always embodied. “[W]ords, talk, conversation and discourse are embodied activities, not merely disembodied linguistic recitations” (Sampson 1998, p.24). For example, the nervous butterflies whirling in my stomach at the beginning of my ‘logo’ conversation with Sean were, among other things, a felt reminder of my outsider status. The fluttering whirlpool inside me was a sensory rendition of anxious subjectivity. And while commonplace, like all feelings it can “never be entirely communicable to others” because it references a “bodily knowledge that refuses and surpasses language” (Casey 2000, p.66).⁵⁵

This embodied knowing, constituted in but not reducible to relational practice, is an integral dimension of emergence. Remember Dorothy Smith’s (1999) assertion above, that our truths and knowledges are “grounded in the foundational moments in which the social comes into being through language *and through the sensory ground which human organisms share*” (p.128, my emphasis). At the time I did not know that

⁵⁵ In this section I use the terms ‘feelings’ and ‘emotions’ interchangeably. While on some accounts the more central or supposedly scientific meaning of ‘feeling’ is physiological sensation I prefer the indeterminacy of a synonymous stance. For example, the Concise Oxford Dictionary defines emotion as “a strong feeling.” And while Western philosophy contrasts emotion with reason seeing emotions as actually or potentially subversive of knowledge (Jaggar 1992), the Eastern tradition of Zen Buddhism neither intellectualizes nor individualizes feeling, but rather identifies it with a “natural social order of mutual interdependence and oneness in which persons are not rational individuals, but instead a-rational ‘beings in relation’ (Sandelands and Boudens 2000, p.46). Most importantly, however you define them emotions are experiential. As ‘beings-in relation’ we experience emotion. “It is this experience that is emotion, not the subject’s thoughts about their experience, or the language of self explanation arising from the experience, but that immediate contact with the world the self has through involvement” (Barbalet 2002, p.1).

Sean had sensed my initial anxiety. However, the shifting positionality created by his friendly greeting and the conversational collegiality we quickly (re)established, settled my butterflies in next to no time. Without a doubt, my newly acquired embodied composure contributed to the dynamics of the ensuing discussion. It is also evident in this ‘feelingful’ example that:

Emotions ... are multidimensional and cannot be reduced to biology, relations, or discourse alone, but belong to all these dimensions as they are constituted in ongoing relational practices (Burkitt 1997, cited in Williams and Bendelow 1998, p.137).

Thomas Csordas (1994) coined the phrase ‘being-in-the-world’ to evoke the existential immediacy of always emergent sensory selves, of our “temporally/historically informed sensory presence and engagement” (p.10). To dispel any representative tendency to dissociate from oneself and from embodied others, Catherine Casey (2000) develops this ethic further, to one of “being-*with-in*-the-world” (p.66, original emphasis). Again, no static pictures of reality here, because in talking about our emergent embodied selves we are simultaneously talking with (that is, becoming in) the process.

As long as we engage in talk about things in our world, we confront that world, ourselves included, only as a kind of ocularcentric object of our inquiry and not as an aspect of the very process by which any inquiry must take place ... [W]e cannot stand outside the body when we engage in discourse, for we are always within the body in and through which we are able to talk. To do otherwise is like trying to talk about breathing without breathing while we talk (Sampson 1998, p.24).

In moving Catherine Casey’s sense of ‘being with-in-the world’ to one of ‘becoming with/in’ the world, this research remains immersed in the expressive and animate world of its ongoing production – it breathes as it speaks. By using the embodied, participatory, creatively emergent sense of coming to know developed here, I am able to both be in, and tell of the many relational dimensions and connections experienced during this research project. However, in order to understand the nuances of such holistic complexity better it is important to both do it, and view it from different angles. Hence, my multiply refracted use of three lenses – the interwoven realms of relationship, identity and reflexivity.

Inside a Living Kaleidoscope: Relationship, Identity, Reflexivity

My use of the concepts and practices of relationship, identity and reflexivity, throughout this research process is already apparent. Even so, as the following chapters take each one of these lenses as a primary focus, it seems a brief recap and scene setting is in order. In doing so my aim is to show both the integrity and the interconnectivity of each lens.

Let's continue as we have from the beginning, with/in relationship. To recap; in contrast to the Western Enlightenment tradition that has historically held the independent self as 'the' basis for human being (McNamee and Gergen 1999), my work follows postmodernism's relationally constructionist precept that our in-process selves are intrinsically social and relational (Holstein and Gubruim 2000; Hosking 1999; Hosking and Bass 2001; Mackenzie and Stoljar 2000; van der Haar and Hosking 2004). Relationship/relatedness with ourselves, with others, and with all our contexts is integral to our human becoming. And therein lies the connection with the second lens, identity, because from this perspective it follows that "*all* identity is relational" (Eakin 1999, p.43 original emphasis).

There ain't no such 'things' as 'I's' or 'you's' – at least, not with anything more than a fleeting existence, changing moment by moment: However, in being addressed as a particular 'you,' in certain particular settings, by certain particular people, you come to know yourself as a particular kind of person among other such persons; as someone whom you can (in both a naturalistic and an ethical sense) address as they address you (Shotter 1989, p.149).

"Mum ... have you seen my spelling book?" more a shout than a question. "Muuuum!"

As I've yet to respond the tonal whine is taking over.

"Muuuum!!"

"How many times have I asked you to come find me and not shout from one end of the house to the other," I reply somewhat exasperated. "The last time I saw your spelling book it was where you left it, atop that heap at the end of your bed."

In countless similar interactions my mother identity is (re)created each day. Certain ‘particular’ people – four of them, in this case my daughter – address me as this ‘particular’ kind of person. In doing so, they substantiate my knowingness of my/self in this ‘particular’ rendition of a mothering subject position. Immersed in everyday living, we typically remain quite unaware of our location within each often mundane, but also unique and unrepeatably moment. Yet in these ‘living moments’ (Shotter and Katz 1999a) my children and I jointly participate in relational identity work. Our individual identities are constantly (re)created with/in these interactions. Importantly, it is only from the relational inside of this ongoing flow of embodied dialogical activity that we can make sense of who we are and how we can ‘go on’ (Shotter 1998a, p.82). Organisational identities too, are cultivated and (re)created with/in similar relational processes (Czarniawska 1997; Hatch and Schultz 2002).

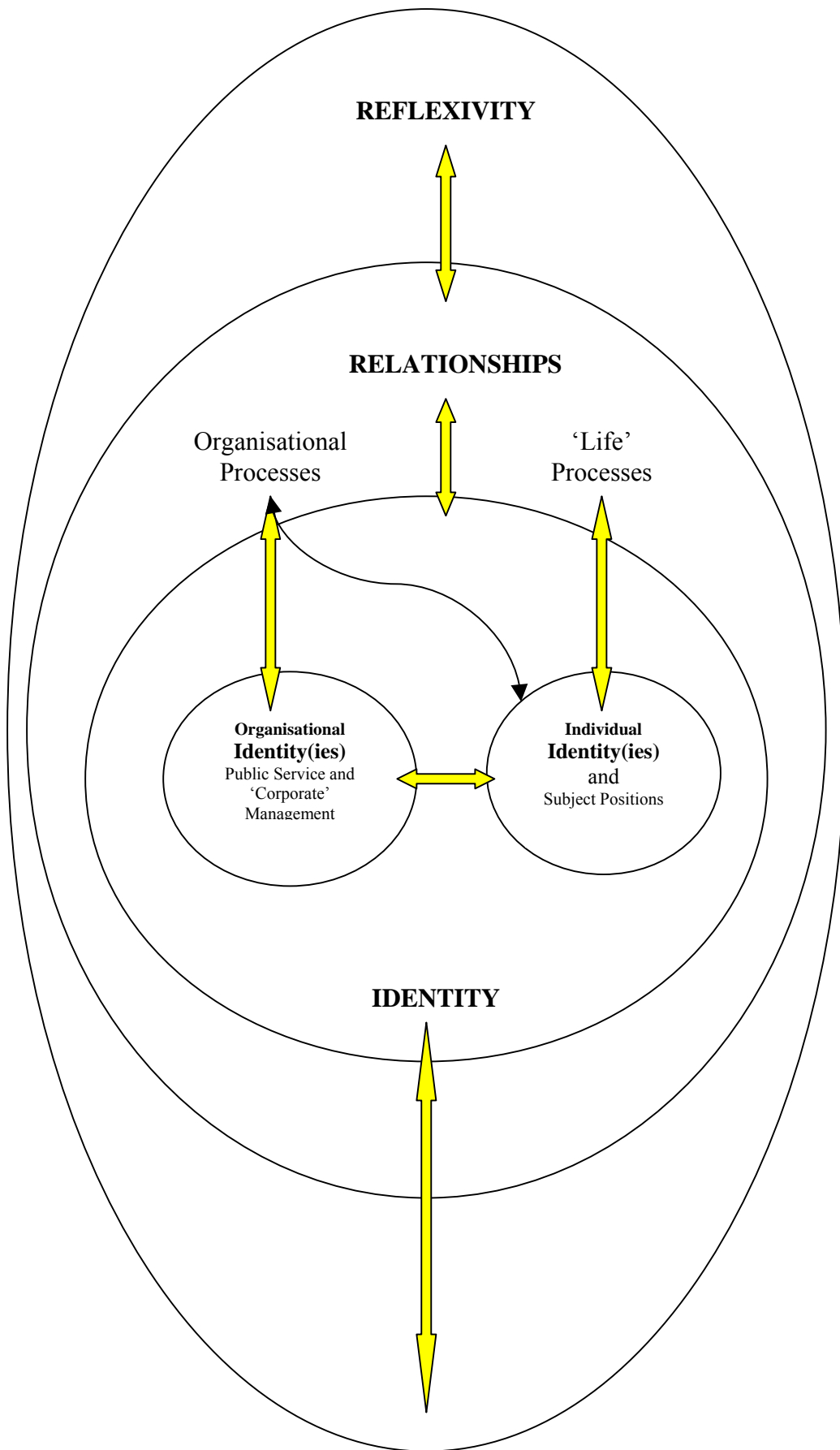
The dynamic and ongoing work and life task at Frontline and beyond, “around creating a sense of self and providing temporary answers to the question ‘who am I’ (or ‘who are we’) and what do I (we) stand for?” (Sveningsson and Alvesson 2003, p.1164) are dimensions I will explore further in chapter six.

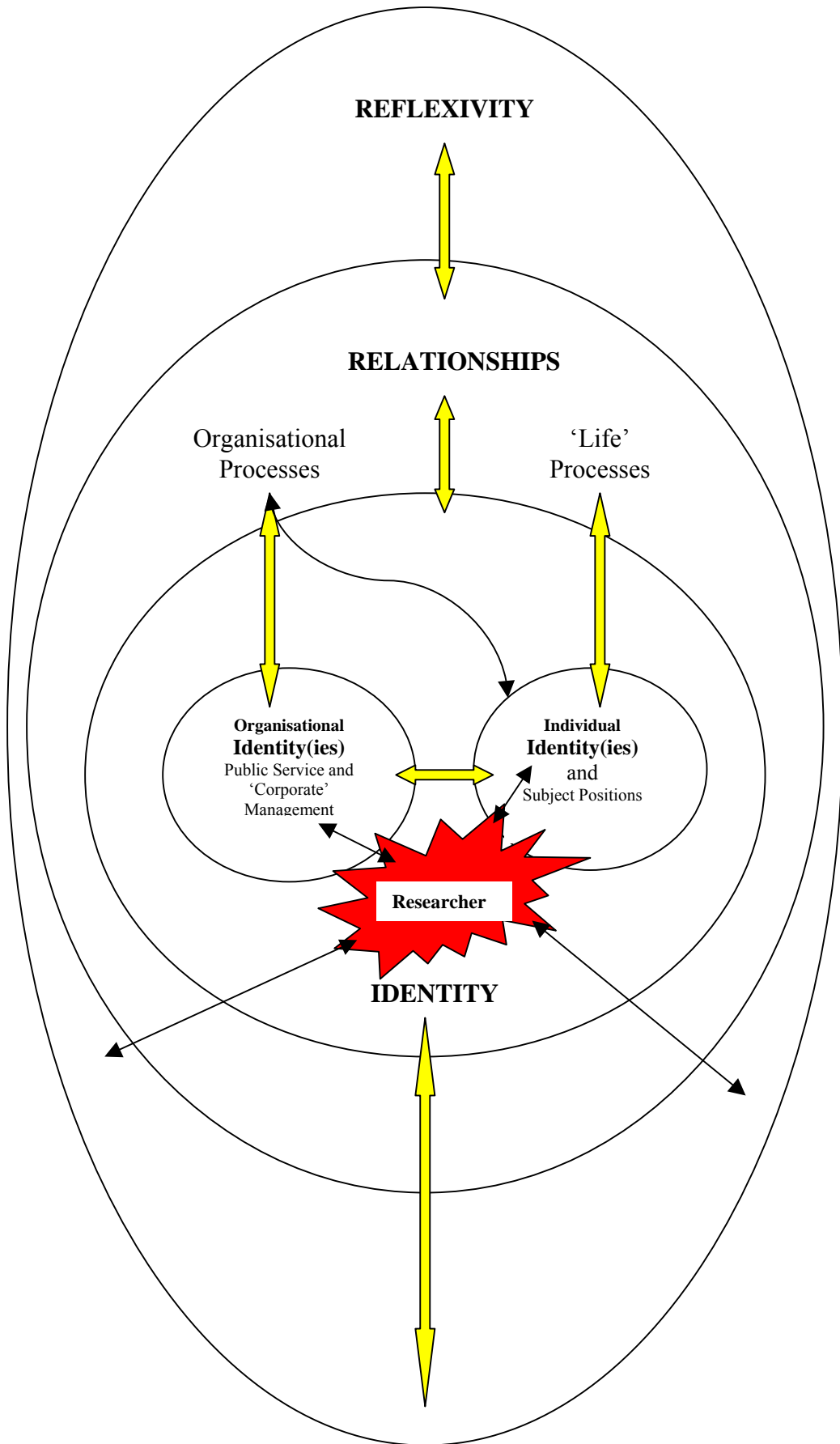
This everyday taken-for granted processual nature of our relatedness and our identities brings me to the third lens, reflexivity. For “if we are to come to an awareness of what we are doing in our doing of it, and to open up opportunities for alternatives, we must ourselves become reflexively aware of the character of our own practices” (Hawes 1998, p.99).

In many respects reflexive awareness and practice provide an overarching context for this research. I incorporate a conscious and consistent effort to locate myself with/in the process and the text and to critically reflect on my own practices. But more ‘crystalline’ than this I extend beyond self/selves to locate the practices and experiences of all the research participants in the layered complexity of our organisational, institutional, historical and other socio-cultural contexts. Again, I pay attention to emotions and feelings. The importance of this reflexive dimension needs to be made explicit here, because unfortunately there is a “tendency to think of critical reflection in overly rationalistic terms, at the expense of a recognition of the extent to which critical reflection can be prompted by the imagination and by emotion, desire and bodily feelings” (Mackenzie 2001, p.124). As I have already noted, all subject

positions and identities are constructed in and expressed through our bodies. Thoughts, feelings, words and gestures are embodied practices and in fostering a critical awareness of ‘what we are doing in our doing of it’ we neglect this aspect of our relatedness at our peril.

At an earlier stage in this research, surrounded (and somewhat overwhelmed) by piles of documents, transcripts, observations, impressions and field notes, I grappled with how to think my way through the project, positioning myself in the process, via the moving kaleidoscope of relationship, identity and reflexivity. In doing so, I came up with the following ‘mind maps.’ The limitations of static two-dimensionality notwithstanding, the diagrams attempt to convey an interactive sense of multiple in-process connections, and are worth reproducing here. (Ideally, my schematic ‘boundaries’ would be moving, permeable and dynamically three dimensional. To picture my intentions, perhaps you can call to mind the animated holograms R2D2 beamed to relay information to Luke Skywalker in the Star Wars sagas).





And So To The Stories ...

In “Part Two” of this dissertation, the integral nature of work, life and research at Frontline plays out in a series of stories and poems crafted through the moving kaleidoscope of relationship, identity, and reflexivity. Always mindful of their dynamic interconnections, I hone each lens to focus on one aspect of the triptych in each of the following chapters.

As with “Bums on Seats,” the day-in-the-life story that introduced this research in chapter one, all the stories I (re)tell are about making meaning, or ‘coming to know,’ in the ‘process world.’ Embedded in, and emerging from living experience, they are crafted from immersion in research, life and work during my time at Frontline. As such, the stories and poems could be called ‘anecdotal’ because “the anecdotal is very much about the moment” (Gallop 2002, p.3). But unlike some academic conventions that position the anecdotal as ‘lightweight’ and diametrically opposed to more privileged theoretical or analytical versions, the stories and poems “cut through these oppositions in order to produce theory with a better sense of humour, [emergent] theorizing which honours the uncanny detail of lived experience” (ibid, p.2). Like Jane Gallop I hope the stories:

Anecdotalize theory – to make theorizing more aware of its moment, more responsible to its erotics, and at the same time, if paradoxically, both more literary and more real (p.11).

Finally, a word about the vexed process of deciding which stories I would tell. Early on in ‘coming to know,’ after vain attempts to ‘theme’ research moments that were for the most part complex, connected and experiential, my frustration with the fragmentation occurring in this process got the better of me. While Mats Alvesson (2003) contends that all research is about ‘doing violence’ to some degree or another, I found themes damagingly distancing. They decimated the rich interconnectivity of my research process, and did too much violence to any sense of holistic emergence around the concerns and interests the participants and I were exploring.⁵⁶ Instead, I

⁵⁶While I soon moved beyond themes, the exercise was not without merit. In fact it proved to be a valuable stepping stone in my on-going process of coming to know. The thematic approach also provided clarity in the initial stages of communicating emergent ‘findings’ to those participating, as evidenced in my “Initial Work-in-Progress Report to Participants” (see Appendix 5).

stay ‘up close and personal’ using intuition, “the ‘glue’ that holds together our conscious intellect and our intelligent action” (Claxton 2000, p.36), as my basis for selection.

[I]ntuition is often more a matter of drawing upon and extracting meaning from a largely tacit database of first-hand experience ... Creative individuals, the literature shows, tend to be those who have steeped themselves in the study of a particular area, and are able to draw on this well of experience in novel, flexible and integrative ways (ibid , p.41).

This way forward is by no means unprecedented. For as Peter Reason and Brian Goodwin (1999) maintain:

As far as intuition is concerned ... it is a universally recognised subjective component of scientific discovery. It is the intuitive faculty that makes sense of diverse data and brings them into a coherent pattern of meaning and intelligibility, though of course the analytical intellect is also involved in sorting out the logic of the intuitive insight. *What is not practised in science is the systematic cultivation of the intuitive faculty, the capacity to recognize the coherent wholes that emerge from related parts* (p.292, my emphasis).

The stories you are about to engage with are my attempt to do just this. In weaving storied iterations of relationship, identity and reflexivity, my goal is to arrive at a more holistic understanding of the connected selves emerging, working, living and researching at Frontline and beyond.

* * *

PART TWO: STORIES TOLD



Te torino haere whakamuri, whakamua

At the same time as the spiral is going forward, it is going back

(Witi Ihimaera 2003, p.199, from His Best Stories)

CHAPTER FIVE: Relationship Stories

'Being is Always Becoming'⁵⁷ (Re)making Me, Them, and Us

Our mistake is to look for an explanation ... [As academics] we are required to respond to the unique events within which people reveal their own 'worlds' to us, as if they must be *explained* - instead, we want to be able relationally, to 'place' their actions, to know where they are coming from, where they are trying to get to, thus to find our feet with them.

(John Shotter 1998a, in *Telling of (not about) Other Voices*, p.85, original emphasis)

We envisage a world of relationships and interdependencies in which each individual is a nodal point of intersection and connection. Activity takes place within interrelationships, and only has sense, and meaning, and purpose within that context. Actions are always preceded by other actions, relationships by other relationships, and the individual self by the selves of others.

(Ian Burkitt 1999, in *Relational Moves and Generative Dances*, p.72)

⁵⁷ This phrase is a play on Eugene Minkowski's (1933) belief that "time is a synonym of life in the broadest sense of the word" (cited in Flaherty 1999, p.9). Time is so commodified in Frontline's call centre environment Minkowski's conviction seems particularly relevant to this study.

Recruitment: Going In, ‘Finding Our Feet’

*What do you know about call centres and why does working at our call centre appeal to you?*⁵⁸

The question jangles. Its jagged edges are raising the hairs on the back of my neck. I’ve officially been ‘in the field’ for just two days and the so-called “motivation” enquiry feels uncomfortably tailor made. My ‘academic’ knowing about call centres is cold comfort in this unfamiliar ‘hands on’ environment, and beyond naive enthusiasm, at the moment I have no idea what (if anything) appeals to me about working here. Thankfully I am not required to answer. Instead the question is directed toward the assured young woman sitting directly across from me. Glancing in my direction, she expresses unfamiliarity and eagerness with consummate ease.

Jasmine, a bright, personable, no-nonsense single parent is handling the three person interview panel as she means to handle the customer service representative’s job; with maturity and a self knowingness that gives her the confidence to do most things on her terms. Several months earlier, as one of Frontline’s ‘clients,’ she withstood urging from her Case Manager “pushing me to go back to part time or full time work.” Her irrepressible son Jackson was still a preschooler and she had only just settled her less robust daughter Monique into the rhythm of the early school years. With sole responsibility for these two, and for running her household, Jasmine felt “pressured” and not yet ready to add paid employment into the mix. When the timing worked better for her, Jasmine made the call. In next to no time her Case Manager, liaising with Frontline’s work brokerage service, put her forward for work in the organisation’s call centre. So here she was interviewing for the CSR role.

“It’s very ‘PC’⁵⁹ at the moment to recruit from our own client base,” one of the managers tells me before the panel convenes to begin the day’s scheduled round of

⁵⁸ Under the heading “motivation” this is the first question put to candidates interviewing for Customer Service Representative positions at Frontline. It comes from a “*CSR Recruitment Schedule*” that covers specified “*key result areas*” (KRAs). These include “*customer service, self-care, communication, innovation, decision making, goals and biculturalism.*” During the interviews I observed, the schedule was strictly adhered to. The questions were read to candidates, and their responses were rated on a 9-point scale (used to evaluate the KRAs, as well as “attitude, appearance and ability to do the job”).

⁵⁹ Politically Correct

interviewing. “But sometimes you really feel as though you’re scraping the bottom of the barrel,” she laments. Nevertheless, like a number of other CSRs already employed in the call centre, Jasmine is being recruited through the organisation’s “own books.”

“I’ve been on the benefit three years, and I gave myself three years, that time’s up next week. My career plans began three years ago when I booted my husband out. I was nine weeks pregnant and I gave myself three years. I’ve been a mum and been busy too, doing voluntary work, school support, budget advice ... keeping it all together and building my self-confidence back up to get out in the workforce again.”

Jasmine’s matter-of-fact disclosures initially surprise me although I keep my raised eyebrows in check. Later, as I get to know her better, I will come to understand and appreciate her perceptive directness as we swap organisational insights, parenting stories, and recipes. At the moment however, I am busy trying to work out how to be an unobtrusive researcher in the contrived atmosphere that marks job interviews out from most other human interaction. However as it turns out, both Jasmine and the interviewing managers require a greater contribution to the emerging process than I can possibly anticipate. I’m about to get the first of many lessons reinforcing the claim that “personal identity (motive, character, intention, action) is a by-product of negotiations within relationships” (McNamee and Gergen 1999, p.20).

At the beginning of Jasmine’s interview, Lucy, the Service Manager heading the management panel, seeks permission for my presence, introducing me as she will throughout the day as a “researcher from the university interested in work and life.” Although the introduction reveals little and the power dynamics make it virtually impossible for Jasmine to refuse, she appears genuinely unperturbed to have another unfamiliar character added to the process.⁶⁰ Such ease was not so evident when Lucy introduced me to her colleagues earlier that morning. Moana and Russell, both former CSRs currently working in ‘acting’ management roles, initially display a brittle politeness towards me. Their cool demeanour conveys how neither seems particularly enamoured by my inclusion in the day’s proceedings.

⁶⁰ In this regard Jasmine is quite unlike any of the other candidates. While no one refused to allow me to sit in on their interview – my presence seemed to add varying degrees of stress to an already difficult situation for the other applicants I observed during the day.

Nonetheless, as Jasmine's interview proceeds I begin to feel that she and the management panel are resourcefully using my silent participation in ways that cause me to think long and hard about the many subtle, contextual and relational variations involved in any form of research with other people. Jasmine's eyes regularly meet mine whilst she replies to the questions put to her by each manager. Is she being polite I wonder, and generously including me in the process? Or perhaps she is as aware as I am of the panel of managers - watching me watching them - as they go about their task? Russell and Moana have certainly begun to thaw towards me; do they sense that I am here to learn and contribute and not to judge them?

Dressed appropriately in business attire and sitting with the panel, I am culturally and spatially aligned with Lucy, Russell and Moana. However, my constant note taking and the 'visitor' tag I am wearing mark me as 'other' than the staff members on whom I am professionally dependent for gaining and maintaining access to as many facets of the organisation as possible. At the end of the day these three, hungry for input, will ask for my impressions of their questions and processes, and how each performed as interviewers. The enthusiastic conversation that sparks leads to valuable insights around a number of operational areas, and as we wrap, noticing the 'visitor' label I'm still wearing, Russell will comment "Oh we'll have to get you a name tag." But even at this early stage of the day I am already on notice. Their active and unspoken curiosity with my note taking provides more than an inkling of the "practitioner relevance" (Johnson et al. 1999) they will require of my presence and my research.

Similarly, without so much as a word uttered in the unfolding interaction, I am experiencing the multiplicity of positions that can occur as "actual relations jointly produced in the very act of conversing" (Davies and Harre 1991, p.55) reshape any prior alignments. The relatively self-contained researcher position I'd unproblematically expected to inhabit during the interview, is being dynamically reworked moment-by-moment by all my co-participants. Sensing and responding to these nuances with a tilt of the head, a frown, a smile, my silence is grounded in the sensate attentiveness of ever emerging present experience (Casey 2000), and a yet to feel comfortable recognition that in each relational moment "we are always on the way to being other than what we already are" (Shotter 2003a, p.8).

When asked if she would consider Saturday work Jasmine's gaze becomes particularly direct. Our widened eyes connect as she raises the issue of childcare, for which she takes complete responsibility.

“Well obviously there's no day-care available on Saturdays so I would need to have reasonable notice so I can call on family and friends to help out with the children.”

Perplexed by the question, and her response, I furiously scribble comments in my field notes ... ‘Think about this request in relation to the labour pool from which staff are being recruited.’ I know the panel are all aware of Jasmine's sole parent situation, so why does there seem to be no recognition/consideration that Saturday work would be particularly difficult for her? Given that Saturday workers are expressly needed, is there any organisational provision for assistance with childcare to make covering the shift less complicated for people like Jasmine with sole family responsibilities?

“I don't think it would be a problem” Jasmine continues, but for the first time in the interview she is beginning to look decidedly uncomfortable. “But as I say I would need plenty of notice,” she reiterates.

I catch myself nodding in agreement; still puzzled no one on the panel seems aware of the chink in her composure the question has revealed. Intent on impressing her capabilities, she's stuck between a rock and a hard place on this issue through no fault of her own, and it's difficult not to be struck by the irony when Russell moves on quickly to ask her for an example of when she used her communication skills to resolve a difficult issue. With plenty of work experience to managerial levels (prior to having children) Jasmine moves easily back to self-assurance and a telling moment passes.

‘Work and life, life and work – gotta see our emerging lives in all their holistic, complex, and messy glory’ I tell myself, making a note to remind Lucy, Moana and Russell of where I'm coming from on this. As it transpires Lucy beats me to it. Not long after Jasmine has been thanked for her time and sent on her way, Russell shakes his head regretfully ...

“She's pretty bright and switched on” he remarks, “I doubt if we could hold onto her for long.”

“On the contrary,” replies Lucy “I think her priorities as a single parent of two small children will mean her aspirations will be completely different from her earlier work objectives.”

As it happens Lucy is not too far from the mark. Jasmine is subsequently offered a fixed term contract and enters the next training intake of CSRs who will be employed to cover the busy Christmas period. Not surprisingly, once officially on staff she readily agrees to take part in the research when I ask her. Months later, with her contracted term almost complete Jasmine’s ‘priorities as a single parent’ do influence her aspirations, but her position is not quite as straightforward as Lucy prefigured.

Getting Along

It’s now early autumn and I am sitting outside in the late afternoon sun shooting the breeze in the midst of a small group of CSRs, some on authorised breaks, one or two on ‘illegals’.

“The sneaky stuff that keeps you sane” Annemarie grins to no one in particular, drawing deeply on the cigarette she has just lit. I’m now well versed with this camaraderie and there’s no need to explain the practice to me anymore. But once again I can’t help noticing how in an organisation that provides precious little sanctioned time for chat, Annemarie’s comment asserts relationships will prevail regardless. Despite the risks, the commonness of ‘illegals’ and the creativity that goes into moving authorised breaks in order to meet up with friends, points to the power and the pleasure these social connections generate. Of course this is hardly surprising because these occasions are an important part of the glue – what’s often called the ‘social capital’ – that binds members of the organisation together.

[Chat] frequent, friendly, unfocused and unscheduled is far from pointless. This informal mixture is especially powerful. Synergy exists between the seamlessly blended social talk and work talk; they support and enrich each other. The social ties validate the work knowledge and ensure nuanced mutual understanding; the work knowledge strengthens the social ties (Cohen and Prusak 2001, p.110/111).

In this milieu Jasmine is pondering her future with Frontline.

“I’m spending more money on childcare fees than I ever have” she tells me. “And I have a mortgage; I’ve got home repairs and things like that. I’ve got good skills to offer them and I know I’m worthwhile so I’ve got to look at the benefits, I could probably go somewhere else and get a good part time job. If they offer me a better rate of starting employment then I’ll stay on full time but it’s gotta be worth my while now.”

“But you know” she continues, “work is important to me. I’ve been surrounded by children for so long I need adult companionship too. I’ve made some good friends here and I get to talk about things other than kids and stuff like that. And it’s been really good absorbing new skills and learning the computer. The children are growing up fast, I really needed to get a foot in the door and not wait any longer. Don’t get me wrong they are absolutely my first priority. Jackson’s such a free-spirited boy, oh he’s a good kid, but if I don’t rein him in now he’s going to turn into a real wayward child. I need to have the one-on-one with him like I did with Monique. A lot of people here know what I’m about because they are single parents too, and plenty of others have extended family responsibilities.”

As always I’m impressed with Jasmine’s uncanny knack of “doing wholeness” as Ken Wilbur (2001) would put it.

“Gee in the short time you’ve been working here you seem to have ‘absorbed’ a great deal” I reply. “Finding your feet and your fellows is not so easy in a call centre like this.”

“Oh you know me Susan” she laughs, “I’ve never been backwards in coming forwards!” And anyway you’d go completely bonkers in here without mates. Who else can you have a moan and a laugh with? And when you get those awful calls it’s so good to be able to talk to people, ‘download’ I think one of the other CSRs calls it.”

Jasmine is one of those fortunate people whose well-honed sense of herself allows her to develop a deep consideration of others (Raelin 2003). Assertive, without being the least bit arrogant, her collaborative and compassionate way of ‘becoming-with-in-the-world’ means she makes friends easily, even under trying circumstances. Unlike

many of the other CSRs who have found it difficult to make connections, Jasmine has readily ‘found her feet’ at Frontline.

I stretch out in the sun and remember Sally. I’d often see her at break times, mostly sitting on her own, but sometimes edging toward the periphery of different groups, perhaps hoping that someone might strike up a conversation with her. ‘Down’ time here is so short and precious, people are preoccupied with making the most of what little there is. She’d nod silently and smile at others’ silly jokes, but her eyes gave her away. Shy and new to both the call centre and the city, I watched her struggle.

In many ways Sally was really up against it. She had transferred in from another Frontline call centre, and already well skilled in the organisation’s ‘products’⁶¹ and processes, was immediately placed in an established team. Unlike most of the ‘newbies,’ who as recent recruits at least get an opportunity to know each other and some of the other staff through the training process, Sally came in cold. On her first day she was welcomed by her Service Manager and allocated a workstation. There were no further in-person introductions; instead Sally’s presence was notified to the rest of her team mates via email. At the time weekly team meetings were a casualty of the National call centre management’s preoccupation with heavy call loads, and it would be three weeks before Sally would ‘officially’ meet her CSR colleagues face-to-face in a team meeting.

I well remember Karen, a part timer, who sat opposite Sally for a few short hours a day, being very angry about this. Her ire sparked by a careless comment made by their Service Manager, when she remarked “Sally doesn’t seem to be making an effort to mix in.”

“I thought she was being a real bitch” Karen fumed, “given that no effort has been made whatsoever to introduce her properly to the rest of us.” Shaking her head exasperatedly, “Oh no, no, no ... they think they can’t afford that time off the phones, she couldn’t even be taken around and introduced to each of us properly ... it was a time thing!” she seethed.

⁶¹ This is the term commonly used at Frontline to describe the various income support measures the organisation administers. I take issue with this language in the next chapter, but for now, to keep integrity in this story, as Robert Coles (1989) contends “since I had entered a world that had its own language, why not speak it while there” (p.29).

Karen succinctly sums up a major organisational difficulty at Frontline. On this occasion her anger was directed at the Service Manager she normally holds in high regard. However, her reference to the 'time thing' is telling. Sally's story shows how organisational processes affect the lives of those who live with their consequences. At Frontline time dysfunctionally preoccupies everyone. Both strategically and operationally a perceived and actual lack of time circumscribes all other considerations. In doing so it dominates the vast majority of work practices and interpersonal relations, often to the detriment of everything else. When Sally arrived at Frontline even the normal courtesy of face-to-face introductions to her new team mates was forgone in deference to time pressures. This deliberate postponement of a personal team welcome made Sally's arduous task of making friends in "an isolating environment," as one of the managers put it, even more demanding.

My reverie is interrupted as Jasmine jumps up in mock horror. "Oh God, time!" she shouts giving Annemarie a hearty nudge. "Move girl" she urges, "we've gotta get back. Now!"

"Ohhh ..." Annemarie groans, rising imperceptibly slowly. "I'm on screen saver, I look awake but I'm not."

Once back in the centre I notice a number of Service Managers and the Operations Analyst grouped around the Management Information System (MIS). The MIS is the technological heart of most call centres. In sophisticated 'real time' (often down to thirty-second intervals) the software monitors all the CSRs who are logged into the system, and amongst numerous capabilities the screens display who is on the phone and who is available to take calls. The application provides detailed numerics of such things as how many calls are in the queue and the number of calls CSRs are answering. At the same time it can also give detailed breakdowns of talk and clerical call handling times for individuals, teams and the entire call centre. At the moment the management group seems to be showing an animated interest in the various screens.

Shortly afterward Jasmine draws my attention to an email sent out to all CSRs. Observing that a number of staff are not taking their rest breaks when scheduled, the

Operations Analyst warns “there’s no excuse for this and you must take your break at the time it’s rostered each day.”

‘Fat chance’ I reflect. The last few weeks have been particularly busy. “We’re just getting hammered, bashed and smacked around,” I remember one of the CSRs telling me wearily, using the battle metaphors that are so prevalent here. Again in an attempt to manage the workflows, the National call centre management team has instructed that all rostered breaks will change daily. This directive means established friendship groupings are often unable to ‘officially’ meet up at break times. As a result CSRs are simply resorting to ever more resourceful unofficial means to get together instead. Hour after relentless hour as the calls pour in, the tension and the tedium take their toll.

“Geez it’s not rocket science,” Martin quips scurrying back to his workstation, “when it’s this frantic you need your mates more than ever.”

With the national focus myopically directed at having ‘representatives on line’ no matter what it takes, the centre’s Service Managers are put in an invidious position. Tasked with ensuring that (as the organisation’s motto states) “*the right people are in the right place, at the right time, doing the right things,*” they carry out audits of CSRs’ whereabouts at regular intervals. Those CSRs found with their ‘bums off the seats’ are expected to offer plausible explanations regarding their unscheduled absences. The very nature and the punitive intensity this type of performance monitoring takes on, puts managers in a futile no-win situation.

The illusions of measurability, manipulability (sic) and omnipotence that the system confers, its rigidity and its reach, combined with the realities of this illusion in practice, force a highly inward focused and defensive orientation in management practice. Management shifts from a strategic task, to a retrospective, catch-up [and catch-out] task, and managers get absorbed in [counter-productive] micro-management (Houlihan 2001, p.210)

The strong relationship between the perceived intensity of this type of performance monitoring and staffs’ well-being does not apply to CSRs alone (Holman, Chissick, and Totterdell 2002; Houlihan 2001).

Time Trials

It's only mid-morning and Tina, one of the Service Managers responsible for a team of up to twenty CSRs, is flopped across the corner of a couch in the upstairs café looking exhausted.

Young, intelligent, and ambitious, with a gentle manner and wry sense of humour that makes her popular with colleagues and staff, Tina has been with Frontline since she left school. Working in various roles and moving quickly through the ranks of the organisation's various incarnations over the years, she made management by her mid-twenties. Until recently, with a strategic eye on furthering her upward career path she has conscientiously taken on extra work. Fiercely loyal and pragmatic, she loves the challenges of the "industry" as she calls it. However, combining the intense demands of her management workload with an equally consuming responsibility for her young family is beginning to take a toll on her health and personal relationships. Priding herself on how much she's managed to pack into her twenty nine years, Tina is now, somewhat uncharacteristically, quietly beginning to question and re-evaluate her motives, passions and priorities.

"How do they think we feel?" she sighs. "I mean who wants to go and ask someone who's a grown adult "where were you?" thinking they were probably in the toilet anyway. Who actually wants to be put in the position where you have to do that day-in day-out, it's very uncomfortable."

Tina is sharing her morning tea break with Lucy and Mel as she often does. The women – all Service Managers - are colleagues and firm friends. They have more discretion with their time than the staff they manage and are often able to meet up like this during their working days. It's a privilege not lost on their CSRs who must sometimes run the gauntlet of each manager's frustration to achieve the same relational ends.

"I hate it" echoes Mel. "No wonder some of them feel we treat them like children, we're kinda set up for that. Having to check up on them all the time and chasing them back to their seats from here, there and everywhere. God I feel like an old mother hen sometimes."

Lucy chuckles, “Yeah I think I’ve ended up mothering my team a lot more than I’d ever have imagined, and certainly more than I’d like to ... do you think it’s because I’ve been pregnant for so long?” she laughs.

Tina and Mel both giggle uproariously. “Oh you’ve overheard us talking,” Mel’s eyes twinkle as she playfully pats the expectant tummy where Lucy’s third child is currently residing.

Lucy feigns offence before smiling indulgently at her friends. “Well this is definitely gonna be my last, third and final, got no more room in the car to put ‘em,” she quips.

“Seriously though,” Mel returns to the topic that initially sparked the conversation, “it always seems to come back to my grumpy face and me telling my staff “I want you here right now,” it’s so structured. I hate treating people like this. I mean I wouldn’t want to be treated like this with someone coming around constantly telling me “you’ve got to only be here at this time, that’s it - full stop. You can’t go to the toilet, you’ve gotta take your breaks when rostered, you’ve gotta be here now doing this, because our clients are waiting.” At times I think that we’re like the boxing bag in between – well our CSRs are the boxing bag between our clients and us – and we’re sandwiched between them and National. If I had to go back on the phones tomorrow I would struggle with all the things that I expect from my staff, but I do wish the CSRs could see it from my point of view too.”

“And how do you think that’s going to happen?” Tina grimaces sarcastically, her eyebrows rising almost to her hairline. “With no time to cover off more than the basics, I mean we’ve all got too much to do, and the time constraints are ...” her voice trails off and she sighs deeply. “It’s stupid but you know as well as I do the Service Level⁶² determines everything.” She looks resignedly at Mel, before turning to glance in my direction. “When would we ever get the opportunity to spend real time with

⁶² Frontline has two overarching call centre performance standards – the Service Level and Quality Control - these apply nationwide. At the time this research was undertaken the Service Level standard was 80% of calls answered within 20 seconds (although the 2000 to 2001 Business Plan mooted 92% answered in the same time frame as a “high level objective”). Quality Control refers to an accuracy standard of 95% accuracy for all call processing. According to the organisation’s ‘Call Centre Blueprint’ the Service Level “*focuses all planning. The Service Level and quality go hand in hand. Achieving the Service Level means we have the right number of [CSRs] taking calls, which means they have the appropriate amount of time to complete a quality call.*”

our staff, and they with us enabling even the beginnings of that sort of understanding to germinate ... dream on.”

I immediately feel guilty. Keenly aware of the privileged ‘researcher’ position I currently occupy, I also feel ‘sandwiched’ rather as Mel describes, uncomfortably inhabiting the uneasy space that exists between the managers and their staff. Perched on the corner of the couch beside Tina, my silence once again contributes to the conversational dynamics. I’ve been in the centre for quite some time now, my long days predominantly spent alongside customer service staff as they go about the ‘business’ of answering the phones. Lucy, Mel and Tina are all patently aware their CSRs are talking to me in ways they don’t to them. At the same time, my silent witness to the preceding interaction also attests that the managers are including me in similar conversations about their staff.

‘Them’, ‘Us’, and ‘Me’

It’s mid-winter and I’m sitting in one of the training rooms at the back of the call centre in the company of half a dozen CSRs, all participants in the research. The lively and friendly atmosphere belies the fact that most of us don’t know each other all that well. My ‘interview conversations’ and ‘shadowing’ days carried out prior to this meeting almost certainly mean I know more about each person in the room than they do of each other. Despite this, a familiarity with me and with the research is already peppering the chatter, and the energetic mood is undoubtedly heightened because the CSRs have a much anticipated two hours off the phones to take part in this focus group. I ask them to introduce themselves by talking briefly about their lives.

“My children say I have no life,” squeals Sara

“Yeah, get a life mum,” Helene laughingly concurs.

Rosa with an exaggerated flourish of her left hand proclaims that “outside of work I am deeply engaged ...” She pauses, obviously savouring the smiling faces and congeniality surrounding her, “in the guide movement” she grins, her eyes twinkling. “And I am a Mah-jong freak, if anyone knows how to play come along on Saturday night.” The invitation cues a light hearted discussion that rolls on from Rosa’s

fascination with the Chinese board game into other aspects of her busy community-centred life. “Oh I do all sorts of things, my life’s really full,” she concludes with satisfaction.

Encouraged by Rosa’s candid narrative, the normally shy Marea offers a gentle outline of the importance of church and extended family activities in her life. “I’m involved with my church practically all week, it keeps me busy and it’s probably where I get all my energy from” she smiles.

Karen recounts her love of music and the west coast beaches near where she lives. Martin likes “to have a laugh hanging out with my mates,” and he also confesses a penchant for “ideas” and “European philosophy.”

“Do you read Nietzsche?” His glance is playful.

“Only on the Internet,” I giggle.

Layers of voices tumble over each other and the contributions echo, as conversational opportunities are nurtured by each person’s willingness to share various aspects of themselves with the others. Indeed Rosa’s opening word play seems particularly apt for the participants have quickly become ‘deeply engaged’ with each other. In the emerging dialogical flow these “windows onto ourselves and our worlds” (Guignon 1991, p.97) enable connections and differences to circulate and it doesn’t take long for the passions and problems that motivate much of their participation in this research to surface.

“I’d like to try and make this place a better place for us,” Sara admits. “This job is pretty isolating and I’m struggling because there’s a real lack of support and a lack of on-going training. So that’s why I’m here, I want to learn, I want to try, and I want to make a real difference,” she states emphatically.

“Yes” Karen reflects. “A lot of it for me would be the support; we don’t get a lot of it in here. I’m like the others; I feel pretty isolated and I like to get outta here at night.”

Sara continues passionately. “Yeah, it is support in so many different ways. For example at the moment they are not supporting us when we are sick. Like this week a lot of people are really sick, have been for the last two weeks. Okay their main focus

is getting us back on that phone – getting us to do this, getting us to do that. They say to us “don’t come in if you’re sick because you’re more important than work” but you know they don’t mean it. You come in feeling sick and awful, you’re trying to do the best that you can – you might be working at sixty percent but at least you made it in. They’re sitting there trying to get you up to a hundred percent because the calls are sitting there waiting to be answered, and you have people coming rushing over to you saying “why weren’t you here, why weren’t you there?”” Her voice cracking with impatience, she answers her own rhetorical question. “Oh maybe it’s because I was choking on the phlegm in my throat! But no, that’s not a good enough excuse – “stay at work, go have a drink of water – get back on the phones.””

Amidst heated murmuring most of the group nod their heads in agreement.

“Actually,” volunteers Karen, “yesterday my manager asked me “why do you think the call centre’s sick leave is so high?” I said it’s team morale, it’s not feeling that management is approachable enough, it’s getting no encouragement and being told off because we haven’t enough time to do things properly, it’s this, it’s that, it’s dah, dah de dah ... the list goes on and on,” she rolls her eyes. “I think they’re trying to look at us CSRs as a big picture, they’re not taking a hundred or however many people there are out there, as individuals. You know we each have our individual contributions as well as our problems, our concerns or whatever. But often the only recognition you get is if something bad has happened, they’ll come up to you and say “oh look your long call times, your sick leave” ... do you know what I mean?”

“Yes” Rosa cuts in “but I’m on the other end of the stick, I hardly ever take a day off, but do I get thanks for it?”

Amidst a chorus of “yeah” and “that’s right” Karen continues in full flight. “That’s why morale is such a big issue, why would you want to get up in the morning and come to work when you think ‘Ohhh ...’” Her face contorts into an exaggerated picture of despair. “You don’t want to have that feeling ‘I don’t want to be at work today.’ I try to make the best of it, but there have been times when I’ve thought I just couldn’t bear to walk through the doors, so I ring in sick. I think they’re just not ... they’re overlooking all the constant knock-backs that amount to - well hey who really gives a stuff whether I’m here or not?”

“A lot of it is because we are consistently and continuously understaffed. There’s no time to do anything properly and well,” Rosa picks up. “Everyone’s frantic and from a quality point of view I can easily see how things get missed, left and overlooked; it’s simply because of the time frames.”

“Yeah but they don’t consider things from our level at all” Martin points out, “there’s not enough two-way communication. I think they try to deal with us as efficiently as possible. That is, they tell us what to do as a whole rather than consult us as individuals – which would take forever. I think when you communicate that way then there’s always going to be miscommunications and people who aren’t happy. It always seems to be “do this or else.” Even if it’s not meant to be that way, it comes across that way. And yet they talk about empowering the staff! Well empowering the staff is not telling them what to do ... it’s about asking people and listening to what they have to say, it’s about staff having real input.”

“Some of us have tried” he continues. “We have this Quality Circle; basically it’s a way to improve things. It was the idea of a manager who used to work here. It ran on the strict principle that the staff were to make suggestions in the group, because we know and they don’t. But it’s kinda ...” his voice trails into thought. He shrugs in annoyance before resuming “I mean the idea of a Quality Circle is that it is fully supported by management, and it’s not.” His last three words are delivered in bristling staccato.

“It’s not,” Helene agrees emphatically. “If someone’s got an idea for any improvements they go to the Quality Circle who discuss it and see if it’s viable. But the names of the people in the circle are not even listed on our Intranet.” Her voice rises in frustration. “And anyway even if they were, half the people in this place don’t even know what the Quality Circle is because we’ve got such a turnover of staff and they’re not regularly told that we’re there to help them.

“I wouldn’t have a clue who to go to,” Karen observes.

Marea looks puzzled, “Well I didn’t even know it existed” she remarks.

Martin stretches back in his seat as though trying to ease out the anger that seems to have descended upon him. “We’re given one hour a week and the rest is in our own time. So I don’t think there’s any support at all – it’s another token gesture” he sighs.

“Do you get that one hour a week consistently?” I ask

“No” Helene replies. “We missed last week because we were so busy, we couldn’t be taken off the phones.”

“Just like the training,” Karen snaps sarcastically.

I am aware the room has become awash with a swirling mixture of anger, frustration, and resignation. Indicative of complex problems with many organisational processes and relationships, these emotions resonate in different ways for all of us.

Emotion is a barometer of moral and relational ethics. Emotion marks and expresses moral outrage and gives force to the relational obligations. Listening carefully to the emotional pulse of an organization should give researchers and members clues to its ethical health. (Waldron 2000, p.79).

Martin seems to harness some of the generating energy. “We could try promoting ourselves” he still looks intense, but more optimistic, “that’s probably a solution.”

“Yeah send out an email to everybody “hey guys remember us we’re the Quality Circle” Helene laughs, responding to Martin’s enthusiasm. “Do an ‘Everyone’ email every week that would get somebody’s attention.” (While on the face of it Helene’s comment seems to be a positive endorsement of Martin’s idea, ‘Everyone’ is in fact a term for an email group “which no one is ever supposed to use” the CSRs tell me, because it goes out to the entire organisation, that is over 5000 staff nationwide.)

Helene’s laughter is infectious and the ensuing hilarity lightens the mood as the CSRs share the in-joke with her. However, Marea is looking puzzled and has gone very quiet. A relative newcomer to the organisation, Helene’s flippant suggestion is lost on her.

“How do you feel about all this Marea?” I ask, attempting to draw her back into the conversation again.

“Well maybe it’s ‘cause I’m new” she demurs, “but I feel that my training was quite good. It was short but for me it was okay and since I’ve been out on the floor I’ve actually had good support from the Service Managers, and my Quality Coaches when I can find them. The thing that really bugs me is that I try and do what I’m told in the time frames, but the way it plays out I know I’m letting people down all round – my manager, my clients, and myself,” she sighs despondently.

The Power of Three: Talk, Time, and Trust

I have been more than happy to take a back seat in the emerging discussion and to let the conversation ebb and flow around me, but at this particular moment I am inexorably struck by Marea’s appraisal of her situation.

For people “show” what their “world” is for them, in their fleeting reactions to, and understandings of, what is occurring around them in practice. And, in being irresistibly “moved” or “arrested” by their reactions, in finding ourselves spontaneously responding to their responses, we are dialogically provided with an initial, crucial grasp of their unique world (Shotter 1998, p.38).

After months in the organisation I have a multifaceted ‘outsider’s’ familiarity *about* many of the issues being raised here. Marea’s embodied despondency *with* her situation affords, just as John Shotter claims, a sensate opening into her ‘unique world.’ This is how it feels for her. Marea’s sadness kindles a complex of emotions for me and provides a relational opportunity to which I am compelled to respond.

“Marea, I’ve sat alongside a number of CSRs who feel similar things. Like you they take personal responsibility for some of these complicated organisational processes and relationships, many of which are beyond your control.”

Helene looks cross. “And why wouldn’t we?” she counters. “Every day, every week our KPIs, our managers, and our Frontline Achievers⁶³ make it our responsibility.” She places extra emphasis on her last two words.

⁶³ Frontline “Achievers” folders are given to all CSRs at induction. They are encouraged to enter KPIs and achievement records as an on-going commitment to improving their individual practice. Each entry must be signed off by the CSR and Service Manager concerned as they are used as an adjunct to measuring performance in each Performance Appraisal period. Achievers folders are primarily regarded as each CSRs responsibility; some are religious in keeping them up to date and others less so.

“Yep,” I agree breathing deeply. “All those systems and procedures do work a kind of black magic. They not only place an often impossible level of accountability firmly on each of you, they also create a smokescreen that makes it difficult to see the bigger picture.”

Pleased to see Helene’s eyes soften I continue. “Time keeps coming up as the determining factor in here, and that’s for you guys and the managers alike. The whole place is dominated by calculated workflows and cost-benefit analyses that try to put what I consider inappropriately ‘hard’ numbers around a lot of what I call ‘soft’ relational processes. Unfortunately the too tightly time constrained rational application of these techniques, coupled with some pretty sophisticated technological prowess to monitor it all, sets everybody up for organisational dysfunction and often ultimately for failure. This instrumental approach based only on technical recommendations, like two minutes forty-five seconds for an average call, has no answer to the practical and the moral considerations you face everyday on the phones in relationship with your clients and your managers.”

“Yeah?” Marea looks both heartened and perplexed. “Some relationship” she snorts, “don’t (w)rap, just yap and tap.”⁶⁴

Sara smiles at Marea’s deliberate ambiguity, nodding her head vigorously. “Yeah, don’t actually get into meaningful conversations with them, and whatever you do don’t touch that wrap-up button” she shouts. “I know exactly what you mean, it’s constant, flick ‘em through and don’t go into wrap-up if you can avoid it ... but we have to have that button. We have to be able to go into wrap-up so we can finish our call processing. You know some of those complicated late income assessments can take up to six or seven minutes, then you’ve got a Quality Coach or a Service Manager on your back saying “are you alright?” It’s stuff you just don’t need. And if I rush it so I can take another call then I get in trouble for missing something or not doing it correctly.”

“You rush them through” Karen agrees. “We are so ‘stat’ focused we don’t always hear, let alone answer what a client’s really ringing for, like some people give really

⁶⁴ ‘Yap and tap’ is a call centre colloquialism for keyboarding while speaking to the caller. The theory behind it is that it speeds up the service encounter by avoiding post-call processing (or wrap-up time), and at the same time it satisfies the caller that ‘action’ (i.e. the keyboarding) is being taken.

half-hearted responses just to get them off the phone. I mean I've done it myself sometimes to be perfectly honest ... and then the client rings back tomorrow asking the same question. So in the end it's costing the department even more 'cause it's an 0800 number and that client may ring back three, four, five, times until they get the service they need."

"Yep, great examples," I'm nodding in agreement too now. "No trouble seeing the bigger picture here, eh Karen." Karen looks pleased. Emboldened, I pick up on her point. "Optimally the 'customer service' you are offering should be about their needs. And while not every call you take is dire or difficult, each is a relational 'encounter' (Gutek et al. 1999), and to be effective it requires a certain level of care. Your callers require a sort of timelessness from you - beyond answering the calls in good time - because there's no doubt they get pissed off hanging around on 'musak.' The majority of the people you deal with are in complex or difficult social and financial situations, growing percentages have English as their second language, and many are elderly. Even booking an appointment with a Case Manager, the 'bread and butter' of what you do, can, and often does, range from relatively straightforward to ridiculously complicated. Whatever their reason for ringing, each caller wants time taken for their questions and concerns to be heard and answered in as much detail as possible. They don't want to ring again; they want to get it sorted, and they want to get it sorted the first time."

"There's a concept called 'time embeddedness' and it's used to describe "the fact that all social acts are temporally fitted inside of larger social acts" (Lewis and Weigert 1981, p.437) For instance, when the clients pick up the phone they expect that you will have time available. More to the point, they expect however long it takes to deal with their concerns. In contrast you are embedded within an organisational setting that severely limits your time. *Ipsa facto*, problemo!" It's my turn for the raised hands and frustrated shrug.

"I hadn't thought of it like that" Rosa jumps in, "but you're right. Don't you think we have to be Inland Revenue, Child Support, Community Services ..."

“Counsellor, everything,” Helene continues. “You get people wanting to pour their hearts out to you. How can you just cut them off when they are talking about committing suicide?”

“Sorry, your three minutes is up!” Martin’s voice drips with a sarcasm that his eyes belie.

The example Martin offers is extreme, but by no means unheard of in the call centre. Watching the contradictions refracting between his words and his eyes reminds me just how difficult life can be for the CSRs when the organisational focus is primarily fixed on a time bound “task-oriented perception of call duration deployed without reference to content or context” (Knights and Odih 2002, p.152). In this case, a relational context filled with the typically difficult ‘contents’ of vulnerable peoples’ lives. At Frontline the keenly measured emphasis on linear time as the overarching ‘key performance indicator’ creates wide-ranging difficulties for the CSRs on every shift each working day because:

Linear time by definition involves a kind of transcendence that trivializes the specificity of the moment. It requires a kind of estrangement from the present that entails dematerialization, abstraction and disembodiment (ibid, p.151).

By this linear, objective logic, there is a clear and predictable relation between the amount of time one devotes to a task and the output expected from that work ... This conception of time is based on a machine logic ... But when this logic is applied to human workers, it becomes clear that what is served is control ... (Bailyn 2000, pgs. 6/7).

“We’re dealing with a whole range of things” Martin continues, “with every single benefit, we have to know everything, or we have to know where to find the information and that takes time if you are going to do it properly.”

“I so agree!” The sharpness in Rosa’s voice surprises me. Typically calm and unruffled, there’s a brittle energy about her now. “Some actions are very involved” she continues forcefully, “and sometimes you have to find other people for authentication or to unsecure a file, it all becomes another hindrance and just adds minutes to your time. And you never know what’s coming next. Six hours thirty-nine on the phones is just too heavy. We know that’s our job but it’s a constant battle

of wits to stay seated in that position especially if you've had a bad call. If you have a bad call in the morning it can throw you out for the whole day ... it doesn't matter if they can't see it, it's still there slung inside you and it's very hard to take." Rosa's words, fast and furious, sizzle and spit like water in a hot pan. "When I first started we used to have about fifteen seconds between calls, but it wasn't long before it was down to eleven and then it got down to four and now there's nothing between calls. Just to give you that little breather, but you don't even get that these days. It's no wonder there's so much sickness in here."

I listen to Rosa and think about the 'tightly coupled system' she's referring to. In this over-controlled environment time is part of the "connective tissue" (Gleick 1999, p.224) that couples people, services and organisational processes together. In the pursuit of efficiency as much time as possible has been squeezed out of the organisation's connective tissue - its life blood - and the results seem disastrous.

Waiting time or stand-by time can mean flexibility or safety ... It all seems out of control – or rather in control, and yet out of reach for us humans. (ibid, p.224/5).

"It's a nightmare." Rosa's voice, now deflated, brings me back to the conversation.

"This dilemma reminds me of the rather poetic words of Manuel Castells, a fairly well known Professor of Sociology" I suggest. Castells observed that in today's world more than ever, time is structured in contradictory ways according to spatial dynamics. He said, "Timelessness sails in an ocean surrounded by time-bound shores, from where still can be heard the laments of time-chained creatures" (Castells 2000, p.497).

"Wow", Martin looks impressed, "yes, that's exactly what we are - time-chained and lamenting - I like that!"

His endorsement bolsters my confidence further. "The time constraints also put the managers in untenable positions too" I venture, feeling brave.

Rosa meets my gaze directly. "Well I can understand where Carol's (the Operations Analyst) coming from" she offers. "She is responsible for us; she gets it from head office, from National if we're not where we're supposed to be, but it's just the

approach to it all you know. Instead of “can I have all CSRs on-line please” or “I need these calls cleared” its “get back on the phones” it’s really, really ...”

“Rude” Martin finishes her sentence. “It’s really rude.”

“Disrespectful” Helene echoes.

“Probably bloody hard work too I reckon, stuck between us lot and them,” Sara looks rueful.

Thus another layer of complexity is added to the ‘us’ and ‘them’ categorisations so prevalent throughout our conversations. In acknowledging another angle to Frontline’s time pressured environment, Rosa and Sara build on the subtle shift I’ve introduced and in doing so they allow a more nuanced understanding of organisational processes to emerge. This is an example of how meaning moves when we talk and respond to each other. In the ‘unique circumstances’ of this focus group Rosa, Helene, Martin, Sara, Marea, Karen, and I are co-creating dynamic and interactive meanings as we find our feet and ‘go on’ together.

I have called such continuously creative activity, “joint action,” for both other people’s actions and the surrounding circumstances are just as much a formative influence in what one does, as anything within oneself. In our actions, we find ourselves just as much “called” to act “into” our surrounding circumstances (already partially shaped by the previous talk-entwined activities of others) as “out of” any of our own inner plans, or scripts, or such like – hence, the intrinsic appropriateness or relatedness of such responsive action always to its unique circumstances (Shotter 1998, p.39).

On this particular occasion there was time to talk (albeit limited time, but nevertheless a great deal more than is usually the case at Frontline). Probably more importantly there was trust. The talk flowed from the goodwill invested in a research process, and from reciprocal understandings of that process that had been built up relationally over many months. After two hours creatively engaged in wide-ranging ‘joint action’ we leave in high spirits buzzing from the chance to share ideas, experiences and selves.

That night, still energised from the day’s events, I begin to transcribe the ‘relational landscape’ (Shotter 1998a) we created earlier. I marvel at how words on a page flatten and make linear an embodied, multi-contoured, iterative and dialogically

messy process. But I am also struck by oft repeated words in print that draw my attention to how the living categories ‘us’ and ‘them’ are (re)constructed at Frontline, and I ponder my own sometimes precarious place in this scheme of things.

A Thrice Told Tale

“Trust ... is central to the core of managers’ willingness to allow or participate in any kind of field research conducted by organizational scholars” (Edmonson and Moingeon 1999, p.157).

“I’ve already heard enough little bits about Susan’s research to know that there’s a whole heap of knocks in there and they’re all aimed at the management. That’s my perception. That if we finally did something right, all of a sudden they’d be loyal, they wouldn’t be sick, and they wouldn’t lie when they rang up to tell you why they’re not going to be in that day.”

Mel’s angry words sting like cold rain on my face in a gale force wind. In this research process I often find myself treading water in the middle of an ever-moving sea of ‘them’ and ‘us,’ and at the moment I feel I’m perilously close to going under. The managers and CSRs alike seem to have huge expectations for the research, and as I swim amidst complex relationships trying to make sense of burgeoning waves of ‘data,’ some days it’s a mission to stay afloat.

So many people have entrusted me with intimate details, thoughts and feelings of their working lives. Without betraying confidences how can I encourage the sharing of information, ideas, and emotions in order to leverage the deep investment most people have for improving work and life here at Frontline? How many dimensions to ‘loyal’ are there? With so little time and in a culture of marginal trust, how do I get ‘them’ to talk to each other? In my initial research agenda I planned to try, but it doesn’t happen. In some respects perhaps this ‘failure’ is a measure of my own naiveté or hubris?

Part of me wishes I could say to Mel, “Yep that’s it, you guys do ‘something right’ and all the problems will be solved.” But she and I both know, as does everyone participating in this research that it’s vastly more complicated than that. So the worlds and relationships emerging on these pages become invested with added

significance for me. Maybe the sharing of these written words will prompt the beginning of other more inclusive conversations? I hope so.

But for now let's catch up with Mel again a little later in our conversation.

"It just keeps striking me that one of the barriers to being an effective manager, is being a manager." She's still feeling fractious.

"What do you mean by that?" I ask.

"Well, here's an example that hit home for me. We had a bowling night the other night and one of the staff came up to me. I didn't know whether to be sad or happy or what about her saying to me, "I'm really touched to see the managers here tonight." I thought 'my God.' My initial reply was "oh we love to have fun too you know," and then I thought 'my God' that's the way they really feel.' Are we that removed from them? We spend all our time thinking that we're all involved in their personal lives and helping them as much as we can, and trying not to give them a hard time about coming in late, but making sure the needs of the Department are met as well. All the enormous conflicts, and that's what it boiled down to – the managers are just a separate unit from them – and I hate that. I hate the way you can approach a group of people and they'll stop their conversation because you're not one of them now."

"Because you're a manager." Tina's matter-of-fact-response confirms Mel's suspicions.

Mel, a former CSR, continues to resist the finality of the interpretation. "No matter how hard I try, I can't continue to have friendships in the same way I used to, it changes just like that!" she snaps her fingers crossly.

The sound stirs a memory from months before, and I drift away momentarily. A couple of CSRs are snapping their fingers at one of their peers and razzing him good naturedly.

"Go on Sam why don't you put your hand up to be a QC⁶⁵ for this team – you'd be good, you'd be a good manager," they prompt.

⁶⁵ Quality Coach

“Nah” he replies laconically. “Don’t wanna ... you guys are my friends.”

“Oh, you don’t want to boss us around? But think of the power Sam.” They both lapse into a fit of giggles.

Looking across to Mel it seems her irritability is tinged with sadness, and I decide it’s not a good time to share the story with her.

Tina looks sympathetically across to her friend. “You’ve become one of ‘them’ or ‘they’ or some other reference, some term that’s used for the management team ...”

“Often derogatory ...” Mel sighs.

Sean too is looking pensive. “I used to really, really dislike my position here because I felt so alone. I have a good peer group, but because each call centre is spread around the country we managers can only get together every six weeks or so. On a day-to-day basis I didn’t particularly enjoy my job.” He smiles at the four Service Managers in the room, “and then I started trusting you and developing friendships and relationships with you, and I felt so much happier in the job. I actually felt like I could talk about things, say things in confidence, be vulnerable, be unsure about the future, where we were going, what we were doing. The huge feeling of support I got increased my job satisfaction tremendously. And I’m wondering if our CSRs could help us feel the same when we’re sort of stepping that down, because those CSRs are really just like us ...” His voice trails into thought.

“Create a ‘leaderful community’ in the call centre” I volunteer into the silence that seems to have engulfed the room. “Imagine how that might change things” I muse.

“What *do* you mean? Waina stares at me intently. I am not fazed by her penetrating gaze. The hours we’ve spent discussing life and work here at Frontline and beyond have already provided valuable learning for each of us and contributed to a growing mutual respect. I sense her interest may be more than academic, although her recent enrolment in an MBA programme has sharpened her curiosity and whetted her insatiable appetite for knowledge even further. Outspoken and determined, she keenly soaks up new ideas like a sponge while riling against the organisational constraints that prevent her from putting many of them into practice.

“Well.” I concentrate on Waina’s inquiring eyes. “In his book ‘*Creating Leaderful Organizations*’ (2003) Joe Raelin, a Professor of Management, develops an integrative model for leadership that supplants the conventional individualised, top-down, controlling and dispassionate arrangement commonly used for running organisations. He replaces this with a holistic relational model that advocates different forms of expertise be recognised and leveraged. He argues that many people should lead an organisational community concurrently in a collective, collaborative and compassionate way. The Four ‘C’s of ‘leaderful practice’ as he calls it.”

“I’ve had the benefit of being around here for a while now. Of working collaboratively, and I think compassionately, with many different people concurrently at Frontline. I’ve had a chance to practice Joe Raelin’s four ‘C’s. It’s given me the opportunity to experience numerous, valuable ways of knowing and doing. If these diverse energies and understandings could, firstly be shared and then developed as ‘leaderful practice’ in this organisation, it might just go a long way towards addressing many of the issues and concerns that worry all of you in different ways.”

Waina grabs some of the ideas and begins to run with them, her words tumbling energetically into the room ... “Yeah I could do that, I mean most of my staff I enjoy being with, because they’re my friends and I see them as my colleagues, and I see them as my employees but I don’t see myself at a different level. I see that we’re all on the one level; sort of like a community. I just have a different job than they do and that’s just really coordinating them so they can do their job better ... Mmmm.” Characteristically thinking on her feet she weaves back into the pragmatics of her world.

“The challenges though ... how could we make it happen? *When* could we even begin?” She looks even more intense. “I mean we’re tasked with getting outcomes daily, monotonous results like so many calls within a specific time frame. We expect this but we don’t actually give the resources, the training or the time more than anything to do things properly. There’s a lot of pressure put on managers, on staff, it irritates me, it irritates me heaps because it’s like I should be in a position where I can control this to make it better and yet we always end up doing things the same way, and that frustrates me. That’s a major frustration. That’s because the demand to have the outcomes on a daily basis has more focus on it than our investment in people.”

Fired up Waina doesn't seem to need air like other people, she hardly pauses for breath. "I think it could be so much easier if we could just have some time to step out of where we are. In fact there must be a better way. To be open to new ideas and different ways of doing things you need time, it can't be just in a one day session. It has to be something that's always on-going. I think that's what I crave for, we don't step out of it enough and because of that we always return to bad habits or habits that have worked for us in the past regardless of what consequences they have. So yes okay we'll just throw you on the phones, you're not equipped to go on the phones, and that's going to have all these negative things happen, but we'll take the risk because you're only going to give me a better service level ... most of the time I think ... what's the point?"

Waina slumps forward in her seat and a weighty silence engulfs the room. Here we are back again at a crucial point, I reflect quietly. That is, being able to see the organisation from an ever-moving relational perspective, and seeing time in the same way. Or, to put it another way, revisioning and revaluing time, away from treating it as a scarce, one-dimensional and abstracted linear measure of control, to seeing it as multidimensional, fluid, and relational. As an integral part of the organisation's always pumping life blood, its living "connective tissue" (Gleick 1999, p.224). For, in the eloquent words of Paul Ricour, "time has no being since the future is not yet, the past is no longer, and the present does not remain" (1984, cited in Cunliffe, Luhman, and Boje 2004, p.261). Yet, I muse, here at Frontline, as in most organisations, (and in most studies of organisations):

time is usually dealt with in objective and implicit ways, conceptualized (explicitly or implicitly) as a passage through stages, a chronology of episodic linear events that exist regardless of those experiencing them. There is also an assumption that meaning is carried through time (ibid).

Instead of dysfunctionally dividing 'organising' into discrete definable categories and stages, that supposedly mean the same to everyone, why not see time as "encompass[ing] the social in motion" (Thrift 2004, p.873). 'Organising' (and organisational research) as:

a fluid, dynamic, yet rigorous process open to the interpretations (negotiated) of its many participants (polyphonic) and situated in the

context and point of enactment (synchronic) (Cunliffe, Luhman, and Boje 2004, p.261).

I wonder how a stance that recognises and works integrally with people and ‘organising’ ... “as a multitude of unfoldings, all making their way into the world at different rates” (Thrift 2004, p.873) could change the dynamics currently testing everyone at Frontline.

Conscious of the heavy silence following Waina’s impassioned dialogue and knowing the other managers feel similar frustration and ambivalence about the perceived lack of time and value around one of Frontline’s “guiding principles” *‘We put people first’* I wonder what they are thinking.

“It’s time isn’t it?” Tina finally disturbs the silence. “We’re time poor, that seems to be our biggest issue. We don’t have time to do everything.” Amidst downcast eyes, the silence is proving resilient. Tina fidgets. Her hands restlessly moving about perhaps longing for the steadying comfort of a cigarette, a habit she’s trying hard to kick.

“Being time poor doesn’t necessarily mean being time poor with your work either” she muses. “I think that I’m time poor all round, I cannot find enough hours in the day to get everything done that I need to, and that doesn’t just necessarily relate only to work. It’s like I was saying before, sometimes that balance with home and family means you make a decision that’s a priority for your work and that actually supersedes something that needed to be done with the family. I think people’s personal situations impact very directly on their ability to manage time or what have you in a more effective way. I don’t have any extra resources, so if it’s not me then it’s Brad (Tina’s husband) and if it’s not Brad then it’s me. That’s the limitations we work within. I have to try and find other ways to try and fit in all the other things. I’m constantly trying to fit more and more into that one twenty-four hour space. I am yet to be able to be in two places at the same time – I’m working on it, I’ll let you know.”

The gentle touch of her self-deprecating humour lightens the atmosphere, and brings others back into the conversation.

“Time and trust, time and trust.” Lucy repeats, more to herself than anyone else. “I dunno,” she shrugs. “You’re right though Susan, we each have this huge resource out there. Our teams, our CSRs, but at the moment that resource is being dominated nationally with the focus almost exclusively in having those reps on line taking the calls. Any opportunity to tap into that resource is being stymied because of the Service Level and other commitments ...”

“It’s a bit of a cycle isn’t it ...” Sean’s response is not a question.

“It’s vicious” Tina retorts.

“But if they ... if they were actually here instead of away on the sick leave, then we probably wouldn’t need to be so draconian with our requirements about being on-line for their whole shift. And if you look at the other side of that if we weren’t so draconian about forcing them to be on line then perhaps they wouldn’t get so sick.”

“Exactly, around it goes” Tina looks dejected.

In contrast to the managers’ mood, I am lost in excited reflection. I am adding the responsive unfolding of this relational interaction to many similar conversations I’ve had with the CSRs, and I am struck by the power of the process.

People with a name and a face are listening to each others experiences, sharing personal stories, inquiring into the layers of meaning [emerging from] these stories, contributing and adding other, related experiences and reflecting on underlying values and assumptions (Abma 2003, p.223).

Moment-by-moment in an emergent dialogical process, the managers and CSRs are (re)storying their lives and their experiences, creating vital learnings for themselves and for their organisation. Now if only they could begin to talk to each other like this.

* * *

CHAPTER SIX: Identity Stories

Doing the 'Business' of Public Service

[Frontline] in the way it looks and operates is very visible ... Creating a service ethic, image and identity that is professional and consistent across the country is paramount to the success of the Department and the responsibility for this rests with each one of us ... (From the C.E.O's published "Our Style" Guide, 2001)

High performance for a Public Service department means (among other things) having a commitment to shared values and aspiring to the highest standards of integrity and probity in relation to public service ethical values and standards. As a public servant you have considerable powers, responsibilities, accountabilities and discretion as a trustee of public resources and public office. Therefore you must act in ways that reassure the public and government that you are carrying out your functions responsibly and effectively, and are worthy of continuing trust and confidence. You are expected to publicly demonstrate a high standard of efficiency and integrity in the management of resources and a commitment to achieving specific target outputs. (From the Introduction to Frontline's Employee "Code of Conduct")

In our society ... a formal instrumental organization does not merely use the activities of its members. The organization also delineates what are considered to be official appropriate standards of welfare, joint values, incentives, and penalties. These conceptions expand a mere participation contract into a definition of the participants' nature of social being. These implicit images form an important element of the values which every organization sustains, regardless of its efficiency or impersonality. Built right into the social arrangements of an organization, then, is a thoroughly embracing conception of the member - and not merely a conception of them qua member, but, behind this a conception of them qua human being.

(Erving Goffman 1959, p.164, from *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*)

Helping People: Frankie's Story

“Kia ora, welcome to Frontline you're speaking with Frances, how can I help you today?”

The voice is welcoming, cheerful and professional. Its lilting cadences are rounded with warmth and good humour. With each greeting Frances, or Frankie as she is better known by her workmates, exemplifies the first guiding principal from the call centre's 'service delivery' document. That is, she 'puts people first.' Frankie is indeed 'smiling down the phone and meaning it' (Sturdy 1998, p.27), as she introduces parts of herself along with the organisation she works for.

“I was brought up Maori with Maori values,” I remember her proclaiming passionately in one of our conversations. Infused through most of her interactions with callers and colleagues alike, this aspect of her identity is often at the forefront of Frankie's commitment to helping people in the call centre. It plays out in the way she goes about her work, and in the way she lives biculturalism in an organisation whose mandate for such often proves challenging in practice.

“I like helping people. I think the main positive point that was pushing me when I went for this job; well for the whole Income Support side of it was ... okay, I want to be a social worker or teacher for Form One and Twos just to help younger Maori and Island kids through that little period. So I was thinking if I can't be a teacher 'cause it was too long, and I can't be a social worker 'cause you have to go to school, this is something that is the next best opportunity. So it was the helping of the people.”

As I transfer Frankie's heartfelt recorded words into print I'm aware of echoes all around me; the voices of other staff members who reprise the theme, inflecting it with their own motivations, and parts of their own identities.

“I suppose it's because I'm a Christian and have had Christian inclinations most of my life. It's my way of helping people; of giving them clear accurate information and keeping them in the picture. I am a servant; I'm here to help the clients and other staff.” (Richard, CSR)

“I spent so many years on the benefit and I didn’t like that - I didn’t like the attitude I got, I didn’t like the service I got and I decided I’m sure I could do a better service than that. So I did my rounds and I decided that I’m going to help our people and promote what I can and try to work out the insides of this government business.” (Nikki, CSR)

“The only thing I ever wanted to do when I left school is I wanted to help people. I thought I wanted to be a social worker, but the thought of going off to university just scared the hell out of me. So I thought if I went to Social Welfare because in those days it was part of the business, the social workers weren’t separate from us. So I thought I’ll try a year at Social Welfare and see if I like helping people. I’m still here, a manager now, nineteen years ... nineteen years and four days later! So obviously it met ... whatever need I had.” (Mel, Manager)

“Oh I love helping people. I just love getting them up to where they want to get, and just helping them along the way. I don’t mind staying because I know I’m helping people.” (Helene, Acting Manager)

These words and feelings convey a multiple intonation of public service Frontline style. But what is public service? Is it a concept, an attitude, a sense of duty (Pollitt 2003)? Unhelpfully, in much of the academic literature and in public sector policy and practice, ideas about public service, what it is and how it might be carried out, are regularly couched in rather vague or ambitious statements (similar to those from Frontline’s “*Our Style*” and “*Code of Conduct*” guides which opened this chapter). Yet for many people working in the public sector this most complicated of propositions can be, and often is, quite simply understood in terms of ‘helping people’ (Brereton and Temple 1999; Jørgensen and Bozeman 2002; Light 2003; Mullins, Linehan, and Walsh 2001; Perry and Wise 1990). Of course the motivation to help people takes many different forms, but nonetheless it generally “distinguishes public service from work in business” (Jørgensen and Bozeman 2002, p.68). In many ways I am not surprised the personal motivations and identities of the staff taking part in this research fit with what continues to be regarded as one of the main constituents of a public service ethos; traditionally characterised thus:

First, and foremost it’s about the setting aside of personal interests ... working altruistically for the public good. Secondly, it is about working

with *others*, collegially and anonymously, to promote that public good. Thirdly it is about integrity in dealing with the many and diverse problems which need solving if the public good is to be promoted (O'Toole 1993 cited in Brereton and Temple 1999, p.456, original emphasis)

But as to altruism and the setting aside of personal interests ...?? I suspect, as do others that Barry O'Toole's somewhat grandiose description contributes to "fostering a myth that there has always been a set of values and beliefs that characterizes those employed in the public sector" (Pratchett and Wingfield 1994, fn. 24, p.11). In contrast, self-interest (that is, the meanings and values particular selves bring to their work) is crucial to how that work is undertaken (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2000). While our motivations may encompass altruistic tendencies, there is absolutely no doubt that identity politics and personal interests are writ large in the voices and stories of all those involved in this project, me included. For example, my own motivation for helping people, that is, my commitment to action research, collaborative practice, and holistic process is a direct challenge to many of the knowledge production procedures characterising more traditional university research (Levin 2003; Levin and Greenwood 2001). In a similar way, Frankie's commitment to helping people also flies in the face of organisational protocols and measures (the ever-present key performance indicators, or KPIs).

"I spend as much time as it takes with them," she declares, "and give them a bit more quality, and when they say "thank you for all your help," it just puts a smile on my face. I don't care what race they are whatever, if you've helped somebody that's the big job satisfaction part of it for me and that's what I feel. You don't get them all the time – you may get a few in a day – it's the luck of the draw. I don't have the best stats every week, I'm working on that too, but I try to give up the time to help that person because they're going to remember the call they've just had."

Therein lies the rub. For both Frankie and I must navigate the often murky headwaters of our respective organisational and institutional contexts; professional contexts in which we are personally invested. For Frankie it's the constant challenge of being both professional and personal, of negotiating stats and her commitment to quality service, of bobbing above the parapet to draw attention to organisational shortcomings and ducking beneath for respite. For me the issues are similar, of being

seen to be doing effective, quality research that honours my holistic *professional is personal* approach while trying to avoid justifying or ‘othering’ myself in all manner of ways in the process.

‘Alternative’ is ‘other’

Needing justification

When did you last notice

A ‘mainstream’ paper in which

The author justified

That methodological choice

(Day 2001, p.150)

This excerpt from Mary Day’s poem *Glass Ceilings and Brick Walls: Double Disadvantage* highlights the always present, often pervasive workings of power. Every aspect of our emerging lives, the ever moving intersections of who we are, what we care about, and what we are doing with whom across our various contexts, is embedded in layers of subtle and not so subtle power relations. David Collinson rightly points to complexity:

[I]n practice, we simultaneously occupy many subjective positions, identities and allegiances. Rarely, if ever, do we experience a singular or unitary sense of self. There also appears to be an almost unlimited number of possible sources of identity. Human beings seem able to construct coexisting identities from many different aspects of our lives ... While some of these coexisting identities are mutually reinforcing, others may be in tension, mutually contradictory and even incompatible (Collinson 2003, p.534).

Yet this is just a beginning. For in practice our complex selves are continually being (re)constructed in various contexts and conversations. As Eric Eisenberg maintains “it is always a mistake to treat identity as a noun [when] we live in the identity process (Eisenberg 2001, p.540). Sometimes this process flows smoothly, but often the complicated, power laden interweaving of our contexts and our selves does not make for an easy life. So it is for Frankie.

Doing the ‘Business’ of Public Service: Frankie Goes to Hollywood

It’s morning tea time, Monday. Frankie is thundering up the stairs, a woman on a mission.

“I time my smokes ... my smoke takes about eight minutes ...” she glances round, grinning widely to check I’m still behind her. I am ... just. I’ve been behind her - in more ways than one - since 7am today. Believe me; keeping up with Frankie is no easy task.

She bursts into the café, cigarettes in one hand water bottle in the other, perfunctorily scans the room for the usual suspects, and careers towards a group of Service Centre staff.

“We’ll join you,” she announces loudly to a group of four women in the midst of a conversation about doing a waiata at an upcoming training hui, “because yous are more hori than we are!”⁶⁶

She flops down amongst them as their laughter subsides. Introducing me, rolling her cigarette and adding her tuppence worth to the chat all seems to occur in one breath. Perched beside her, I grab an instant to reflect how effortlessly this young woman takes multi-tasking at breakneck speed to stratospheric heights.

“How’s your focus going today?” her friend Georgina asks.

“Not bad,” Frankie replies, “but we’re getting hammered out there so I haven’t had much time to think about it. I haven’t got picked up for my shoes yet though” she giggles.

I glance down at her open-toed Doc Marten sandals and wag my finger mischievously.⁶⁷

“Comfortable, but not very corporate eh!” she grimaces playfully.

“It’s Monday” Georgina states flatly, “they won’t be looking at your feet today.”

⁶⁶ The term ‘hori’ is a New Zealand colloquialism generally used prejudicially to describe Maori people
⁶⁷ Open-toed backless shoes are not officially sanctioned at Frontline. They are deemed unprofessional (“not corporate enough” as the CSRs say) by the prevailing dress code.

Given the typically manic Monday workflows we are experiencing, Georgina's point is well made. However, the shoes are arguably a bit of a hiccup for Frankie's current focus. Few people know the effort Frankie puts into each working day via her 'focuses' as she calls them, although she amiably shares this information with Georgina, a longstanding friend. I recall an earlier conversation where she set out the importance of being 'focused' to enable her to get through her working day reasonably intact.

"I go through this phase thingy, where I pick up a focus every few months," she explained. "They've been really helpful. At the moment my focus is being corporate and professional."

In striving to be 'corporate and professional' Frankie is doing identity work (Alvesson and Willmott 2002). More to the point, she is engaged in an identity struggle as she tries to find some correspondence between her work situation, and how she defines herself and what is meaningful for her in this context (Sveningsson and Alvesson 2003, p.1188).

Here, in her own words, is Frankie's story about being 'focused.' It is the story of a coping strategy; of Frankie's fluid and unstable attempts to regulate her identity to fit organisational norms and controls, at the same time as she tries to reconcile who she is in the process. It is a story of self-construction amidst self-destruction, and the struggle to make sense of it all.

Doing the Professional Thing

"You know I'm young and I'm a Polynesian, they just look at me as if I really don't know ... I got told, well I got given the 'professional' talk. Told by my manager that I had to be professional. That's when I had to worry about what I wore everyday, how I did my hair, and I had to worry about my speech."

"Were you picked up on all those things?" I ask incredulously, reflecting on her passion for giving quality service to each of her callers. How her CSR team mates and other colleagues find her so knowledgeable and approachable they often come to her with queries and problems rather than approach the designated Quality Coach. And I remember the adherence certificate proudly pinned to the otherwise empty wall

of her workstation. Signed by the Call Centre Manager, the certificate marks her consistent adherence in meeting her rostered time on the phones for the preceding three months.

“Yeah,” she shrugs.

“By your ... ?”

“By my Service Manager.”

Frankie glances at me dubiously, and I figure my disbelief obviously shows. Yet it's not her I disbelieve. I'm having some difficulty reconciling my perceptions of her with those presented to her by her manager. I tell her this and she visibly relaxes.

“I was given coaching – a Quality Coach. She was gonna help me out of saying “oh yeah” and “okay” and “hmmm” and things like that, ‘cause it's not professional. So that's when I got focused and I did the professional thing. I wrote down that from the hours of seven till three I would be professional. I would not be saying “um,” “yeah,” “er” and all those kind of things. I would walk around how they wanted me to walk around which was quiet and not talking and everything like that. I wasn't allowed to stop and talk to people. So that's what I keep to now, my focus. When I have like ... well when I get upset by them, I just keep thinking of that focus. Remember three o'clock - I'm outta this place. Then I just don't have to worry about it. So that's why when I go home I'm so happy. It's like a Jekyll and Hyde kind of life.”

“I bet” I sigh, recognising as Heather Hopfl (2002) has shown, that in being ‘focused’ Frankie is in many ways constructing the required corporate performance.

The corporate actor must embody the values which corporate culture proposes. Hence demeanour, bearing, and supporting gestures must express the consonance of the role with the purpose of the action ... The actor's external appearance is clearly part of the construction of the performance. Hence, make-up, hairstyle and costume become aspects of the artistic control of the actor's body (p, 262).

In this environment Frankie's scripted performance allows little room for ‘artistic control.’ It is more about artifice than any artistic sensibility.

“Anyway” Frankie continues, “I had to change my whole dress thingy and really mellow. Like if I am going to work I have to make sure that I am corporate. The focus helps to relax me. I think it’s really about relaxing myself so that by the time I get in here I’m not hypo, 'cause when I’m hypo I think I aggravate everybody else.” She throws her head back and laughs infectiously.

“Yeah Frankie, there ain’t no doubt you’re larger than life at times” I chuckle with her.

Her warm brown eyes sparkle, accepting my compliment as it was intended.

“Yeah, making sure I’m relaxed, making sure my standard of dress is alright so I’m not going to get in trouble, and then getting in here at least five minutes before my day starts. So I can make sure that my computer’s here and I’m not running to my phone at the last minute. My focus during the day is making sure I’m where I’m supposed to be, which is on the phone and making sure I’m trying to be nice, as nice as I can be to my clients and offering the best service. I remember there were stages where I wasn’t focusing,” she grimaces guiltily, “stages where I would be mucking around or something for a laugh, and then that client would know I didn’t give him that hundred per cent service. So I’ve got to make sure that every time I’m on that call I’m focused on my client to make sure they’re alright and they’re getting what they want from me.”

“Sounds exhausting” I offer weakly.

She beams; Frankie has more stamina than most. “Oh you know me Susan, I come in here and I do my work and everyone thinks I’m quite clever, so I’m doing all of that and then when I go home I change everything. My clothes go to tracksuit pants and a tee shirt and I just blob out at home. I don’t have to worry about what I’m saying or anything like that. My parents don’t expect me to do everything, they don’t expect me to know everything, and so it’s like being a kid again, which is awesome because there’s so much crap happening here. But it’s just I suppose, how I have to focus my life. Making sure that this is seven till three and the reason I am here is for the eight hours that I love helping my customers. The hours are good, the money is good and it’s so convenient to home.”

Frankie is spreadeagled across the corner couch in her living room. The house has been shut up all day and is baking hot in the mid afternoon sun. The air is still and the open-plan room feels stuffy despite doors and windows thrown wide the moment we returned from eight hours at the call centre. Her head lolls to one side exhaustedly, and she looks at me with glassy eyes.

“Biscuit?” She pushes a packet of melting chocolate Girl Guides in my direction. I fall upon them with gusto, my energy levels dangerously low.

“What’s it all about Susan ...?” she sighs.

I sense her question is both philosophical and rhetorical requiring no answer from me. This is just as well, because at that moment I have none to offer. I roll my eyes, shrug exaggeratedly and reach for another biscuit. We are both too tired to think.

Later, many months later, in the calm of my own work space I begin to consider her question and merit it the importance it deserves.

What’s it all about Frankie?

According to Frontline’s “Identity Standards” document it’s all about being “*an organisation that is professional, accessible, responsive and progressive. Everything that we do reflects our commitment to quality and the provision of the best possible service to our clients.*”

There is no doubt that Frankie is committed to ‘quality and the provision of the best possible service to her clients.’ Yet she struggles to do this amidst complex identity processes and interactions. On the one hand there are the stories with which she defines herself. As Dan McAdams (1993) puts it “if you want to know me then you must know my stories, for my stories define who I am. And if *I* want to know *myself*, to gain insight into the meaning of my own life, then I too, must come to know my own stories ...” (1993, p.11 original emphasis). For Frankie, her stories are the ever-emerging autobiographical narratives about ethnicity, upbringing, life stage, and values; stories about her “Self and its doings” (Bruner 2001, p.25). Listen ...

Frankie at Twenty Six - a Found Poem⁶⁸

i

My Mum's Maori, Nuiean, Tongan
My Dad's Grandad is from Croatia.
Came over in the gum digging days
Married a Maori,
From up North.

I was brought up Maori
More the rural Maori values
In the country.
I identify with Nuiean, Tongan, Croatian
But I don't really know them.

Every holidays
We'd be up North.
We'd live in a tram
It had a port-a-loo
and our bathroom was a creek out back.

⁶⁸ This poem is created from Frankie's words expressed during her interview conversation with me. I did not write a word of it. It is a found poem as Anne Dillard calls them, because it lifts already composed lines and sentences and weaves them into an original order (Dillard, cited in Frost et al. 2000, p.40)

I don't really think

I did have a normal childhood

Like everyone else.

My dad was a hard core drinker when we were little.

My Mum used to work.

It was easier on my parents

to take us up there and let us roam free

in the country for a few weeks.

Didn't have to worry

about sending us to the shop

'cause family would bring it in.

Big Family, Close

A real respect.

They were strict on us

What your elders' say you have to do

kind of style.

When I was fourteen, fifteen

I was up north

every other weekend

with funerals or things like that.

We were the first ones at the Marae

doing all the work.

Sitting in the kitchens
washing dishes
hard-core.

You see fourteen, fifteen year olds now
They can't even do dishes.

We had a lot of alcohol
Gang members even
They're quite prominent
In our life. In my life.

It was a different lifestyle.
I notice a lot of people here
never really had
the opportunities I had.

I expect, you know
I do expect more
than what I'm supposed to get.

ii

I'm the youngest
of three children
and my Mum and Dad
are still together.

My brother's got three children

He's divorced.

My sister's still living at home

with no kids.

I didn't like school

It was boring.

From the fifth form I just went to learn Maori

It was an easy way out.

In sixth and seventh

I picked up computer studies

And English.

I was a prefect.

My brother had his first child

as I was finishing school

'cause I didn't like school

I was brought home

to look after my niece

'cause his wife didn't want to.

Then I went to KFC.

I was a driver.

I went to KFC

because I wanted to go to America.

I suppose if you look at it
like, you have a Mum and a Dad
well in our house
it's my Mum and Dad
then I'm the next support
there for them.

For both of them.

If one of them gets sick
I'm the one
that is expected
to look after the grandkids,
and make sure they've got food,
or stay at home
if their parents go drinking.

It sounds pretty hard.
Quite a busy life
but it's something I've got used to.

I'm really just a homebody

I'm not a person that goes out
drinking.

I'm more the person
that would go driving
go pick the drunks up
bring them home kinda person.

I've got this buzz
with my Mum and Dad
Mainly with my Dad.
Up at the Rugby Club they said,
'if you don't stop drinking you're going to die'
He stopped drinking.

My Dad's old.
That's how I look at my Dad now
he's too old to be mowing the lawn,
I'll just go and do it for him.

And it's not like it sounds.
Like it sounds quite deep
But Yeah,
I live my life with my parents
my life is around my parents.

I do have time to get away
To myself
if I want to

Just walk out the door

Sweet as

Don't worry about it.

But my main concern is my parents

Always.

I live my life

with my parents

around my parents.

That's why I like this job.

I was either gonna

be on the dole

be a bum

muck around.

Or I could try

Start helping my Mum and Dad

'cause I wanted to get a loan

to go to America.

iii

I like helping people

My customers.

I focus on the ones with children

I feel sorry for the children.

I hate it when people say

"My child's got no food."

If you can help someone
Let them know that someone's out there
It's a really good job.

Over the phone
You're not taking their luggage with you.
It's only two minutes
I won't actually see the kids.

I'm trying to help them
but I'm setting my limits.
"I don't want to get involved in your life
but I will help you as much as I can
when you contact me."

I'm a gradual person.
What I'm doing at the moment
is to the best of my capabilities.

I love helping my customers.
If I couldn't find any flash job or didn't win Lotto
I could stay here
for another eighteen years.⁶⁹

⁶⁹ During the course of this research Frankie left the call centre. She wrote and told me about her new job saying "even though my work load has increased I enjoy my job as I see results that I have achieved in people, not numbers on a computer."

Organisational Identity – ‘Professionalism’ in Process

Then there are the stories with which the organisation defines itself. In policy, practice and conversation, life at Frontline is being created by its members in an ongoing, ever-emerging process (Campbell 2000). Nested within competing and complex relations of power and accountability, Frankie’s struggles to (re)create her ‘Self and its doings’ within the constraints of organisational norms and practices highlights the power-infused “relational dimension of selfhood” (Eakin 1999, p.63). In particular, her strategies for ‘doing the professional thing’ relate to one of the dominant ‘conversations’ at Frontline. That is, they revolve around a specific construction of what it means to be professional and accountable in this context.

The word ‘professional’ occurs frequently in the official crafting of Frontline’s identity.

To enable [Frontline] to establish and maintain an image of a dynamic and professional organisation with its clients, stakeholders and the community I need to set out my expectations for the work environment, personal presentation and client focused service ... (CEO Intranet document ‘About us: The way we work’).

[Frontline] NZ is an organisation that is professional, accessible, responsive and progressive ... (‘Identity Standards’ document).

Creating a service ethic, image and identity that is professional and consistent across the country is paramount to the success of the Department ... (‘Our Style’ Guide).

But what does it mean to be professional at Frontline? Public service, ‘helping people’ is the organisation’s mission and mandate; remember the ‘Guiding Principles’...

“We put people first, we are fair, we act with understanding and care, we get it right, we deliver.”

Yet interestingly this ethic is carried out in a manner that pays a great deal more than lip-service to a corporate business model. At Frontline, a ‘professional’ image and

identity is explicitly linked to certain ideas about corporate culture.⁷⁰ Within this ‘*Public Service department*’ (as the organisation is categorised in its ‘Code of Conduct’) both the look and language of business is pervasive. In Frankie’s terms this makes for a peculiar Jekyll and Hyde existence for staff and ‘clients’ alike.

Getting the Look

One of the most striking ways ‘professionalism’ manifests at Frontline occurs via the organisation’s clear desk policy and its staff dress codes. The word ‘corporate’ is commonly used by CSRs when referring to these policies. It is a contentious catchword. A loaded term that euphemistically and often critically refers to the fact that keeping up appearances is important here. Its use denotes complex organisational and individual identity work that involves various degrees of identity struggle for both CSRs and managers. A great deal of energy goes into managing being ‘corporate,’ worrying about not being ‘corporate’ and railing against or actively undermining the need to be seen to be ‘corporate’ at the call centre.

Frankie has first hand experience bumping against the rules in trying to make her working environment a little more personal, ‘a little healthier’ as Martin one of her colleagues puts it.

“I brought in crystals and I got told off,” Frankie shrugs. “I was sitting by the toilets when they first started using those desks. I was sitting right opposite the toilets – I had two toilet doors to me. All the draughts,” she waves her arms around expressively, “people coming and going.”

“That can’t have been too pleasant,” I respond.

⁷⁰I use the problematic term ‘culture’ to refer to a process. “Culture is not static; it is an ongoing process of social construction, ever changing, always in negotiation” (Pelias 2004, p.110). This makes defining organisational culture, as Joanne Martin (2002) proclaims, the “granddaddy of dilemmas” (p.55) Indeed there may be as many moving and contested definitions as there are moving and contested ‘cultures’ themselves. (For an excellent synopsis of some of the more useful, see Martin, 2002, pgs.57-59.) In this instance, I am following Mats Alvesson’s (2002) lead on organisational culture, and concentrating on ever emerging meanings that are “anchored and transmitted in symbolic form” (p.5) in a particular interactive social context. For as Aaron Turner (2000) puts it “culture only exists and persists in the form in which it is lived and this form is itself constituted in ongoing intersubjective interaction” (p.53).

“It was just so yucky. I was the only one there. I went and got a plant, they took it away from me. I wanted the plant to have some kind of living form next to me. So then I brought in crystals, I had this little dish I bought from the Two Dollar Shop, it had a smiley face and I put little crystals in it. I asked my Service Manager “am I allowed this on my desk?” Answer, “No you’re not – take one or two out hide them on your PC somewhere so no one can see them and put the rest away, that is not corporate, that is not achieving our standards.”

I pull away from Frankie’s words and look up to the top of my computer monitor. To the brightly coloured figurines, the witches and dragons and clowns my family and friends have given me ... each with stories to ‘tell’ reminding the toiling student that she is a wife, a daughter, a mate, and a mother too. The blue-tacked fridge magnet from my eldest son David that proclaims, “Of all the Mum’s in all the world there’s no-one quite like you,” is the latest addition. Its story is beyond words. David gave it to me on my birthday, the recent one that followed his almost successful suicide attempt. I’m only just learning to look at it without crying. Yet when I get bogged down with doctoral dilemmas, this touchstone, and the others, just a glance away, cue the larger circle. They ‘tell’ me not to get so precious as to lose myself and “disappear into a jumble of words and waffle” (Horsfall 2001, p. 83). They prompt this particular intervention in my ‘production of knowledge’ ... Showing, as Patti Lather (1991) would have it, inclusive “ways that work out of the blood and spirit of our lives ... [and] communicate my always in-process ideas and practices in order to expand a sense of possibility ... (p.20)” Somehow, I suspect Frankie might agree. Now where did I leave her? ... Oh that’s right, lamenting the loss of her crystals.

“It makes no sense to me” Frankie continues. “Again it goes back to the corporate wear and things like that. You’ve got to change depending on what the situation is. Sure corporate standards for being outside in an office. You don’t have crystals on your desk in an office, but in a place where we don’t have customers ...? I suppose it’s functional ...?” Her voice trails off and she looks perplexed.

Martin, sitting alongside, has been listening intently. “It depends what you mean by functional Frankie, it’s certainly not healthy.”

“No it’s definitely not healthy. You are so right,” Frankie agrees.

“But it’s functional to the maximum, that’s the problem it’s too functional.” Martin gazes intensely around him. “It’s good because there are no distractions, it’s bad because you need distractions, and you need something of yourself sitting on your desk. You don’t want to feel like a machine who sits in front of a great space.”

“I’m a robot in green walls” Frankie sighs.

Frankie and Martin are not alone. Organisational space is part of a social landscape where identities and relationships are mediated through spatial configurations (Halford 2004, para 5.15). As I wander about the centre I often tap into this dimension by asking ...

“Tell me how you feel about the physical environment you’re working in?” This time my question is directed to Shanti, one of the Quality Coaches taking a clerical break from call monitoring.

“I hate it! I so don’t like it!” Her eyes blaze up from the printout she’s checking, and I am taken aback by the intensity in her voice.

“I think it’s impersonal. I don’t think just because you’re a government department you shouldn’t be able to have personal stuff on your desk or whatever. I think it’s a hugely corporate idea, and I don’t think we should be a corporate department or whatever. Even like wearing ... I totally disagree with wearing corporate dress to work because the clients that we are dealing with aren’t corporate clients. They’re at home Joes, you know, to make a rash generalisation, but that’s the bottom line. And just the whole ...” she glances around, and with a laboured sigh flicks the completed printout onto the desk alongside, “I like to look outside.” Her voice becomes wistful. “It’s just horrible not to be able to look outside.”

Shanti’s lament sparks a memory. I glance towards the back of the call centre looking for Beverley. Catching sight of her where I expect to, tucked in alongside the covered windows, I smile, remembering her comments and her window strategy.

“I’m going through ... I was going to say middle aged spread” Beverley laughs. “Menopause. I have hot flushes all the time, so I sit by the windows. I always ask if I can sit by the windows. If I’m in the middle I can’t take my jacket off or my shirt off

because it's not corporate. I try to have sleeveless underneath.⁷¹ One of my Service Managers did say to me "Oh I don't know what your excuse is why you want to be by the windows," and I'm not going to tell her."

"Have you been able to sit in the same place all the time Bev?" My curiosity is piqued, for it's unusual for CSRs to remain in the same place for any considerable length of time.

"Yeah do now Tina knows, she's my new Service Manager and she's one of the most approachable. So hopefully I'm staying put here. I've gone right around the centre. I didn't mind sitting in the middle of the aisle, but if we have visitors and I've got sleeveless on ... yeah not a good look."

Beverley doesn't question 'the look.' Indeed, now she has an 'approachable' manager to assist her, she seems reasonably happy to take responsibility for managing the dress code around the common vagaries of her life stage. Others however are much less accommodating and far more critical. When my focus groups present participating CSRs the chance to discuss the dress code, it raises a great deal of heat and sheds considerable light on their view of the 'corporate' imperative.

We are some way into a wide ranging conversation about what it means to be an effective CSR at Frontline when the issue comes up.

"They're⁷² worrying about little things all the time," Karen sighs.

"Like the clothes," Sara replies pointedly.

"And you feel so stupid," Helene's jaw firms noticeably altering her usually soft demeanour.

"Oh the wardrobe ..." Sara sparks. "I mean I had an example where I fought to keep my shoes. I had a really nice pair of shoes, they were really nice, there was nothing wrong with them but they had no back on them. They were summer ones. They were corporate! The managers kept going on about them every day. Every day they'd tell me off about my shoes. And every day I'd keep wearing them until one day Tina

⁷¹ Sleeveless tops are also regarded as unacceptable dress – again 'not corporate enough.'

⁷²'They' as chapter five detailed is a collective term used in reference to the managers.

drew straps on them. Well she drew straps on the back of my heels. I mean I just think it's pathetic. You are trying to do the best job you can and they're bitching because you haven't got straps on the back of your corporate sandals!"

"And the person on the phone can't see it!" Helene's frustration is palpable.

Sara nods vigorously in agreement. "I mean if someone comes in and their footwear is unsuitable then they should be pulled aside as an individual and told "hey you can't wear those, they look really crappy." Instead of making this silly rule, right no strapless. You know, you have to have straps."

In another CSR focus group when similar issues are raised and similar feelings run high, I set the cat among the pigeons and ask ...

"Do you think what you wear affects the quality of work you do? There is a loud and resounding chorus of "No!"

"No, I don't think so" Laura offers "I still try and give one hundred percent, I'd just feel a lot more comfortable. I'd rather not wear corporate at all and be comfortable. When you have to sit so long I feel wearing a jacket is restrictive. It makes me feel uncomfortable and I can feel it around the back of my neck. To be able to wear tidy casual would be more relaxing. I'm sure I'd be more productive when I'm happy."

"Yeah, casual," Richard agrees "most of the call centres I know of aren't corporate and I think it would be a morale booster."

Jasmine concurs, "oh yes, I actually would feel more comfortable in casual eight hours on those chairs all day, that's just me. My money's tight and I do find it a hassle having to worry about clothes in the morning."

At Frontline the dress code and the clear desk policy are "key parts of the structural systems of control that operate as sensegiving practices" (Karreman and Alvesson 2004, p.169). These codes provide identity material – rules for how to be (and importantly, how to look) professional. Ongoing evaluation is made in light of these rules because they are an attempt to influence how the CSRs think and feel about themselves in relation to the organisation and the 'professional' job they are doing. However, neither the rules, nor the rigidity with which they are enforced make much

sense to many of the CSRs, because they do not identify with the sensegiving on offer. They cannot make it their own.

Identification differs from similar constructs, such as commitment and person-organization fit, because of its emphasis on the self-concept and is thus defined as occurring when an individual's beliefs about his or her organization become self-referential or self-defining (Pratt 2000, p.457).

The emphasis on corporate clothes and clear desks doesn't fit with the CSRs self-perceptions of who they are and how they value what they do, and no manner of enforcement will change that. Therefore, the officially sanctioned organisational culture of professionalism via these mechanisms arguably becomes an exercise in futility. As David Collins maintains:

[W]e must acknowledge that cultures are historically developed, socially maintained and individually interpreted. The notion, therefore, the managers could rewrite history, impress their influence upon groups and, at the end of the day, change the beliefs and attitudes which people hold about their lives, and life-styles, simply beggars belief. Any model which claims that managers can effectively manage culture, can change how people think and act, must therefore, be viewed academically, as over-socialized and socially, as somewhat arrogant (Collins 1998, p.126).

At Frontline many of the directives for its organisational way of being - its image and identity - come from the top. At the time this research was carried out, the CEO was a strong advocate of "a management style where image and identity matter" (Espiner, cited in Wallis 2001, p.5). For this she earned opprobrium. One media commentator described her as, "an arrogant and aloof disciple of the worst manifestations of modern management," and railed against "the dictate that we don't comment on the dress of the head of a Government department even though [Frontline] staff were subject to strict dress code dictates from their boss (Armstrong 2001, p.A26). Another, more academically inclined, argued that "she and her supporters derived from managerialist literature on organisational leadership the view that the controversial aspects of her style were justifiable since they helped her achieve the organisational focus on a clear vision required to improve its performance in 'key result areas'" (Wallis 2001, p.14).

While political storm clouds gathered around the appropriateness or otherwise of her leadership, day-to-day life at the call centre continued to be fashioned in what have now come to be regarded as some of the more ‘controversial aspects of her style.’ One of my conversations with Sean, the call centre manager, alludes to some of the consequences.

“Sean, one of the things I’ve noticed about this centre compared to others I’ve been in, is the lack of personalised space. Quite often I’ve seen call centres where, because the work can be stressful as well as routine and mundane, a way of making staff more comfortable is giving them licence to personalise their workstations. I am very taken by the fact that there is absolutely none of that here.”

“It’s very austere” Sean concedes, “and not personal. That’s a direct reflection of our CEO really; she’s published her style standard. She anticipates that she could go into any site within the country and see a similar sort of franchise standard.

I am struck by his language of standardisation and franchise. “Right. So it’s sort of a McDonaldization of style” I reply, grateful for George Ritzer’s (1996) completely applicable term.

“It is. Yeah, it is,” Sean nods. “We’ve gradually slipped in some concessions, like you’ll notice the wallpaper on some of the screens is a personal photo. So there’s ... I mean you can’t deny a person’s uniqueness, and I think that’s one of the stumbling blocks here, that we’ve sort of fought against for some time because it is such a structured and disciplined environment, you almost need to balance that by having chaos in there as well. But we aren’t allowed, and that’s sort of ... I’m not allowed to do things, really makes me feel like I’m sucking on a lemon.”

Indeed he is and unfortunately ‘chaos’ does occur here. In one manifestation it comes in the form of unacceptably high sick leave, low morale and high staff turnover.⁷³ CSRs struggle, unable to find any meaning, integration, or even some correspondence

⁷³At the time this research began the call centre had a staff turnover rate of 32.5% per annum (according to figures I obtained from Call Centre Management). Nationally, in the past three years across the entire organisation Frontline has averaged 12.3% staff turnover, compared with the public service average of 11% (New Zealand Herald 2004). During the period I was ethnographically ‘resident’ in the centre both the amount and frequency of CSR sick leave was a critical and on-going issue. There was however, a significant decrease in the year following – a point I return to in chapter eight.

between their self-definitions and their work situations (Sveningsson and Alvesson 2003, p.1188). Frankie has developed sophisticated strategies - her focuses – for keeping her head down and attempting to conform, whereas others, like Sara (battling over her shoes) are more defiant. In questioning, and failing to comply with the organisation's standards of professionalism, both Frankie and Sara have faced criticism and both have developed reputations amongst the managers for being difficult. Perhaps this is to be expected, for as Marc Zegans (1997) maintains “rule obsessed organizations turn the timid into cowards and the bold into outlaws” (p.115). In many respects the controlling nature of Frontline's image and identity processes turns its staff into identity fugitives who seek respite elsewhere. Committed to helping people, both Frankie and Sara, along with many other CSRs, utilise identities and values that originate outside the organisation (being ‘brought up Maori,’ being a Christian, being an ex-beneficiary) in order to survive within it. To do so they must not only be seen to be meeting the organisation's identity standards, they must sound the part as well.

Person and Voice: The Language of Business

Karen rolls her chair out from her workstation as far away as her tethered head will allow, and yawns widely. Workflows are unusually slow. There are no calls in the queue and the reader boards scroll a one hundred percent service level. The centre's languid atmosphere is punctuated by the sound of friendly banter and laughter as CSRs, visibly relaxed, wait for incoming calls. Even at this pace they do not take too long to arrive.

“Welcome to Frontline, you're speaking with Karen.”

“Pardon?” a tentative voice queries. Karen breathes deeply and repeats her scripted greeting.

“Oh sorry, you answered so quickly I wasn't sure whether you were a recording or not,” her caller apologises.

“How can I help you?” Karen's tone is clipped and her eyes wander skywards as she clicks briefly to her email screen while listening to the caller's questions about applying for assistance.

“Are you on a benefit at the moment?” She clarifies the caller’s circumstances before offering information about the support available and the various criteria required to apply.

“I’ll need to book you an appointment with a Case Manager to discuss your situation, one moment please.” Karen puts her caller on hold because she has already flicked to the relevant calendars and found them disconcertingly full. “Bugger” she grimaces, more to herself than to me.

“Problem?” I ask.

“Yeah, it’s new business” she explains, “the appointments need to be longer, and normally the last appointment for new business is three thirty in the afternoon, but these schedules are all really full.”

I remember Sean commenting that Frontline offers “over seventy different products and services” and wonder which ‘new business’ category this recently separated mother and two preschool children will fit, and what ‘products or services’ the organisation can offer her. I also reflect on the Ministerial edict I downloaded from the Intranet earlier in the day. In response to a Ministerial inquiry into Frontline the incoming Minister requires (among many other things) that “*the Department modify corporate and business language.*” As it’s very quiet I share my musings with Karen at the completion of her call.

“Oh yeah that’s right” she responds “whoever the powers that be has said we can’t use ‘customer’ now, we have to use ‘client.’ I asked Mel, my Service Manager, ‘tell me what the difference is between a customer and a client?’ Doh ...” She sarcastically intones in her best Homer Simpson voice. “But on the part of all our letters that goes out it was still saying customer number, so I actually put in an ISO request⁷⁴ for that to be changed. It’s very confusing. I began to use ‘client’ and they were giving me their telephone numbers. Honestly, instead of their customer numbers, I’d say can you give me your client number, and they’d give me their telephone number.”

⁷⁴ The call centre is ISO 9001 accredited. Policy and procedural changes must all be carried out via ISO mechanisms and standards.

“So I went to Mel and told her “this is ridiculous, I’m just going to use customer number, they know customer number, people are in that habit.” She told me “you know Karen; change is not necessarily a bad thing.” Oh yeah right” – the sarcasm continues to drip from her voice. “So it has been changed. There is a ‘client’ number on the letters that go out now.”

Karen is obviously irritated. She shakes her head and swings away from her workstation more vigorously this time, her brow furrowed in thought. “That’s another thing; recently we’ve had to change our telephone farewell as well. It’s been quite a major going through the Department. I’m someone who’ll do something if there’s a good reason for it and I feel that what we’ve been doing is just fine.”

“Is that saying your name again at the end of the call?” I query, aware of other CSRs who are as fractious as Karen about this new development.

“Yeah, and asking “is there anything else I can help you with?” she intones scornfully, “all the rest of it. I mean we are fitting into a small time frame, we are being timed. They want us to say more and offer extra in the same time frame. I’m really uncomfortable about that because there’s no flexibility there, so I had a chat to Mel about that too. She told me “oh we don’t expect you to say it to every customer; it is at your discretion.” But because we have QC’s - our Quality Coaches - their interpretation and our interpretation can be quite different, so you end up having bit of a confab about what they think. How they see it and how you see it. And at the end of the day I’ve been marked down because I haven’t said it, and that affects my PA.⁷⁵ I don’t understand why we are doing this. Has somebody just sat up there and thought ‘Oh that’ll be a good thing to do.’ She spits out the comment, her arms raised questioningly, her eyes smouldering. “I heard it at the bank the other day, they always say, “is there anything else I can help you with,” but they’re selling products. Whereas as if we want more customers!!” Karen is really worked up now.

“I thought it was the opposite in this job” I counter. “I thought the idea was to have less customers.” We both laugh aloud and the tension is broken.

⁷⁵ Performance Appraisal. Failure to perform required actions is noted numerically and this does as Karen said “influence whether you go up to your next pay scale, whether you get your bonus and everything.”

“Yeah! That’s the one,” Karen chuckles.

There’s no doubt Karen’s resistance to, and frustration with the changing language of ‘customers’ and ‘clients’ alongside the arrival of a newly scripted time-hungry call closure (“you’re speaking with Karen, is there anything else I can help you with?”), indicates that “when law, policy, and rules are ill matched to workers’ views of fairness and appropriate action work smoulders with conflict over what is the right decision and what is the right thing to do” (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003, p.9). Even when the relevant changes are made to standard organisational letters Karen continues to call ‘clients’ – ‘customers’ most of the time. Like many other CSRs she regards this as ‘the right thing to do’ seeing the language change as an unnecessary exercise in pretentious semantics. This view is strengthened day-by-day on the phones by the callers who continue to self-identify as “customers” often volunteering their identifying “customer number” before the CSR requests it.

The subtle distinction between ‘client’ and ‘customer’⁷⁶ provides enough nuisance value to annoy many CSRs. In doing so it importantly shows, “the way that people talk about an issue is intimately related to the way that they think about it and ultimately act with respect to it. Discourse is thus a locus of power” (Conley and O’Barr 1998, p.7). At Frontline the way people talk about and carry out public service is through the language and practice of business. The function of this, as Michael Brereton and Michael Temple (1999) note, “is chiefly to confirm the (artificial) status of the clients as customers and this confirmation is required as much by the organization itself as it is to make a signal to the citizen” (p.472). These ‘signals’ are much more than semantic however, because the language of ‘customer and client’ carried out in a marketised environment driven by quantifiable and tightly measured ‘targets and deliverables’ creates and forms identities and relationships disciplined by this particular way of being.

[H]uman communication cannot be simply seen as a matter of information transfer from one location to another, it must be seen as ontologically *formative*, as a process by which people can, in communication with one another, literally in-form one another’s being, that is help to make each other persons of this or that kind (Shotter 1989, p.145 original emphasis).

⁷⁶ Indeed the Concise Oxford Dictionary defines a client as a customer of professional services.

Callers to Frontline ontologically learn how to be ‘customers’ in conversation with CSRs. They are identified by customer, (now client) numbers, they are informed of the ‘products’ the organisation offers, and their questions and concerns are corralled into quantifiable time parameters. Some callers take up the transactional language and identity with it unproblematically.

“I don’t care quite frankly how polite they are ... If they give me product knowledge, I will put up with their rudeness and arrogance” (Domestic Purposes Beneficiary cited in Forsyte Research 2000, p.17).

Others are much more equivocal. For example, consider a conversation I listened to where a caller was anxious to get a benefit breakdown sent to him quickly to enable him to work out vital budget concerns. The CSR cheerfully offered “do you want me to fax this through to you today?” To which the caller replied “No I haven’t got a fax machine, only two hungry children.”

“Dealing with [Frontline] is a personal thing. It is not like going to a bank or Telecom or anything like that. You’re dealing with people’s lives and the issues in their lives. I know from being on a sickness benefit and being under a lot of pressure emotionally and mentally that having to go through everything over and over with different people is a big problem” (Sickness Beneficiary cited in Forsyte Research 2000, p.53).

Of course as both Karen and the person quoted above recognize, dealing with Frontline is not like being at a bank. People who use Frontline’s services are neither customers nor clients in any real sense. As Evert Gummesson claims “the government sector was once intended to be of service to its *investors*, the citizens” (2000, p.6, original emphasis). However, day-by-day in the call centre the euphemisms of ‘customer’ and ‘client’ are a long way from the idiom of ‘investors’ and ‘citizens’ and they inform quite different identities. The language is far from inconsequential. As “figures of intentionality and a distraction from that intentionality” (Stein 1998, p.4) these euphemisms create marketised identities at the same time as they diminish and distance the vulnerable people who must use the social services the organisation provides.

“[B]enefits claimants cannot help being ‘customers’ [they] are vulnerable people because they are *powerless* people ... If privatisation or marketisation threatens the public service ethos, they reduce the protection for captive ‘customers’ and particularly for the vulnerable.(Goodwin, cited in Pollitt 2003, p.141 original emphasis).

Despite the marketised environment and the transactional nature with which they are supposed to go about doing the business of public service, many CSRs are keenly aware they’re dealing with vulnerable people’s lives and the complicated issues in them. Constrained by the requirements of business language and practices, and yet motivated by their own deeply held values around helping people, they attempt to negotiate ways of being (identities) that enable them to be both socially accountable in the workplace, and personally accountable to their callers and themselves. Often this makes for the Jekyll and Hyde existence Frankie claimed.

Each working day CSRs are faced with a fundamental dilemma that has been called the defining characteristic of frontline public sector work. The difficulties they encounter occur because “the needs of individual citizen-clients exist in tension with the demands and limits of the [marketised] rules” (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2000, p.349). CSRs must negotiate these demands, tensions and limits by exercising discretion and making moral judgements moment-by-moment, call after call in an emerging process that often plays out within complex identity work.

Morals and Discretion: Living an Identity Process

“Richard, are you okay?” Engrossed in the story unfolding through my headset I jump, startled by Penny’s query. The Quality Coach, on floor walking duties is standing behind us.

“Richard?” The voice is urgent. Penny taps her watch indicating the call is well over time.

Deep in conversation Richard glances around and smiles charitably, including me in his gaze.

“Bear with me Marion I’m just going to put you on hold for a moment” he tells his caller as he turns to Penny. “It’s a complicated cancellation that’s generated a debt and I need to get these figures sorted and understood. Okay?”

Penny nods and grimaces. “Quick as you can” she instructs as she wanders off content for the moment, although we both know she will return shortly should the call continue much longer.

“Sorry about that Marion,” Richard returns to his previous conversation, “grab a pen and let’s go through these figures again shall we.”

At the beginning of the call Richard was faced with a very angry woman “sick and tired of being given the run around by different bloody people, and fed up with the incompetence of this fucking department!” He’s worked very hard to get alongside, and more to the point, to get her onside, in order to discuss how the debt she is disputing arose, and how to resolve the contentious issues around it. Deeply religious, he obviously struggled in the face of a tirade of expletives before he quietly set about defusing the situation once Marion had said her piece. Needless to say all this took considerably longer than the average ‘general benefit’ call time of two minutes forty five seconds, and he still has a way to go yet.

Richard is motivated by his Christian values; they guide what it means to him to “give quality service to everyone,” as he puts it. Yet according to the Call Centre Blueprint, he is a CSR who “*consistently records a relatively long average call time and may need [his] performance analysed and training may be required.*” However, Richard is more than willing to trade ‘bureaucratic failure’⁷⁷ in order to remain true to the important identity and values that inspire him most. He seldom meets his KPIs, a crucial factor that impinges directly on his performance appraisal, and ultimately affects his remuneration. Even so, he comfortably sees himself as a very effective CSR, an ‘advocate not a bureaucrat’ (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003). At the end of this long call another person has benefited from the identity work he has undertaken and a relatively calm Marion comments “I do understand what you’re on about now Richard, that’s great, thank you very much.” Nonetheless by the Call Centre’s efficiency standards his performance is woeful.

⁷⁷ This term belongs to Steven Maynard-Moody and Michael Musheno, 2003, p.115.

Of course not everyone is so altruistically inclined, and there are myriads of ways identities play out each day at Frontline. Let's catch up with Jasmine again.

"Welcome to Frontline, you're speaking with Jasmine."

In a halting voice in broken English a young woman gives the customer number and identifying details of another. She explains she is seeking information about training incentives on behalf of her friend because the friend is even less familiar with the English language than she is.

Jasmine slumps forward across the keyboard in front of her, exhaling an audible moan as she checks the details offered onscreen.

"Look, your friend's been here for nine months, she must have picked up some English to talk to us" her voice is sharp, and her exasperation thinly disguised. "You have no authority to act for your friend and I can't tell you anything."

Jasmine glances in my direction and grins. "I'm really harsh eh ..." she comments as she finishes the call. "But honestly, I can't get a [training benefit] because I got my UE⁷⁸ twenty years ago, and I've worked in the last six months. These people come over here and they just want it all, and in a week they've got everything it really irks me!"

Jasmine's irritation has surfaced on a number of occasions today and I cast back to a call this morning, and the young man who also encountered her ire.

"Well you've had four days to ring up and fix your benefit" she told him in no uncertain terms. "You've been on the benefit for over a year, that's long enough to have got to know the system. You know you can't ring up and change things just like that." He had little chance to reply as she was just warming up.

"So have you thought about looking for work? Have you been doing any work at all? Have you done no work at all this year? You know you can't use the benefit as an excuse for not getting work" she chastised.

⁷⁸ University Entrance

While this caller may not have appreciated her manner, Jasmine feels her background, skills, and the values she holds dear make her well suited to the job she is doing. She readily identifies with her context and its requirements as she sees them.

“I’ve been on the benefit, I know the system and I know people,” she told me adamantly. “I feel I’ve got the right people skills for this job, and I’ve got good telephone skills. I have a temper every now and then when I don’t get enough sleep, but I do feel I’ve got the right skills for helping people and this place needs me.”

Like most of us, Jasmine holds a considerable number of values, and as with most of us, there is no guarantee that these are all mutually consistent (Pollitt 2003, p.134). Although she values helping people and is committed to doing so, in conversation on the phones each day her confident identity as a former Domestic Purposes Beneficiary, and latterly as a competent and relatively self-sufficient single parent “becomes the yardstick by which she measures the motives and actions” of those with whom she interacts (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003, p.82). In constantly emerging formative identity processes she uses her own identity in a way that “strengthens her self-identification; the self creates the standard and the application of the standard reinforces the self” (ibid). Consequently Jasmine’s disdain with dependence and her impatience with the “overstayers and refugees,” as she calls those who have English as a second language, dominates the identity work occurring. While the callers are not passive in the process, in these circumstances they have almost no power and little chance to respond, and the brief phone mediated conversations tend, if anything, to reinforce the stereotypes she holds.

As the stories of Frankie, Richard, and Jasmine show, the ontological process of forming and enacting selves goes on call by call each day at Frontline. Despite the organisational rules and regulations, the marketised language, and policies and practices that lean more towards commercial business models, the relationships CSRs have with their callers tend to be based on complex, discretionary, multidimensional, and fluid identity processes and struggles. Frankie ambitiously works this multiplicity as best she can ‘playing the part’ (Hopfl 2002) through her ‘corporate focus’ and working on her KPIs, at the same time as she attempts to “help the people, especially the young ones.” Richard spends his days advocating for the powerless with/in his Christian identity. It motivates him to take time and care with vulnerable individuals

who are easily intimidated or frustrated by the enormity of the bureaucracy they have to deal with. And Jasmine, forthright and outspoken, more so by her own admission for the lack of a good night sleep, strengthens her own identity with her no holds barred approach to ‘customer service.’ In doing so each CSR demonstrates that “[front line] work is as much a process of forming and enforcing identities – both of citizen-clients and [front line] workers – as of delivering services and implementing policy” (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003, p.153).

Yet most of this identity work goes on beneath the official organisational radar. A focus on quantifiable actions and targets, “business intelligence” as the managers call it, largely derived from technologically monitored numbers and surveillance processes cannot take into account the ever emerging nuanced formation and (re)formation of identities that influences each and every call. Arguably it makes understanding and managing such complexity an exercise in flying blind.

Managing the ‘Franchise,’ Managing Identities

“Susan, over here, come sit with us,” Carol beckons to me. It’s a chilly autumn morning and I have just arrived at the country lodge where the management team are holding an off-site planning day.

“Bit nippy isn’t it,” I shiver, sliding onto a wooden bench beside Carol, Frontline’s acting Operations Analyst. A brightly striped sun umbrella, jutting at a jaunty angle from the middle of the wooden table where Carol rests her elbows mocks the overcast morning, and matches the mood of the managers seated beneath it. I nod hello to mostly familiar faces and hope the cheerful atmosphere will help to dispel the niggling sense of unease that’s settled at the bottom of my stomach.

“How’s the shadowing going?” Carol asks. “Do people mind you following them around?” I assume that like many not ‘officially’ participating in the research, Carol is curious about how this particular phase is unfolding.

“I think the novelty effect’s worn off now and everyone’s familiar with me, so people seem okay with it,” I reply. “Lots of different experiences with different people as you can imagine, but at the end of each day most tell me they’ve enjoyed it and some even say they forgot I was there at times.”

“It’s not for me, I wouldn’t like it at all” Carol looks at me directly. “When I was going through a custody dispute a while back, a court appointed psychologist asked to come and observe my family during a mealtime, I said no.” Her sparse words are delivered with obvious feeling. I nod silently and maintain eye contact. “Anyway,” she continues, “you are part of this day today, not an observer; you have been invited to join us as a participant and I for one am very keen to hear what you have to say about us.” There’s an edge to her voice, a challenge even, her statement as forthright and unequivocal as her gaze. The knot in my stomach tightens.

Carol’s unambiguous identity construction of me as a ‘knowing contributor’ to, rather than ‘learning observer’ of the day’s proceedings connects directly with the anxiety I’m feeling about managing different identities today. Although I have tried to position myself as a novice doctoral researcher who, in the spirit of relationally responsive collaboration, wants to research with and learn from the staff, my self-constructed neophyte status is often eschewed by managers and CSRs alike. Despite my best efforts I am frequently cast as the ‘expert’ or ‘outside voice’ from the University, with my conversations and opinions weighted accordingly. Committed to the democratising potential of action research, I hope my inclusion in this planning and team building day will continue to blur and challenge these positions. But there are other expectations. I sense today will also be a test of “how helpful the researcher is prepared to be in addressing “problems” within the organisation” (Johnson et al. 1999, p.1238).

The piles of transcripts and field notes sitting on my study floor are not specifically oriented toward organisational ‘problems’ and their ‘solutions.’ They (re)create dialogical processes and relationships, the warp and weft of life and work here at the call centre in all its emergent glory. While these processes are richly insightful, I am only just beginning to gain a sense of this moving feast, and I’m yet to feel relationally and intellectually “at home” here, as John Shotter (2002a) would say. Feeling I can only offer fragments of ‘information’ and certainly no ‘solutions,’ I’m struggling with how I can effectively contribute to this management planning day without jeopardising the integrity of always in process research that privileges relational interactions. Indeed, it is almost three years since that planning day as I write this paragraph into being. Without the confidence in relationship, and deeper

understanding and experience I now have, Carol pushing me into the position of ‘knowing contributor’ sparks the ‘pain and resistance’ other researchers have noted identity regulation entails (Alvesson and Willmott 2002). I smile weakly in response and say nothing.

Despite Carol’s candid direction, as the day progresses my initial fears prove unfounded, for ambiguity abounds. Waina kicks off the gathering introducing me and Paul (a facilitator from Frontline’s National office who will lead the whakawhaungatanga⁷⁹ workshop) as ‘visitors.’ Later in the morning during the whakawhaungatanga process I am able to introduce myself, talk about my family of origin, and admit that I’m feeling awkward. I explain that although I have spent considerable time with Sean, Waina, Mel and Tina (as signed up research participants), I have only a passing acquaintance with the remaining eight managers, and in this context feel somewhat of an ‘outsider’ amongst people who are all very familiar with one another. I try not to get tetchy with Sean at lunch time when he challenges that I am “choosing to be so,” although his perceptive comment hits home. (Indeed, on reading this claim, one of my supervisors comments that to cast myself as an outsider in this context “sounds like a copout in a functionalist corporate world.”) Nevertheless, unaware of the privilege it constructs at this moment, I restate the ‘outsider’ identity I feel most comfortable with today. All the while knowing that I can never really settle into this identity, or any other for that matter, because we’re constantly moving, reinventing our ‘selves’ together in each relationally responsive encounter.

On a day devoted to team building and management planning my sense of being an ‘outsider’ gives me the confidence to both contribute and observe as different aspects of managing the call centre arise during the day. I never feel comfortable because I’m dancing on moving fault lines again. Yet by staying aware of what we are doing in the process of doing it I am able to experience how all these categories (researcher, researched ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’) are constructions whose theoretically neat boundedness and continuity are rent asunder in the messy actuality of interactive socially situated practice (Turner 2000).

⁷⁹ A form of team building based on the Maori process of whakawhaungatanga. It involves a call to action based on a sense of family, and a coming together that includes a sharing of each individual’s family background.

Unsurprisingly, much of the day is steeped in the strategies and language of business ‘problems’ and ‘solutions.’ In a session devoted to what is called the “Fixing CSRs on-line problem,” concerns about “business intelligence” are raised. “What’s driving the clients to call us?” someone asks. Then ponders, “our business intelligence is lacking, we need a more detailed and global picture because our forecasts are not accurate.” In a similar vein, CSR difficulties with the new call closure (“you’re speaking with ... is there anything else I can help you with?”) are expressed as problems with introducing new “business standards.” To this discussion I am able to contribute some of the observations CSRs are making. With Karen’s words ringing in my ears, I explain how frustration out on the call centre floor is driven by the perception that extra work is being generated by the new closure, but that as yet no extra call time has been allocated to cover this.

“Goodness, you’re quite right there” one of the Service Managers comments, surprised. “We’re not tracking that change - that is not occurring at present. But you know we haven’t marketed the use of the new script properly to our CSRs either ...”

By mid afternoon my head is spinning and the ‘undaunted courage’ William Tierney (2000) suggests is required to reach across boundaries both external and within, is deserting me. I don’t remember Judi Marshall (1999) mentioning that the identity work required in living ‘life as inquiry,’ of being “continually in process, adjusting, seeing what emerges and bringing things into question” (p. 156-157) could be so exhausting. The Service Managers have split into several brainstorming groups dotted around different parts of the venue. Their task is to formulate different aspects of a “service delivery strategy” revolving around “Maximising Staff Potential.” With the larger forum not due to reconvene for twenty minutes, and in dire need of shedding both researcher and contributor identities for a while, I wander outside, grateful now for cold, clear air to breathe. I let the quiet, green country setting envelop, nurture and calm me. ‘Breathe’ I tell myself ... ‘breathe.’

“How are you doing Sue?” A voice behind me slowly breaks into my consciousness and registers on several levels. Like sociologist Pamela Cotterill (1993) I choose to use my full name in academic and professional work. Yet just like Pamela the ‘me’ I know best is not Susan, but Sue. She is, as Pam claims, “the ‘real’ person known to family and friends” (Cotterill and Letherby 1993, p.68). Sean’s addressing me thus in

this moment distances Susan and her present professional conundrums, and reconnects me to Sue, another sense of self, a more familiar embodied identity, and 'she' enables me to 'go on.' Just one word, "Sue," in this momentary relational encounter, foregrounds my "embodied embeddedness in a living flow of spontaneous but complex activity" (Shotter 1996, p.386), and shows the importance of an ever-present and emerging identity process. It is a background process of which we are often unaware, but one which nonetheless supports and sustains "all our ways of making sense in and of our lives" (ibid).

"I'm feeling very tired, and at this moment kinda constrained" I reply honestly. "They're all in there," I nod back toward the main buildings, "discussing employee empowerment and development issues and my research process is building relationships and gathering material that speaks directly to that. It's early days yet, but when I hear people talking about outcomes, targets, business standards and solutions, even though I know we are looking at the same things, I wonder if we are not talking past each other. The approach I'm taking here is rather like David Campbell's (2000). An organisational consultant, and he frames it as:"

[n]ot about solving problems once and for all, but about changing the way employees understand the construction of problems in the first place, and the way problems can be deconstructed and reconstructed through conversation ... (p.84).

I smile wearily before continuing. "It's about valuing this process and creating trust so there are always opportunities to ensure, using David Campbell's words again, "essential conversations can take place to develop the necessary strategies and structures for the future" (ibid). It's an ongoing process Sean, which sees living interaction as the mainstay of organisation. And it is in marked contrast to the ideal of corporate governance that seems so dominant here. In many ways Frontline tries to epitomise an ideal where, as Mark Considine and Jenny Lewis (2003) explain:

Public organizations are seen as corporations run by business managers, where people should respond to targets set by managers, and should be guided by a comprehensive performance-measurement regime that makes such targets the mainstay of the organization (Considine and Lewis 2003, p.133).

“You know” I sigh, “the numerics determine such a lot, and the oppressive time constraints ... but because my thinking around all this is so incomplete I’m worried that to offer anything much at the moment might pre-empt and potentially jeopardise the relational process and therefore the rest of the project.”

I glance up from my computer screen and wonder as I write these words into being, if they represent part of the ‘real’ conversation that Sean and I couldn’t have on that day.

Sean looks despondent. “Yeah,” he concedes “I can see where you’re coming from, but I’m really impatient for answers too.”

“Well I don’t know about answers,” I respond. “But I do know Waina put her finger on a lot of it only a few only minutes ago when she said “there’s no time available to take investment in staff development seriously, the training is hopeless, ISO supports the wrong stuff and the KPIs drive the wrong behaviours.” I think she’s right,” I venture, “because despite their perceived importance, the official performance indicators that drive most of your organisational processes are one dimensional. They cannot see, let alone account for a lot of what’s actually going on here. If you want to go back to the language of ‘problems,’ of course there are going to be some biggies, how can there not be given the complicated nature of public service you are tasked to carry out under this pseudo-business model.⁸⁰ I think Waina might agree with Anne Marie Berg’s (2001) comments that:

Undefined and unspecified goals and values of public sector services are also behind the never-ending problems with result indicators and performance measurements. Most public organizations are complex and often pursue contradictory goals, including non-tangible and non-economic goals. Indicators and measures are usually understood to be quantifiable measures, derived through the logic of economic rationality. *This means that parts of the activities are not reported and are thus less ‘valued’* (ibid, p54, my emphasis added).

“Yes” Sean nods, smiling “I expect Waina would agree wholeheartedly with that.”

⁸⁰ Michael Brereton and Michael Temple also use the term ‘pseudo-market’ which refers to the fashionable use of market-like terminology by public sector service providers where no real market relationship exists.

I smile too, remembering the conflict Waina expressed in a recent conversation. “I struggle” she told me ...

“I struggle with coming to work for the vision and values, these principles the Department has about helping New Zealanders find independence, providing them with resources to upskill them and empower them to do what they want to do. In principle I agree. But sometimes I feel it’s an impossible journey and we are so far away from it ... the challenge of getting results, or outcomes daily. There’s such a lot of pressure put on managers, on staff and the demand to have the outcomes on a daily basis has more focus on it than our investment in people. We don’t actually have the resources or the time for our client base or our staff. It is very rewarding to be able to help people, and I find job satisfaction in that. I have more eagerness to help my staff than I do actually helping our client base; that’s because they are real people in front of me. But we’re burning them out, that’s what we do all the time, I’m burning my staff out. I see it. I can see them all struggling ... The hard results, the stats results are not worth investing in ... I just think the Department should look at the way they are sending out their messages ... they’re trying to look after everyone else but they don’t even look after their own first.”

I drift back to present focus bringing some of Waina’s thoughts and frustrations with me. “You know what Sean,” I disturb the silence that has settled between us, “some of the most important activities not officially reported occur around what motivates people to work here, how they identify with what they are doing and how they go about managing their working lives in light of what matters to them. Do you remember an earlier conversation we had about CSR recruitment, when you told me why it was important to have a diverse range of people working in the centre?”

“Yeah, I think so” Sean replies, settling beneath the garish umbrella which looks even more incongruous in the late afternoon’s pallid light. “I told you what we’ve got now, these are just my terms ... we’ve got a bunch of oldies and they bring their wisdom and their nurturing and their ‘unfrazability’ under a crisis. We’ve got people here that provide us with that strength. They don’t necessarily produce high output, but in a way I don’t care too much because their other stuff is more valuable. We’ve got lots of people in the middle; these people are ... they’ve pretty much got their life working okay. They’ve got a life outside of the Department, that might include being in a

relationship, that might mean they're really sporty sort of people ... but they've got other stuff which gives them their social needs. We need the bulk of our staff like that because this is a very isolated sort of insular role. They come in and they sit down and they take calls, and then they go home. So they really need a whole dose of socialising outside here. Then we've got ... the 'flames' I guess in the team. That's predominantly really young people who move on fairly quickly ... They add the youth and the energy and the vibrancy I think to the Call Centre. They'll spontaneously stand up and yell out and tell a joke and do all that sort of thing. We haven't got enough of those unfortunately; particularly we haven't got enough men in the Call Centre, just my opinion, to provide us with the optimum balance.” His brow is furrowed in thought as he downs the last of the coffee he’s been swirling.

I sit awhile, reflecting on the eclectic bunch of people - research participants and many more besides - whom I have rubbed shoulders with over the past ethnographically intense year. While the range of work and life investments and commitments are as diverse as the people concerned, I can’t recall one who just ‘came in, sat down, took the calls and went home.’ I take time to consider my response.

“These categorisations of yours, the ‘oldies,’ the ‘flames,’ and ‘those in the middle,’ seem to allude to life-stage based social identities.” Sean’s gaze is curious and direct. “Dan Karreman and Mats Alvesson (2004) maintain “a social identity points at an affiliation with a social group. It confirms the affiliation, and also charges the affiliation with emotional significance and personal meaning” (p.154). While you may value people because they bring a range of important life-stage characteristics and motivations to their work, many other identities, personal, social and organisational inflect day-to-day work here in complex, ongoing and ever emerging ways. In particular, I’ve noticed that the most important personal meaning, the one that seems to carry the most emotional significance and generate the most energy for CSRs and managers alike, is the motivation to help people. Yet obtusely, instead of nurturing and developing this enthusiasm, the organisation’s ‘corporate driven’ protocols and practices seem hell bent on thwarting it at almost every turn.” Sean nods and sighs deeply.

“There are no simple answers” I continue, “but perhaps more holistic ways of looking and more time spent really listening would reveal valuable clues. Helene, you know Helene?” I prompt ...

Sean looks puzzled for a moment. “You mean the Quality Coach, the one who’s our acting Service Manager on Saturdays?” he queries.

“Yep, that’s her” I reply. “Been here nearly four years, and I reckon you be hard pressed to find a more conscientious and knowledgeable employee.”

He nods in agreement. “I believe she’s part of our junior management development programme.”

“That’s right. She is. Well Helene summed a lot of it up very succinctly for me the other day when she told me ...”

“You know Susan if they looked after their staff, they’d have them here for years and years because this is such a neat business. You know we are helping our clients, but they need people who are genuinely - who’ve got that customer service focus. ‘Cause I love this job I really do but most days you feel like you just want to leave, and there are a lot of people out there on the phones that feel the same way. I’m such a big person on customer service, just giving the best customer service you can. But when you’ve got ... like you have to do this within two minutes forty-five - I mean why? How? I had an old age pensioner on the phone yesterday, said he’d waited ages to get through. I asked him for his customer number, but he didn’t have it to hand and went off to look for it. You can only hang on for such a short time. I was thinking ‘c’mon, c’mon, hurry up, my talk time is going to blow ... I’m going to have to cut you off...’ And I’m feeling dreadful because I’m owning it, I’m owning it through my stats. His wandering off is completely out of my control and cutting him off is a last resort because I want to give him good customer service. And of course he’s just going to ring back again and someone else will cop his irritation ...”

“You know Sean,” I break into Helene’s story “none of this angst, neither Helene’s at the constraints around doing her best, nor the caller’s at being cut off and having to

phone again, will show up in any MIS⁸¹ rating of her 'Quality of Service'. Perhaps that's why Helene goes on to say ...

"I'd certainly get rid of all that and just give your best customer service. You know that's why we've got such a bad name. We have clients that ring up - I had one today, a client who said to me, "you've been the best person I've spoken to in such a long time because you've offered me that customer service". Why aren't the rest doing that, why aren't the other CSR's doing it? Because they are so focused on their KPIs. That's what our performance is judged on, that's what our pay is based on, but personally I just don't see what the point is. What does that really achieve? I've heard it – heard the rubbish, being a Quality Coach you hear it on the phone. It's like that was rubbish, I would never speak to anybody in that way, but that rubbish came in under two minutes forty-five."

Sean looks even more downhearted, but unsurprised. Something about his demeanour tells me that although I'm colouring the picture in multidimensional hues, he's familiar with the contours of this canvas.

"I was at a National Call Centre meeting the other week" he muses, more to himself than to me. "One of the National managers pointed to the first of our guiding principles and then asked "which people do we put first?" We don't put our clients first, and we don't put our staff first" she said, "so which people do we put first ... what does it mean?"

"I guess it was a rhetorical question" I speculate sadly. "From what I've seen, the people who are trying to do it all, that is, to put the callers first, as well as attempt to meet their organisational targets and standards are caught betwixt and between the impossible demands these disparate roles require. While they may be using the language and practices of business, often quite creatively, at the same time they're drawing on the more traditional public sector ethos of helping people. To complicate matters further, this motivation is infused with personal identities that are constantly in process, interacting with each and every caller on the phones each and every day. As managers you are tasked to understand, supervise and control these elaborate

⁸¹ Management Information System

processes inside significant time restraints, and with a set of tools and measures that, however technologically sophisticated, will only take you so far. In many instances all this means is that you cannot see the wood for the trees.”

As I’ve been speaking Sean’s mood has lifted appreciably. “You know there is one person in this organisation at the moment who really knows what’s going on for our CSRs.”

I miss his point completely. “Yeah? Cool I’d really like to talk to them,” I respond eagerly.

Regarding my reaction jovially he smiles “That person is you Sue, it’s you.”

Another wave of sadness washes over me and the tiredness I’ve been holding at bay returns with a vengeance. I glance at my watch, preferring not to contemplate the ramifications of such responsibility at this late hour of the day, “They must have done their twenty minutes now, shall we see what they’ve come up with,” I fudge.

Back in the warmth, despite the lateness of the hour, the roundtable reconvenes with energy and enthusiasm. Observing the thoughtful interaction, I wonder if I am witnessing one of those “essential conversations” David Campbell (2000) mentions. An agreed upon task and structure, evident good humour, trust and reciprocity seem to facilitate the emergence of innovative ideas around how the managers might begin to go about maximising staff potential at the call centre. Modelling an inclusive process, everyone agrees there needs to be an overhaul of intra-departmental communication in order to create a more trusting atmosphere for information sharing. A fundamental re-prioritising of staff training and development is also considered necessary. There are few illusions in the group as to the enormity of the task, particularly in the current environment. All are adamant that National and Head Office buy-in is ‘the’ most critical factor for creating both the time and the resources needed to proceed. From this management roundtable, a statement resolving to do ‘the business of public service’ differently heads an ensuing report. It encapsulates a vital point made throughout this chapter, and seems an appropriate way to close this conversation.

We have decided to focus our efforts on Maximising Staff Potential.

We recognise that although the prospective gains are immense

the tangible measures of success are difficult to quantify,

however

the challenge is one which we feel is very worthwhile.

* * *

CHAPTER SEVEN: Reflexivity Stories

Amplifying Connections and 'Being More Human Together'

Beyond the crisp and the certain
And the recipes of one minute management and seven steps to somewhere
Beyond the longing to keep ambiguity and anxiety at bay
Lies the doubtful, the liminal, the vulnerable



Between the Worlds

The fumbling search to be authentic, not for greater productivity or power
But for something that might help us to be more human together
In a quest to reveal what lies between the worlds
Of the practitioner, the artist and the theorist

(Laura Brearley 2004)

Questions of Potential: Moving Beyond ‘Bums on Seats’

It seems appropriate to begin this conversation by considering a topic that arose at the dénouement of the previous chapter because it connects with important issues this chapter will explore. At the management planning day I was struck by the decision to focus on ‘maximising staff potential.’ The managers’ courage to tackle the complex parameters of this people process surprised me, as did their determination to do so in the difficult operational context prevailing at the time. Their project is ambitious, because it requires understanding and valuing people in a way that goes well beyond the narrow concept of ‘human resources,’ or regarding staff as mere ‘bums on seats.’ A good place to begin, as all the stories told so far show, is in relationally responsive dialogue that engages people as holistically as possible. However, this is no easy task. It means being prepared to invest ongoing time and energy in those ‘essential conversations’ which nurture trusting ever-moving relationships among all members of an organisation. It requires a fundamental recognition and implementation *in practice* that of the three organisational essentials, people, strategy and operations, people trump strategy and operations any day. “To put it simply and starkly, if you don’t get the people process right, you will never fulfil the potential of your business” (Bossidy and Charan 2002, p.141).

Unfortunately for the managers and staff at Frontline - as it is for many others in organisations both large and small - while visions about “putting people first” abound, doing so in practice is an altogether different matter. As Frontline’s managers recognise, the people process cannot be inscribed as an adjunct to organisational practices primarily focused elsewhere. Putting people first requires a radical and systemic rethink of what our organisations, indeed our societies, could be like (Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee 2002; Handy 1997; Lulic 1996; Rayman 2001; Reason and Goodwin 1999; Sennett 1998, 2003).

Yet the concept of ‘maximising peoples’ potential’ (Laura Brearley (2004) would call it ‘becoming more human together’) intrigues me. It taps into the heart of this research and highlights a raft of concerns with which I am grappling. Not the least of which is ‘how’ to do so when people are always ‘heterogeneously becoming’ (Chia and King 1998) communally in relationship with one another. As Robert Chia reminds:

[s]eemingly concrete things such as ‘individuals’ and their identities, ‘organizations’ and their attributes and ‘institutions’ and their cultures, are nothing more than temporarily stabilised event-clusters: momentary outcomes or effects of historical processes (Chia 2002, p.866).

Within this “process-metaphysical orientation” (ibid) the ‘people process’ is always-in-process. Moreover it is often permeated with ambiguity, anxiety and vulnerability; conditions Laura Brearley (2004) contends, we long to keep at bay.

Yet what potential might we realise if we are brave enough to embrace liminality, and to work with/in the everyday ambiguities, anxieties and vulnerabilities that becoming ‘more human together’ entails? The stories in this chapter reflexively posit some possibilities. But first, I begin with some questions the call centre managers’ determination to ‘maximise peoples’ potential’ initially evoked for me.

- ❖ How can we shift the prevailing organisational emphasis away from individuals because as Ken Gergen (2001) maintains, “the performance of an individual is only a manifestation of a broad relational network” (<http://proquest.umi.com>). We don’t live and work, manage and organise, or discover and develop potential on our own.
- ❖ If we focus on the relational premise, understanding that “all social realities – all knowledges of self and of other people and things – are viewed as interdependent or co-dependent constructions existing and known only in relation” (Hosking and Bouwen 2000, p.129) what might maximising peoples’ potential look/feel like within this moving interconnected multiplicity?
- ❖ What kinds of relationships could realise new (different, better, more inclusive) understandings and practices (potentials) for always-in-process people?
- ❖ Being attentive to how much we don’t know, how can we create ways of knowing (communities and processes) that help us to recognise our ‘selves,’ our immanent relational interconnectedness, and ‘go on’ with others in more mindful, holistic and integral ways?

In the complex, relational, and ever-emerging world of twenty-first century organisational life, how can we know indeed? Yet these questions open us to possibilities. In a paper considering reflexive inquiry in organisational research subtitled “Questions and Possibilities,” Ann Cunliffe (2003) also makes the point, as I and others have done throughout this project, that life (and research) is a process of becoming (p.991). If we consider maximising peoples’ potential not as an objective or a goal but as “an active, iterative process of co-creating a world through aware action” (Reason and Goodwin 1999, p.306) then questions about developing people’s potential raise all sorts of possibilities (at this point I’ll leave the word maximising behind, because in an ever moving process world there is arguably no ‘maximum,’ no end point to growth, learning and development). By acknowledging the ongoing constitutive nature of our lives, by examining and exploring our relationships with one another (as much as we can, given there is always so much we can’t and don’t know), by questioning our assumptions and practices, and by highlighting the situated and contextual nature of our ‘going on’ together without privileging one aspect over another, we raise possibilities for developing potential. That is, we raise expansive and inclusive possibilities for new ways of understanding each other, our knowledges, practices, and experiences.

Radical Reflexivity

In the two stories that follow I take up the challenges and possibilities offered by ‘co-creating a world through aware action’. My intention is to use these situated and partial narratives to tell of relational connections self-consciously highlighting the ongoing and multi-inflected process of becoming. I do so tentatively and speculatively, using a form of reflexivity called ‘radical’ (Pollner 1991).

From the root meaning ‘that which turns back’ (or takes account of itself) (Siegle 1986), reflexivity involves “immediate, dynamic and continuing self-awareness (Finlay and Gough 2003, p.ix). It is a theoretical concept and research practice that has many confusing and diverse meanings and uses (Alvesson and Skoldberg 2000; Chia 1996a; Finlay 2002; Holland 1999; Lynch 2000; May 1999). As Katie MacMillan’s poem eloquently asserts...

Reflexivity, like hypnotherapy, has various levels.

Some dabble near the surface,

dipping into reflective moments, flirting with the images evoked in the reflection, before

returning to the safety of the mundane.

Others attempt to confront the fear of the monster lurking in the abyss

by descending into the deeper realms of reflexivity. It is those who

confront the beast

who will truly know what is there, in the dark beyond...

(MacMillan, 1996 cited in Finlay 2002, p.227)

Radical reflexivity makes some headway in attempting to ‘confront the monster lurking in the abyss’ because it emphasises that any effort to make the world “seeable or sayable” is a construction and an ongoing accomplishment (Garfinkel 1967, p.32). “Intrinsic to radical reflexivity is an *unsettling*, i.e. an insecurity regarding the basic assumptions, discourse and practices used in describing reality” (Pollner 1991, p.370 original emphasis). Importantly, it disavows the subject/object distinction between the researcher and her context often maintained in a lot of academic work that nevertheless claims to be reflexive (and which on one level, ‘dabbling near the surface,’ it is) (Ellis and Bochner 2000; Turner 2000). Radical reflexivity takes ‘one step up’ (Pels 2000) and collapses this distinction “in order to tie the story back to the narrator and display the performative, projective relationship between the spokesperson and that which is spoken for” (ibid, p.17). Furthermore, it ties all research participants into an unfolding, intersubjective process of becoming.

From a radically reflexive perspective, reflexivity becomes an ontological issue because it unsettles any notions of the objectification of reality and knowledge and embraces a process of becoming. Radical-reflexivity turns the reflexive act upon ourselves to deconstruct our own constructions of realities, identities, and knowledge, and highlight the intersubjective and indexical nature of meaning (i.e. accounts are ongoing discursive social accomplishments taking place in shared, taken-for-granted interactions between people). Radically reflexive researchers explore how we as researchers and practitioners constitute meaning through our own taken-for-granted suppositions, actions and linguistic practices (Cunliffe 2003, p.989).

* * *

(1) Feeling our way together

Matalena has a lot to say about her working life, but she is feeling fragile. On top of her natural shyness and self-confessed lack of confidence, the way she's feeling makes talking with me even more of a challenge today. It probably doesn't help that I am missing a lot of her cues. (I know this because I have played the tape of our conversation over and over, hearing every audible but non-verbal clue to her tenuous being. Every sniff, every pause, and every sharp intake of breath as she struggles for control. Each nuance I missed at the time we talked now screams at me from the tape recorder, as retrospectively I hear the subtle, yet detailed lead up to when she begins to cry.)

Our interview conversation begins uneventfully enough though. Matalena, a twenty something Samoan/Tongan CSR, responds to my initial questions about her working life with ease, smiling happily as she describes the development of her young family.

"I've got three now" she asserts proudly, "a nine month old, a three year old and a five year old."

"Oh you have been busy!" I exclaim, and we laugh together.

"They're all boys, and that's it!" Still smiling, Matalena expresses certainty her family is complete.

"Oh really ... that's it?" I mirror her contented gaze. "I had three boys close together just like you, and then I went back some years later and had a little girl." It's my turn to be proud.

"Okay" she grins kindly, while shaking her head. "No, my sister's had a girl so that's my girl too."

"Yeah, that's always nice. Boys are great anyway."

"Yeah they are," she agrees.

In the warp and weft of our unfolding conversation, Matalena goes on to describe her large close-knit extended family. How she and her husband organise their childcare around parents, in-laws and other family members.

“I’ve got a lot of support. I get a lot of support from my family. My Dad’s a Pastor so my parents are available whenever I call them, and so are my husband’s parents so we can call upon them at any time to take care of the kids. My younger sister and brother too ‘cause they’re both at school, so they’re available during the holidays to look after my kids. I just need to ring. Really supportive.”

The love and respect she has for her family shines from her. I find it infectious and it warms me too. Yet when we move on to considering other important factors in her life I notice she seems to lose touch with this grounding as her composure begins to unravel. This begins when I ask her about her priorities and what work means to her at present.

“At the moment work’s meeting my financial needs” she responds, “and it’s kinda like a break from home. I actually enjoy dealing with clients, to a limit, but I enjoy the challenges the job brings. There’s downfalls, but I’ve learnt to pick myself up and just carry on.” As she is speaking Matalena lowers her head, averts my gaze and begins to glance nervously around the room.

“What do you mean by downfalls?” I probe, aware of her changing demeanour. The curiosity of my ‘organisational researcher’ self is piqued and I pick up on her verbal cue.

“Ah” she sighs, “downfalls in terms of opportunities that have been available and not being chosen for those opportunities.”

“So you’ve put your name forward for opportunities and haven’t been chosen?”

“Yep.” Her voice is soft and clipped. “I applied for one of the QC⁸² roles in the last intake, and I was turned down and they couldn’t give me a reason why.”

“Well that was my next question, were you given a reason?”

“No. No. I mean basically I got all sorts of reasons, different reasons, but not a straight answer. My Service Manager was away at the time so the person that spoke to me was an Acting Service Manager ... another CSR.” Matalena’s words become even quieter. She pauses, breathing deeply before continuing. “Then I actually went

⁸² Quality Coach

straight to the source, to the Service Manager who did the interviews, and she confirmed that they looked at a different group of people when they took that intake. That was all she could give me, that it was a management decision.”

“So you weren’t really satisfied with the reasons you were given?”

“No I wasn’t.” Her voice is almost inaudible now and I completely miss the sharp intake of breath through which she seems to be steeling herself against the feelings that are threatening to overwhelm her.

“Okay, fair enough” I reply, moving on. “So in terms of your priorities, what’s important to you at the moment?” My sharp and clumsy segue has little connection to the preceding conversation nor any awareness of the feelings it has elicited. Yet in being oblivious to Matalena’s struggles, I inadvertently offer her temporary respite.

“What’s important to me is family, and God” she responds assuredly, making eye contact again as she reconnects with that which sustains and grounds her. “God is a big part of my lifestyle. So I do put the Lord first, then I put my family, and then work.”

Her composure regained, our conversation rolls on through the hurly-burly of a typical day in her life. From the morning rush to get out the door, through the daily pressures and challenges of “stats and going that extra mile in giving clients as much service as you can,” to evenings preparing meals, playing sport, spending time with parents, and seeing to the needs of three boisterous boys. “It all depends on what we’re doing” she smiles indulgently at me, “my days change all the time.”

“I know it’s a dumb question asking about a ‘typical’ day,” I grin, rolling my eyes playfully in response to her comments. “But I have to get an anchor on it somehow!”

We laugh together as Matalena wistfully requests a touch of the ‘typical’ or the ‘routine’ in the face of an ever-moving interactive system that allows neither.

“Yeah, I wish too” I agree, reflecting on the Mad Hatter’s Tea parties that often characterise my working days. So we ‘go on’ together, Matalena and I, constructing and sharing identities and knowledge, conversationally creating meaning of each other and for each other until a tipping point occurs that will redefine our emerging

relationship yet again. We move toward this point during a discussion prompted when I ask what aspects of call centre work make it easier, and what aspects make it harder for her to manage her busy life.

“Oh this shift definitely makes my life easier”⁸³ she answers. “Before this shift came along my sick days were quite unreal because of my children. My young one had a hard time adjusting to me coming back to work and he was getting sick. And if he was sick, he was sick. I wasn’t coming to work. But with this new shift I’ve got the two days a week that he sees me. I can do everything in those two days, like go to school, pick things up and come Friday it’s like a new week for me. The only downfall is Saturday, because that’s a family day, it means sacrificing Saturday for those two days, but we’ve still got Sunday.”

“The people that work here make it easier too” she continues, “I actually like the way the managers run it here in terms of the relationships between staff and managers. I came from another job where the managers cut themselves off from their staff and didn’t really mingle and you couldn’t really talk to them on a one-to-one basis. I do find the managers here more approachable, so I like that bit. A lot of the managers here have children of their own so you don’t feel so guilty when you do have to ring in sick. In my old job they wanted us to put work before family and they came down hard on you, but I do find here they are lenient to an extent, which is fair enough.” She pauses and leans back in her chair, her brow furrowed ... “Okay,” she inhales deeply as though steadying herself ... “In terms of harder, I’d say it is harder now from when I first started to get a PA.”⁸⁴

“What does that mean?” I ask.

“It’s harder for me to get an increase in my income at the moment. Once you are at top pay here you’re meeting everything – which I’ve been doing – meeting everything they’re expecting from you. Well then they expect you to go beyond. They expect you to be doing projects, some outside of work, but lots of others going on during work time. I find it’s the same people doing these projects ... I suppose they put themselves out there ...” she speculates, her eyes heading downward again.

⁸³Matalena works a full time 40 hour week over four ten hour days – 8am until 6pm – Monday, Tuesday, Friday and Saturday. This means she has Wednesday and Thursday off mid week.

⁸⁴ Performance Appraisal.

A silence settles between us. We leave it be. In the stillness I become aware of how loud the tape sounds recording ‘silence.’ Eventually Matalena’s chin comes up a little...

“You see we’ve got all sorts of personalities out there,” she nods towards the closed door and the call centre floor beyond. “And for me personally, I don’t think I fit into the type of personality that puts themselves out there.” Her voice falters but she looks directly at me now. “I really think they should balance it out, because while people are doing these other projects we’re actually taking the calls. So we’re allowing them to do these projects, but they don’t look at it that way.”

“So you don’t feel recognised?”

“No. No. Not when it comes to our PA. I feel like saying would they rather us be doing these projects - some of them aren’t that big and you don’t need to be off the phone that much – or would they rather us be taking calls and assisting the call centre in making our service level. I don’t think they look at that at all.”

“Are you able to feedback concerns you have like this, Matalena?” How do the lines of communication work here?” I’d intended my second question to rephrase the first, but as soon as the words are out of my mouth I recognise I’m going in two directions at once. Matalena is on to it.

“Yeah there’s communication there ...” she pauses, looking sad ... “But for people who don’t have the ability to speak out like myself ... yeah ...” Her furrowed brow matches mine. She takes a long swig from her water bottle before continuing. Less tentative now, “I suppose that’s my downfall that I can’t speak out ... I suppose the first person that we should be going to is our Service Manager, but I don’t, for myself I don’t feel I can actually go to them.”

Puzzled by her contradictory comments, moved by her openness and honesty, and recognising she is wounded, I prompt gently “Can you tell me why?”

“Because I’m not confident for one, I mean I’m not confident in what I’m saying and the last time I went to my Service Manager it was a bit degrading really ...” She shudders and her voice fades. Welling tears slide from large brown eyes that fight valiantly to contain them.

Her distress is palpable. Surprised by how quickly her feelings have overwhelmed her, I respond spontaneously. Reaching across the small distance between us and clasping her hands, I try to reassure her. “What you’re saying here is important Matalena. Do you want me to turn the tape recorder off? I’m really happy to”

“Yep, please” she nods, visibly relaxing and allowing her tears free reign.

Emerging Interactively: How Else Can We Know?

Art Bochner and Janice Rushing (2002) ask that we reflect on who we are in our research conversations, and that we think about the ways in which participants narrate their lives for us as an audience (p.55). Yet this request asks us to retrospectively look for “something, already existing, but supposedly *hidden* behind appearances” (Shotter 1998, p.46 original emphasis). How can I know who I am (or who I was) outside of this unique, once-only, fleeting, momentary, and fragmentary relational encounter? How can I know Matalena and her life stories outside of the responsive context in which we are immersed, making sense of it together? The meaning, the story we are creating together is:

A “once-occurrent event of Being” as Bakhtin (1993, p.2) calls it, by means of which we express the unique nature of our inner lives to each other. And we understand such events from within the ongoing conduct of our practices, not referentially or representationally by stepping out of their flow to think ‘about’ them – but responsively, relationally, spontaneously, and practically from within their ongoing flow (Shotter and Katz 1999, p.155).

With this in mind let’s stay awhile longer with the papālagi⁸⁵ researcher and the Samoan/Tongan CSR. Two women both experiencing some difficulty, each trying to work with and understand the other. Women who are nonetheless building goodwill and trust by narrating and sharing aspects of their lives. Each perhaps an audience for the other, in the process of creating their own story together.

Somehow, the now silent tape recorder gives greater license to whoever we may be at this point in our story. Beyond its subtle confines, it feels as though we are able to explore our present dilemmas more easily (although I can only speak of and not for Matalena. We would each try to have it otherwise, but more about that later). Once

⁸⁵ This is the Samoan word for a ‘European’ or white skinned person.

the tape recorder is turned off and the tears have subsided she seems to breathe easier. I continue to reassure her, reiterating the value of her contribution, and emphasizing that one of the premises of this research is to provide an opportunity “for you to have a voice,” a possibility her eyes tell me she believes in. Slowly and quietly, a more detailed picture about ‘not being chosen for opportunities’ emerges.

As it transpires, Matalena was initially told she had been appointed to a Quality Coach (QC) position. She went home elated to share and celebrate her success with her extended family that evening. “Everyone was so proud of me” she sadly confides. On returning to work the next day she was told a review process was underway, and was subsequently informed by her Service Manager that she had not got a QC role this time around after all. Despite being told the outcome had nothing to do with her personally, that it was a “management decision,” she nevertheless takes it very personally indeed.

“I tried to get a reason, a straight answer, but all they could give me was that it was a management decision.” She looks pleadingly at me and her eyes fill with tears once more. “It’s so degrading. I feel like they’re fobbing me off. There *must* be something wrong with me to have been dropped like that.”

Unfortunately self-doubt and a further undermining of her tenuous confidence are not the worst of it. Feeling humiliated and embarrassed, and with no apparent reason that makes any sense to her, Matalena feels unable to explain the turn of events to her family. And so, in the two weeks or so preceding our conversation, this devout young woman has been, by omission, living an increasingly unbearable lie. Its effects are becoming toxic at work and at home.

Pain is a fact of organizational life ... The pain that accompanies events [like what happened to Matalena] isn’t itself toxic, rather it is how that pain is handled in the organization that determines whether its long term effects are positive or negative ...

Toxicity, the outcome of emotionally insensitive attitudes and actions of managers and of the practices of their companies doesn’t simply ruffle a few feathers. Rather it acts as a noxious substance, draining vitality from individuals and the entire organization ... Left unchecked, it will seep into the organization’s performance, right down to the bottom line. Despite the pervasiveness of emotional toxins in organizations and their negative

effects on people and on performance, no one will raise the subject since, as most of us have experienced first hand, the discussion of emotion and pain in work situations tends to be seen as “weak” or “soft,” leaving those who do see it – and help to resolve it – with their mouths shut and their heads down (Frost 2003, p.12/13).

I’ve never really been one for keeping my ‘mouth shut or my head down.’ As Matalena haltingly describes her untenable situation, I react viscerally to her pain.

We look at another, they smile or frown back at us, and we ‘go on’ with them one way or another as a result; if another cries out in pain we cannot but respond to them in some way or another – our bodies are affected (Shotter 1998, p.38).

“It has to be resolved. It’s affecting everything you do and it’s making you sick.” I state the obvious.

The emotional connection with another provides a direction for action. Shotter (1995) describes this as ‘feeling one’s way forward’ (p.127) in organizations. Connection with another often demands immediate action and interplay (Frost et al. 2000, p.32).

Without noticing it, I’ve moved from ‘organisational researcher’ to advocate. In hindsight (that is, on retrospective intellectual reflection), I realise this shift is easier for me because I’m an organisational ‘outsider.’ Yet at the time, immersed in a relational ‘landscape of possibilities’ (Shotter 2003), I’m not aware of this consideration either. Rather, in embodied relationship, Matalena and I ‘feel our way forward,’ making sense of our circumstances moment-by-moment as they unfold.

Her eyes fill with tears again. This time more from relief at sharing the situation and feeling listened to. But she shakes her head vigorously when I suggest approaching her Service Manager once more.

“Would you like me to talk to her and see if we can achieve some resolution?” I offer.

Her eyes answer my question before she speaks.

“Oh would you, oh yes please,” her voice is appreciative, yet she immediately looks startled when I get up to leave the room.

What ... Now ...?

“No time like the present,” I grin en route to the door.

I cannot find Lucy, her Service Manager, anywhere in the call centre. But while looking for her I catch sight of Sean at his desk, and decide going further up the hierarchy may not be a bad thing. As it turns out, he is aware of some of the problems with communicating decisions about the last intake of Quality Coaches.

“It was a systems change that I instigated” he tells me, “but unfortunately some of the Service Managers informed CSRs of decisions when they were still pending due to that change. That Matalena was unsuccessful this round is no reflection on her as a person or on her capabilities.”

He looks shocked when I tell him the profound effect the ‘systems change,’ and the way it was communicated, is having on Matalena, and agrees it needs fixing as soon as possible. (A few hours later I will engage in the self-conscious, retrospective reflexivity Art Bochner (2002) advocates, and reflect on my shifting identities, feelings and subject positions. I will ‘see’ how as an ‘organisational researcher’ I compromised participant confidentiality in this conversation with Sean. I’ll take comfort in that I’d asked Matalena’s permission to speak openly about her struggles before approaching her managers. But I will ask myself, ‘what if this situation had gone pear-shaped? What affect may that have had on staff perceptions of my ‘researcher integrity’ for the remainder of my time at Frontline?’ And I will be very grateful it didn’t, thanks to the honesty and goodwill of the people involved.)

I find Matalena back at her workstation, head down busy taking calls. It’s her turn to look shocked when I tell her Sean wants to meet with her today.

“Not up the front” she insists, “down the back.” She confides she’s worried about crying, and understandably doesn’t want to be in full view of most of the call centre in Sean’s open plan area. “Oh and after lunch, please, so I’ve got time to work myself up to it?”

I ‘go between’ some more (hmmm ... yet another emerging subject position).

Our meeting takes place as Matalena requested, mid-afternoon in one of the training rooms at the rear of the centre. In the course of an hour long conversation, Sean will talk Matalena through the processes by which management decisions were made. He will admit “we stuffed up,” own the mistake and apologise to her unreservedly. He will work hard to reassure her that her competency was never in question. Matalena will cry some more. But she will feel able to talk about many of the things that are bothering her, to ask the questions she needs to ask, and to seek clarification when she is unsure of the answers she receives. Every now and then she will glance at me, seemingly for reassurance and smile as though she finds my presence useful.

I will take an integral and multi-inflected part in the process too. In the course of the conversation I will have the opportunity to offer my perspectives as an ‘organisational consultant,’ breaking down the systems and communications difficulties into their constituent parts as I see them; as a ‘sociologist,’ addressing the cultural and organisational issues of ‘talking past each other’ (Metge and Kinloch 1978) in a workplace where it is very hard to get to know people holistically; and as Susan, the ‘new kid on the block,’ I will admit, “I am way out of my comfort zone here.” In honest conversation, tears and laughter, healing and resolution will begin.

Epilogue and Reprise

Four months later, as coincidence would have it, I am shadowing Matalena on the day of her next Performance Appraisal (PA). Around mid-afternoon I disappear to the bathroom unaware of what’s about to transpire. I emerge to see her beckoning me urgently from the back of the call centre. Curious, I follow her into one of the training rooms where Lucy her Service Manager is waiting. I am clearly part of the landscape at the Centre by now because Lucy (also a participant in this research) welcomes me, “giddy shadow,” without reservation. (After work I am surprised to learn from Matalena that she was unwilling to begin the PA process without my presence. Without this awareness and past the point of no return, I scribble in my field notes ‘had I known Matalena was about to go into a PA process I would have explicitly asked to sit in, and not assumed I could do so without either her or her Service Manager’s permission.’)

I sit alongside Matalena and, as in the meeting with Sean months earlier, notice that she glances at me periodically throughout the process, particularly when comments

begin to trouble her. However, this time I remain silent, trying to be an observer of the proceedings. I wait until after work, when we are at Matalena's home, to ask her "why didn't you say anything when Lucy made those assertions?"

Oh well ... You know me Susan," she replies with resignation, "I'm not one to put up a fight."

This attitude prevails in the face of a number of provocations. To begin with, her Service Manager euphemistically refers, on a number of occasions, to the previous episode around QC job notifications, as Matalena's "rough patch." For instance Lucy cheerfully asserts "considering you had a rough patch, you've done really well, and you've overcome some personal hurdles." All of which lays ownership and responsibility for earlier managerial and systems failures firmly on Matalena's shoulders once again. Further, Lucy claims that she has "gone out to bat, wrangling to get you into the latest intake of Quality Coaches." No mention is made of Matalena's ability for the role. In fact, to the contrary, Lucy makes several comments about Matalena's "reserved nature" reminding her she will "need to deal with some loud people." You will have to make yourself heard, you know" she cautions.

Throughout the PA Lucy urges Matalena to "get out of your comfort zone." Insisting, "You need to get out there and create the opportunities yourself. Raise your profile and push for things, make those opportunities happen. Get out there Matalena. This is your chance to shine."

I listen to Lucy's almost evangelical enthusiasm for Matalena to be enterprising and to take ownership and responsibility for 'creating the opportunities yourself,' and wonder if she is articulating a conception of the individual as 'entrepreneur of the self.' It's a conception that as Paul du Gay (1996) notes, "is firmly established at the heart of contemporary programmes of public sector reform" (p.157).

It is well established that wide ranging New Public Management reforms champion 'entrepreneurial governance' (Boston, Dalziel, and St John 1999; Clarke, Gewirtz, and McLaughlin 2000; Considine and Lewis 2003; Pollitt 2003; Stokes and Clegg 2002). It has also been suggested that "a defining feature of 'entrepreneurial governance' is the generalization of an 'enterprise form' to all forms of conduct ... [including] the conduct of individuals themselves" (du Gay 2000, p.64/65). This rationale casts

employees as “autonomous, calculating individuals in search of meaning and fulfilment looking to ‘add value’ to themselves” (du Gay 2000aa, p.70):

In keeping with the constitutive principles of enterprise as a rationality of government performance, management and related techniques [such as performance appraisals] function as forms of ‘responsibilization’ which are held to be both economically desirable and personally ‘empowering’ (du Gay 1996, p.157).

In her performance appraisal, Matalena is told to take responsibility for ‘making those opportunities happen.’ That this is ‘economically desirable’ is a moot point. It is hardly ‘personally empowering’ though, because Lucy’s framing allows little room for cultural diversity or individual difference. That Matalena ‘is reserved’ seems to be held against her. “Take team involvement just that little step further,” Lucy encourages, “push yourself onto them.” No mention is made of the ‘value she adds’ to Frontline with her Samoan language skills and the way she works extremely well with Pacifica people (callers and staff alike), nor is any holistic appreciation given to her life-stage situation and values. On one occasion Lucy recommends, “You show us you have managerial qualities and want to develop leadership skills.” She asks, “Have you thought about attending “Baby Bosses?” (The colloquial name for an in-house leadership development programme run by several managers for a couple of hours on a semi-regular basis after-hours in the evenings). This possibility also came up in the conversation with Sean months earlier. Then as now, Matalena quietly but firmly explains how the evening sessions don’t work for her at present because she works full time and has young family responsibilities that she is neither willing, nor able, to compromise. Following this assertion the subject is abruptly dropped.

“I think some of her comments were really unfair,” Matalena complains to me later.

Seated at the family dining table, I fiddle with my tea cup and watch her attack the chicken she’s preparing for dinner. She slices through wings and thighs with exaggerated gusto.

“But I did appreciate her going to bat for me to get the QC’s job.” She looks up from the task at hand and makes eye contact. “They need to do more of that, they need to encourage and develop staff more like that. You know, it’s like with the Baby Bosses, it was well, if you can’t attend that, then that’s the end of it. There was no ‘yes

Matalena I understand family commitments, let's see how we can work with that to enable you to develop the leadership skills we value so much.” There is no sarcasm in her voice, only sadness. “There's no reason why I couldn't do a Baby Bosses programme if it was scheduled during the day, and by doing that they'd be walking the talk, they'd be making leadership training and development available to all the staff who might like to participate.”

I can't help but agree. Her sadness is creeping towards me.

“She kept going on at me that being reserved wasn't okay.” The now dismembered chicken is thrown into the oven, its banging door emphasising Matalena's last point. “I mean, it's like I'm supposed to become one of the louder, noisier ones.” She screws up her face, swings her youngest toddler to her hip and sighs, “I feel like it's not okay to be me.”

Her unhappiness envelops me. ‘If only you could have said some of these things at the time’ I muse silently, smiling weakly at her and wishing I was someplace else.

I feel worn out and somehow complicit that another opportunity for developing organisational understanding and relational selves has gone unrealised. Matalena's sadness enfolds the moment, punctuating the end of a sometimes frustrating day.

* * *

Possibility and Openness, Particularity and Closure - Reflexively Living in the Moment

Matalena's story as written here is, of course, an on-going story about a story. It begins with the knowledge we created and used in our relational research conversations and interactions. It moves via the preceding narrative, crafted and shaped from the 'empirical data' (for want of a better description) generated in that process. The story continues in engagement with the narrative, moving "above and beyond its referential content, in dialogue with an audience" (Langellier 2003, p.449). These iterations of emerging knowledge (rather than any objective 'truth') do not mirror a world that already exists waiting to be discovered, but emerge from an open and infinitely complex 'landscape of possibilities' (Shotter 2003) via a process British philosopher Hilary Lawson (2001) calls closure. He maintains:

Openness ... is infinitely dense with possibility, but it is not differentiated. It is closure that provides particularity and differentiation. It is through closure that we are able to identify things, understand our circumstances and intervene to a purpose (p.4).

[T]here is no practical limitation on the ways in which openness can be closed. All of the variety and detail of the world is provided through closure and in the realisation of things [in this case, stories] the unlimited character of openness is obscured, hidden behind a seemingly solid wall of known orderliness ... What we take to be reality is thus a complex web of closures we have come to use in order to make our way about in the world, and as we become accustomed to them and rely on them so the original possibilities held within openness fade from view (p.6).

In some ways Matalena's story provides orderliness. It is a form of closure and this is why we need to be careful. Such orderly prose can delude us into thinking it is "the one true story" (Ellis 2004, p.203), when in fact it is one interpretation of a multiply inflected relational encounter. The relationship between our interaction in situ and this narrative account of it "is the outcome of interpretive and representational work which arguably renders it no more than a plausible fiction" (Fox 1995, p.10). In its reflexive iterations the story crafts a way of looking at how we create our worlds through aware action and shows "we are inventors not representers of reality" (Cunliffe 2003, p.988).

Inventively, in the relationally responsive process of ‘going on’ together, Matalena and I constructed some practical knowing. Yiannis Gabriel (2002) calls it “actionable knowledge” - knowledge that has validity based on its usefulness rather than any “intrinsic properties or claims to truth” (p.136). The knowing⁸⁶ we created proved useful in its first iteration. It helped to alleviate a difficult life and work situation for Matalena, and it provided a modicum of organisational learning. Over time it proved less useful, because it didn’t change the relevant organisational or individual behaviours to any great extent.

Regardless of its individual or organisational usefulness it is the creative conversational emergence of this knowing – the important ‘how’ of sense making rather than the ‘what’ sense made, that interests me here. In the course of our research encounters and conversations, Matalena and I drew each other’s attention to “those aspects of our activities in the present moment that mattered and that made a difference in our lives” (Shotter 2002a, p.292). We began talking about her work and family life because as a researcher that mattered to me. We soon moved on to the difficulties she was experiencing at work and at home because that mattered (and was making an unpleasant difference) to her. In this distinct “once-occurrent event of being” (as Mikhail Bakhtin would say (1993, p.2)) Matalena’s pain became a catalyst for synergy. It was a call to relationship, as Peter Frost and his colleagues assert. “Expressed pain is an invitation to connect. Expressed compassion is a response that affirms the human connection” (Frost et al. 2000, p.35). With/in connection, with/in embodied dialogical interaction Matalena and I created an emerging “responsive order” (Gendlin 1997), with new knowing and new relations that mattered to both of us. Circling back to where we began, our emerging ‘story’ draws attention to how those “aspects of our activities in the present moment that matter and that make a difference in our lives” (Shotter 2002a, p.292) are lived.

Understanding this spontaneously responsive, living, bodily activity in situ - how our lives are lived in the moment - is very different from how as researchers and academics we typically think and talk about encounters, ‘after the event ...’ (ibid, p.290). For example, some time after the days spent with Matalena at work and at home, I began to wonder about the “problematics of otherness” (Hantzis cited in Langellier 2003, p.460). To wonder if and how differences between Matalena and I

⁸⁶ I prefer to use the verb ‘knowing’ again here because it signals movement.

may have affected our ‘going on’ together. What about my ‘papālaginess’ and Matalena’s ‘Samoan Tonganess;’ our ages, forty-something and twenty-something; our organizational positioning, ‘outsider’ vs. ‘insider;’ and our occupational status, university researcher vs. CSR? Did these (and other dimensions I’ve not thought of) affect our ways of relating to each other?

I can speculate that my university researcher and ‘outsider’ status, coupled with the relationship emerging from our initial research conversations, were factors that influenced Matalena’s ability to speak with me in a way she claimed she could not with her managers. Maybe some of these things also made it easier for me to speak for Matalena when setting up the meeting with Sean. What’s more, although I did not speak for her in that meeting, my active participation had some bearing on its useful outcomes. Perhaps, given this precedent, Matalena expected I would take a similar position in her PA? She certainly admitted she was reluctant to undertake the PA without my presence. Did my lack of active participation in this process temper her ability to speak for herself, as competently as she did with Sean? I don’t know, and without talking these things over with Matalena in another ‘present relational moment’ I can’t know. Most importantly, in the absence of further interaction, my *ex post facto* speculation doesn’t matter. It is, as John Shotter (2002a) maintains both after the fact and beside the point. Such speculation is ...

after the fact because in taking the modernist stance of an external observer, we divert our attention away from the fleeting complexity of those moments of responsive adjustment within which we discover, in the present, how to tailor our actions in the course of their performance to their surrounding circumstances. [It is] beside the point because in so hiding the unfolding relation of our performances to their surroundings, we then turn our attention in the wrong direction: we inquire into supposed occurrences inside the heads of individuals rather than attending to events actually occurring between them (p.300).

In embodied dialogical relationship, Matalena and I ‘allowed ourselves to be responsive to the others and the othernesses around us’ (ibid, p.305). We ‘went on’ making sense with/in what mattered and made a difference to us both in those fleeting present moments we shared. That is the crucial point.

* * *

(2) Embodied Reflexivity: Feeling There's No Way To Go On Together

Sometimes the challenge of 'being responsive to others and the othernesses around us' can be overwhelming.

“Oh no” Eric spins on his heels. “We’re not going out there, not with all those damned social workers.”

I glance out onto the smokers’ patio, across of a sea of unfamiliar faces, before hightailing it after Eric who has already disappeared back through the café portico. Wiry and sprightly he moves with a speed that belies his fifty plus years of heavy smoking and sedentary living.

“Problem?” I query, catching up with him on the stairs.

“Damned right! I’m not spending any of my spare time off the phones with that lot of children who think they know it all.” Eric bristles. His irritability is as sharp and uncompromising as the noon day sun that blasts through the external door we’ve reached at speed. I reach for my sunglasses as Eric, advancing towards the outdoor seating, continues to seethe.

“They’re children - the lot of them. And there they are trying to tell people how to raise their own children ... you know I’ve given my kids a good few clouts in their time, and it’s done them no harm ... Biffed my son good and proper more than a few times I can tell you. It was for his own good, no big deal, showed him who was boss. Did no harm at all ... He looks up, drawing deeply on a newly lit cigarette and faces me for the first time since beginning this tirade. “Dammed PC⁸⁷ social workers, people should be allowed to do that stuff eh!?”

More than a statement of his position, Eric’s assertion is also an explicit challenge to me.

⁸⁷ Politically Correct

Two or three things I know for sure, and one of them is that
personal narrative is liminal.

A limen is a threshold, a border, a margin, a transitional space,
a site of negotiation and struggle

(Langellier 2003, p.459).

Eric's confrontational demeanour pushes me to a threshold. Waves of emotion surge through me as I face the swirling liminality of 'public' and 'private' selves. I struggle, feeling I'm about to suffocate and drown.

As a direct and vivid subjective experience, emotions also incite reflections about questions like 'Who am I?', or 'Who am I to have this emotion now?' In other words, identity concerns are raised and the emotional experience is evaluated with respect to aspects of identity that are salient in the situation under scrutiny (Jansz and Timmers 2002, p.83).

Who am I ... ? Who am I now ... ?

I am an outraged parent, with strong views about corporal punishment.

Who am I ... ? Who am I now ... ?

I am a researcher, a representative of my university working in my chosen profession.

Who am I ... ? Who am I now ... ?

I am an abused child, beaten many times 'for my own good' by a parent equally determined to show me 'who was boss.'

Who am I ... ? Who am I now ... ?

I am unsafe.

Sunglasses are my only protection, masking a dangerous embodied silence and the eyes that will give me away.

The Eyes ("I's") Have It: Embodying the Sounds of Silence

My silence is vociferous, pounding, pressing, my entire body feels
the weight of its presence

Breathe, breathe ... focus. Let the words ... provocative, piercing, painful...

Let them go

Let them wash over, run off ... dissociate ... ignore

Barbed

They land, stick, settle

In mute interiority I argue back precariously

Silence is complicity

Betrayal

Eric does not release me from his gaze. With measured deliberation he inhales more nicotine, and then slowly blows its by-products in my direction. Like a noxious mushroom cloud the silence billows and grows the longer I do not reply. Locked in its grasp, we both 'know' I don't agree with him. But only I know how vehemently, and at this moment, how powerlessly. Wracked by vulnerabilities and wounds long suppressed I do not trust myself enough to reply. First I must contend with the bodily knowledge and experience his comments have evoked.

What might we sense and know if we listen to the body? ... We may sense knowledges of experiences long forgotten by the mind but always known by the body before language was privileged as the sole representer of knowledge and experience. And we may sense present experience and bodily knowledge that refuses and surpasses language (Casey 2000, p.66).

Girl child

Cowers

Bamboo

Showers

Pain.

Welts gleam

Words scream

Girl Child

Keens

Pain.

Eric has rattled me. His words raise unexpected memories and identities. In our unfolding interaction, these deep-seated and embodied aspects of me do indeed ‘refuse and surpass language.’ Jeroen Jansz and Monique Timmers (2002) would say I’m experiencing ‘emotional dissonance.’ This is “a feeling of unease that occurs when an emotion is evaluated as dissonant with respect to one’s identity concerns” (P.84). On one hand, the anger, sadness and dismay I’m feeling are ‘dissonant’ because they do not accord with my professional identity as an organisational researcher (arguably, you are not supposed to get really unnerved by and annoyed with research participants). However, there is a lot more going on here, because these feelings are completely consonant with my identities as a parent, and as an abused child. In the moment, in my body, these identities cannot be separated, hence the distress I feel, and my recourse to silence. I will my silence to preserve my ‘professional’ persona. Yet beyond will, my embodied silence screams “the sound and fury of human existence” (O’Shea 2003, p.315) conveying my fear, unhappiness and disgust.

Eric remains confrontational, his silence as resolute as my own. For an extended moment there is no talk – no dialogue – instead our deeply held differences emerge with/in the ‘existential immediacy of our bodily existence’ (Csordas 1994, p.10). Or put another way, although we are both literally ‘beyond words,’ knowledges and

feelings are still being created and communicated. Our bodies are interdependently active participants in the construction of our identities, our social knowing and our social worlds (Prichard 2000).

Interruption and Respite

“Hey Eric, how’s that new business of yours coming along?” Jason flops down between us completely unaware of the tension. His cheerful intervention offers both Eric and me face-saving respite. Always keen to regale anyone who shows an interest in his dreams and schemes, Eric is quickly off on another tangent, while I retreat to my clipboard, head down, scrawling out ‘field notes and feelings’ with welcome relief.

Part of me wants to stay mad at Eric all afternoon. Part of me recognises how pointless that would be. To stay mad, would be as Debra Meyerson (2000) tells it, to:

Struggle on in a no-win battle about who is right and why they just ‘don’t get it’. [It would be to] ignore the other’s feelings and struggle to manage my own ... No one gets beyond the surface feelings of anger and resentment, and everyone thinks of themselves as right and righteous. We continue to talk past each other and the gulf widens (p.168).

Debra goes on to ask, “what if emotions were honoured? What if people regularly attended to and engaged others’ feelings” (ibid). She concedes that doing so, in organisations, and anywhere else for that matter, is the exception, rather than the norm. Despite the potential for legitimating and valuing honest human connection, enabling organisations and communities to holistically care for and develop their members, “for many people these [emotional] experiences feel fleeting and inappropriate to the public domain of work” (p.181). Besides, ‘honest human connection’ requires a lot of risky relational work.

Back in the call centre, seated within a hair’s breadth of each other, hooked up to headsets so we can field and record problems so much larger than ours, Eric and I find it as hard to attend to our own feelings, as we do to engage with each other’s. Instead, for the rest of the afternoon we improvise, by carefully crafting a workable relationship that allows us to ‘go on’ together. Neither superficial nor deep, it’s an artful world of personas – the ‘diligent CSR’, the ‘interested researcher’, the ‘caring

grandfather', the 'interested researcher', the 'jovial bloke', the 'increasingly contrived interested researcher.' These selves enable a way of "being-in-relation-to-others/self/surrounding" (Shotter and Cunliffe 2003, p.21) in this moment, as *we* negotiate who *we are* in responsive dialogue. Much more than impression management (Bottom et al. 2002), these selves simultaneously acknowledge the gulf between us, and on one level allow us to bridge it almost as wordlessly as we created it.

After/Work

Fine-tune my attitude all afternoon

Weary and wary I work on my self

Abbreviated presence fashioned with care

Through distance and dialogue rapprochement relayed

Although of the 'hiccup,' no mention made

Drive him home a transition of sorts

Walls adorned with grandchildren's smiles

Past times and pleasures recounted with pride

Setbacks and heartaches dished up on the side

Stories are gathered selves are contrived

A smile, a wave, an exhausted goodbye

* * *

Coming Back Around: Reflexive Embodiment, Moving Circles and Undivided Selves

Reflexive scholarship comes back around, points to itself in order to say this is where it stands, at least at this moment, with these qualifiers and with these questions (Pelias 2004, p.12).

“Who am I, who am I now?” my poem asks. It’s a puzzle that fascinates me, and one I tried to explore with staff at Frontline. One of the questions I asked participants early on in the process during our interview conversations was, “are you the same person at work as you are outside of work”? Sometimes I came at it from a different direction by asking, “do you bring the whole person to work?” The question was oriented toward understanding people’s identities; to investigating Paul Eakin’s notion of “many stories of self to tell and more than one self to tell them (Eakin 1999, p.xi). I was also looking for connections - an indication of Thomas Merton’s ‘hidden wholeness’ (McDonnell 1989) in our everyday lives. Many responded by talking about what they do. Here’s Martin:

“I say work is completely separate or different from the rest of my life because I do things here which I don’t do anywhere else because the call centre environment is so different, so unique. Work for me is food on the table, just a sort of uniquely different part of my life that’s not connected to the rest.”

Others, like Nikki, brought in some consideration of who they are:

“I bring the whole person to work. I mean I talk really professional just like they want, but you’ll get the odd call where the customer just wants to hear you and what you think. You know I even give my own personal life experiences. I’ll say “how about I suggest you go and do this, personally I’ve done it myself, it works, try it see how you go.” And they go “Wow – thanks.” I just want to be one Nikki and not two. In regards to working with the other CSRs and socialising with them, I’m that same person as well. The friends that I hang out with they know me and they know that I’m not this Nikki at home and this Nikki at work. I’m the same person, there’s only me to deal with and everyone knows who she is.”

Much further into the research process I recognise that these questions and the responses are attempts to talk *about* our selves as though we are looking in from the outside. Just as Nikki demonstrates when she talks *about* herself in the third person. Rather than explorations *with/in* living encounters these reflections *about* identity and connection are, in some respects, again ‘after the fact and beside the point’ (Shotter 2002a). Framed thus, they divert our attention away from the “fleeting complexity of those moments of responsive adjustment, within which we discover, in the present,” (ibid, p.300) who we are now. For who we are now, and how we might go on is always emerging; made and remade moment-by-moment in relational interactions between our selves, others’ selves, and our current surroundings.

Yet in other respects Martin’s and Nikki’s replies are instructive. For while the ‘aboutness’ of their answers (the substantive ‘what’ of knowing), focuses attention away from the ‘withinness’ of the process (the relational ‘how’ of knowing); the process remains the same. Not surprisingly their comments were congruent with my questions, which were based on assumptions about selves as separate entities, with defining characteristics (the ‘same person’; the ‘whole person’). My ‘organisational researcher’ self, located in a relatively knowledgeable (powerful?) position, (unwittingly) presented preconceived assumptions about (‘whole’) selves to Martin and Nikki, and they responded accordingly. Our interaction not only “*reconstructed* the identities and relations of the participants just as much as they “found out” about them” (Hosking 2000, p.154 original emphasis), the ensuing conversations also revealed how the research “assumptions you start with set limits on how you can ‘go on’ – not ‘anything goes’” (Hosking and Bass 2001, p.351).

“Are you the same person at work? ... Do you bring the whole person to work? ...”

“Yeah, I bring the whole person to work ... I just want to be one Nikki and not two ... I’m the same person, there’s only me to deal with and everyone knows who she is.”

Relational processes make who a person is (identity or “self”) in relation to some other, and that making is going on all the time. So as you act, and some other coordinates with your action, this is making who you are in relationship – and of course – who or what they are in relationship. In this sense self and other are joined – not separate objects. It’s more like a

polyphonic musical performance – “people and worlds” constantly are in the making (Hosking and Bass 2001, p.354).

My ‘organisational researcher’s’ attempt to construct and talk about distant ‘entitative’ (Hosking 1995) selves still occurred through “*relational processes as the medium within which social realities – including what it is to be human and what it is to be ‘this particular human’ [at this particular moment] – are located*” (van der Haar and Hosking 2004, p.1021, original emphasis).

As identity emerges from our interaction with others, and we can never fully control these interactions, our identity is never fully under our control. Such a view challenges the idea that we are omniscient authors of our own lives, suggesting instead that we have multi-authored selves (Holman, Gold, and Thorpe 2003, p.59).

“Who am I, who am I now?” In relationship with Matalena and Eric (and many others besides) I learned the answer is always: it depends, and not only on me.

Each day I arrive at the call centre comfortably ensconced in my professional capacity as an ‘organisational researcher.’ As I walk through the doors others recognise this identity. That is, they recognise this claim I make about myself. They do so, not because I can autonomously put on the identity as I would a new pair of shoes or because it is a defining characteristic of who I am as a person at this particular time. Rather, they do so because in my day-to-day interactions with Frontline’s CSRs and managers, *we* routinely and relationally re-create and maintain this particular way of ‘becoming-with-in-the-world’ in this context. However, the position is only, and always, a beginning ... just one identity in an always moving relational process. For not only am I multi-authored, but I am also multi-connected, to other contexts and to other selves (including those from my past).

While ever moving relational processes preclude the formation of ‘whole people’ (as complete and separate entities), my encounter with Eric proves there is a hidden wholeness to our many selves. A complex and “cumulative interpenetration” (Chia and King 1998) manifesting in an unpredictable flux of emergent multiplicities that creatively influences our continuous process of going on together.

Each novel advance into the future implicates the present and the past, which both enables and constrains the possibilities for the future. In this manner the past is immanent in the present, which is itself immanent in the future, so much so that each novel moment embodies both what has gone past, and what is to come. This realization of the inextricable one-in-otherness or *cumulative interpenetration* of things is what distinguishes the processual approach to understanding the creative structuring of the new (Chia and King 1998, p.466 original emphasis).

Eric's challenge to me evoked an immanent past that shaped not only that moment, but also our future interactions for the remainder of the day.

Even further into the future it continues to shape this textual retelling. Yet in working this iteration beyond the spontaneous and immediate discomfort of that day in the call centre, my story, my poems, and my dialogue with the academic literatures affirms another connection.

Inevitably, living a childhood and writing about it as an adult are fundamentally different experiences, but the value of autobiography is that it creates forms of embodied knowledge in which the (adult) self and the (child) other can rediscover and reaffirm their connectedness (Behar 1996, p.135).

I rediscovered and continue to reaffirm that connectedness – that 'hidden wholeness' in my body.

Bodies, Deborah Kerfoot (2000) maintains "are the 'raw material' of organization" (p.234). They are also, as Matalena's tears and Eric's challenge revealed, the 'raw material' of ever-unfolding research experience. Yet both organizational and research practices try to "invisibilise the body behind [their] codes, whilst all the time making the body the focus of [their] will to regulation" (Holliday and Thompson 2001, p.122). One of the most prevalent and powerful forms of regulation is the separation of work (public) and life (private). The workplace, the research 'place'

becomes a public space, while one's life outside of work [and research] is constituted as private space; one's working body becomes a public body while one's body outside of work is a private body (ibid).

In reality, as the preceding stories show, in organisations and research, bodies will out. Despite the will to discipline otherwise, our various work and life selves are intimately and inextricably connected and embodied. Yet we continue to overlook our ‘hidden wholeness,’ our ‘one-in-otherness’ all too often, to the detriment of richer, more holistic and nuanced understandings of our selves, our organisations, and our research practices.

Circling back to the possibilities for developing peoples’ potential raised at the beginning of this chapter, it is my hope that the stories told here kindle further reflexive action. In contemplatively telling of the ever-moving, embodied and relational development of selves, the stories temporarily reconstruct and fix, here on the page, “the amazing ‘fractal fullness’ of the momentary events occurring between us: their inexhaustible richness of detail; their strange, mixed character; their only ‘once occurrent’ nature, and so on” (Shotter 1997, p.347). Working with/in the richness of human encounter the stories redirect attention away from individual ‘selves’ and remind us of the interconnected dynamic living systems and processes in which we co-create our ‘organized worlds’ (Chia 2002). In doing so they remind us of the everyday, every moment possibilities for developing deeper more holistic understandings of the relational processes and the communicative practices within which we make our selves and our worlds. That is, they signal mindful awareness and mindful practice; the capacity to notice.

The capacity to notice, to be more aware of aspects of our practices in our own performing of them will not allow us to control or predict their outcomes ahead of time, but it will help us to notice important details – often thought of as ‘trivialities’ – to do with refining them into better ones (Shotter 1997, p.356).

To do so takes time; a willingness to slow down and be more curious about and attentive to, the moving and integral extra-ordinariness of our everyday lives together.

Knowing/acting slowly, participatively, involves living with possibilities rather than certainty; including multiple voices – including voices without words; taking care of patterns, constructing forms of practice with other in mind (Hosking 2000, p.156).

It is my hope that in the storied (re)creation of our ‘fumbling search to be authentic’ (as Laura Brearley (2004) puts it), Matalena, Eric and I have raised expansive and inclusive possibilities for new ways of understanding each other, our knowledges, practices and experiences; new ways of developing relational potential and ‘becoming more human together’.

* * *

CHAPTER EIGHT: In Process

What happens if there is no conclusion?

What happens if the reader is left to decide
on the meaning of what they see or read?

(Peter Burrows 2001, p. 145 in *A Trinity of Dreamers, Researched, Researcher and 'Reader'*)

The uncertainties and imprecisions
of this deliberately foolhardy discourse
thus have their counterpart in the quavering of the voice
which is the mark of risks shared
in any honest exchange of ideas
and which, if it can still be heard,
however faintly,
through its written transcription,
seems to me...
to justify its publication.

(With poetic apologies to Pierre Bourdieu 1990, p.ix, "In Other Words: Essays Towards a Reflexive Sociology")

Crystalline Refractions: A Conversational Coda

“I guess they’ll expect a conclusion?” Sean’s gaze is as direct as ever.

“That would be conventional,” I reply with a grin.

“And when did you become that Sue?”

I ignore Sean’s raised eyebrows for the moment, and concentrate instead on absorbing the sights and sounds of a busy call centre, barely discernable amongst a panoply of riotously themed creativity. Frontline as I used to know it has disappeared. In its place a cheerful tableau fashioned by each team of CSRs creating their own ‘world.’ There’s *Spiderville*, replete with resident superhero and dangling webs. *Boogie Wonderland*, with jukebox, movie screen, and more LP covers than I’ve seen for years dotted about the workstations. *Sleepy Hollow* is as dark and impressionistic as any Tim Burton film set, and comes complete with its own ‘mayor,’ an imposingly cloaked Count Dracula. *Jungleland* boasts palm trees, tropical torches and a waterfall, albeit a cleverly crafted crepe paper variety. In *Toyland* there are hanging mobiles, balloons galore, enough cars and fire trucks to keep a preschooler amused for days, and more cuddly bears than even my daughter, an avid collector, could possibly cram into limited space. Finally, the *Fusionistic Galaxy* takes space into a new frontier via luminescent planets dangling over work areas, and lava lamps casting eerie images on foil space invaders dotted about everywhere. Inside each world, its CSR inhabitants are going about their ‘business,’ colourfully clad in varying degrees of themed ingenuity.

“Could say the same for this milieu,” my grin widens. “It’s hardly what you’d call conventional either.”

Sean laughs aloud. “Touché!”

“There certainly have been some changes since I began researching here four years ago.”

“Indeed there have, on so many levels. I think we can be very, very proud of what we’ve done here.

“So, overall the research has been useful?”

“Very useful, and continues to be.” Sean relaxes back in his chair as he too surveys the colourful scene. His desk is no longer at the front of the call centre, but now resides at the rear. Tucked unobtrusively in a quiet corner, he nonetheless can still see across his managerial domain, although his perspective is very different.

“Way back when you started here Sue, I think the key thing for me was we needed to do something different. Because what we were doing wasn’t working. I think when you scoped out the project I saw some opportunities in there for us. It was the right time, and the right place. I think the first real catalyst for me was our interview conversation and having the opportunity to talk about where I was at in terms of a much bigger picture. Not just work, or home, but all of it ... plans, perceptions, ambitions, and challenges.”

“Yes.” I nod. “That’s not something we often get an opportunity to do. Is it?”

“No. No, it’s not. And because the call centre is my responsibility I guess, and my colleagues are in similar positions in different parts of the country. So when we get together we usually deal with operational stuff, although on occasion with vision and leadership, and that type of thing. So you gave me a really good opportunity to look differently ... and perhaps to do something differently with staff. That was your initial challenge, spending a whole day in each of these people’s lives. I think I quite rightly said at the time that you knew a lot more about them, their jobs, and their lives, than pretty much anybody else in the call centre.”

Again, I am nodding in agreement. “I was able to look holistically and that was really important. More than just people’s working lives ... I worked, as you say, with/in a much bigger interconnected picture, and it gave a different set of insights.”

“Yes it did. That was key. And the other aspect that was crucial for me was how you did that. You were really listening to their lives during that short period of time. You weren’t excusing it, you weren’t rationalising it. You were just saying ... this is it.”

I smile. “I think part of that is down to who I am. People fascinate me, and I’m genuinely curious. Also in terms of listening, my Buddhist training has taught me to

cultivate an inner silence. It's an ability William Isaacs (1999), a Professor at MIT's Sloan School of Management, would call 'listening without resistance.'

We can learn to listen in a way that recognizes and then puts aside the resistances and reactions that we feel to what someone else is saying. This may be better put as "listen *while noticing* resistance (p.101, original emphasis).

"Remember Eric?" I frown momentarily.

"Indeed I do" Sean replies.

"William Isaacs also goes on to say that:"

Perhaps the simplest and most potent practice for listening is simply to be still. By being still in ourselves ... we can open up to a way of being present and listening that cuts through everything ... As we learn to lift ourselves out of the net of thought, the conclusions we jump to, the disturbances of our heart and resistances of our mind, this surface sea of reactions can calm down. We discover that there is another world of possibility for listening. We can listen *from silence* within ourselves (ibid, original emphasis).

"Yes." Sean concurs thoughtfully. "Because when I started reading it, when the chapters began to come through ... it was raw. I spent so much time rationalising these things away and making it all smooth, so that this centre looks good. I wasn't really listening to the staff. I wasn't actually looking and using my senses. I was using my brain to judge what those senses were giving me. So I think that realisation was probably just as important as the overarching higher level stuff."

Like so many participating in this research, the richness of Sean's self-reflections are proof of what can be learned when trusting relationships inspire confidence to reveal more, and conceal less.

"But don't forget" I remind, "that at that time you as a manager were tasked with making this place look good."

"Yeah definitely" he responds. "It was a franchise. We were ISO 9000 accredited and had lots of things that said we were all the same. We still are ISO accredited, but

a lot of it has been simplified. The standard has been reviewed, and we've just gone over to new one that is far more service oriented."

"That must make life a lot easier" I speculate, "because I remember the CSRs felt those ISO processes were pretty unwieldy in terms of getting things done."

"Yep. And a lot them have been, or are being, revamped and remodelled considerably. For example, I've been doing some development stuff with my colleagues around the country with the quality programme, and also getting into the head space of the training managers as well. I call it a three-legged stool. It's got timeliness as a leg, client satisfaction as a leg, and quality as the third leg. They all depend on each other. Because, as the research showed over and over again, we did have such a focus on timeliness. It was a core value ... time ... every second was precious. So what I'm suggesting now is, yes that's true, but other things are important as well, and they all need to be considered. It's complex, and we need to think about it in as complex a way as the system itself is complex. That was another thing that came through strongly in the research. That layer upon layer upon layer of complexity. How each person here, and all their family, and their entire home stuff, every single one of those is another layer on top of all this. We used to say leave your baggage at the door. You have to be professional. You know, we don't want to know those other problems."

"Yes Sean" my tone is pensive, "I know exactly what you mean."

"Of course you do ..." there's another understanding in his eyes. "How's David doing now?" he asks kindly.

"He's back in hospital at the moment, but early intervention this time, so fingers crossed." I cross my fingers and feel my shoulders straighten, my resolve for my son as strong as ever. "My situation as the primary support person for someone who suffers the unpredictable vagaries of chronic mental illness is a useful exemplar really. Isn't it?" I smile ruefully.

"Yes it is. And it hasn't stopped you doing this important work."

“No, David’s illness adds another thread to the warp and weft of my everyday emerging. It’s another layer woven in to a complex mix, just as you have noticed for yourself, and all your staff. All of us are continually in-process, adapting to ever-changing circumstances and priorities ... the curved balls can come at us from any direction, at any time. And I think this intricate and always moving tapestry proves Keith Hammonds (2004) point, that any quest for some sort of contrived ‘balance’ is “bunk.”

The truth is balance is bunk. It is an unattainable pipe dream, a vain artifice that offers mostly rhetorical solutions to problems of logistics and economics. The quest for balance between work and life, as we’ve come to think of it, isn’t just a losing proposition; it’s a hurtful destructive one (Hammonds 2004, p.68).

“We don’t live our lives in static categories, and the current penchant joining a couple together and calling them ‘worklife’ is just another artifice. We need to think differently, holistically. Our organisations need to recognise, and develop policies and practices for getting alongside our lives as we live them, with/in complex ever moving relationships and processes.”

“Yes.” Sean smiles, “and that’s what we are beginning to do now. The approach we’ve got is far more holistic, because we started doing a Susan, and really listening to people. So now we actually get into ... I suppose it’s a form of life coaching with the staff, and that’s at the Service Managers’ level, down to the CSRs. What’s happening is we are saying, “How can we support you through that?” What can we do to help you to show up for work?” I think around the time you started here we had maybe between 12 and 14% per annum sick leave. I had a look at the figures just before, and we’re currently the best in the country, running at around about 6% per annum, and 3 – 3.5 % for this week which is really cool.

“Wow that is really good. Because when I started this project sick leave was a huge issue. The centre was the worst in the country.”

Sean beams and looks justifiably proud.

“What about your turnover rates?” I ask. Have they been affected by some of these initiatives? How are they trending now?”

“There’s been a real revolution there in a way too. Because we looked at our recruitment and we asked, “have we employed people that have got such terrible home lives, that they’re not going to be at work, or be able to function at work?” So we looked at our whole recruitment strategy, and we developed a new model. As a result of that we now recruit more successfully.”

“How do you do that? How do you get some insight, at such an early stage, of potential employees’ bigger work and life picture?”

“It’s a complex process and we’re fine-tuning it constantly ... but all the time Sue, we’re looking at values ... values and beliefs and identity stuff. To put it in a nutshell ... we advertise a bit more cleverly. We use targeted advertising. We’ve tracked the last 12- 18 months worth of successful recruits and discovered where they found out about us. We’ve changed our wording; so we now invite people along to an information seminar. We have staff go along to these and talk to potential recruits about the job. That’s pretty honest.”

“So it’s a warts and all approach,” I chuckle.

“Yep. It is. We tell them “It’s boring, it’s tedious, you’ll hit a wall and some of you will make it and some of you won’t” ... we just tell them how it is really. What that does, is it turns about half of them off. They just go away. But those who apply then go through a detailed selection process. Firstly, we do phone testing to look at the more technical aspects. Their tone, their speech patterns, language, accent, those sorts of things. I mean, if they’re no good on the phone, we don’t want them. So that’s easy. Then they fill in a written application. We use that, and their CVs to short list. Academic background is important, because it gives us some understanding about how quickly they’ll pick up the complex technology stuff, and all the policy and procedures.”

“Then we get them to come into the centre. It’s all done in a process interactive way. There’ll be a group of them in a room, and there will be about three of our staff in there working with them. We’ll observe them, and make notes based on the observations ... “I saw Jim do this ... I heard Mary say this ...” That gives us an insight into their behaviours. We also have an interview.”

“In fact, we’ve just started a process now where we’re doing group interviews. We can have between three and six people at an interview. One of the things we’re finding is that the candidates are actually getting a lot of support from each other by being interviewed at the same time. As you know, previously it would be one person coming up against a panel. In those circumstances it was quite challenging to get good rapport going.”

I drift away from Sean’s voice for a moment; remembering my day observing an interview panel ... and Jasmine ... remember Jasmine. She was certainly the exception that proved the rule that day ... not much trouble with ‘rapport’ there as I recall.

Sean’s continuing description of the new ways of doing things brings me back to present focus.

“We have an exercise to start with where they work together on a problem. For example, you’re stranded in blistering cold Canada in the middle of winter. How are you going to survive? We’re basically scanning and looking for their motivations, their values and beliefs. We’re not really worried about the problem solving itself. This gives us a really good indication. As I said before Sue, all the time we’re looking at values and beliefs and identity stuff.”

“Yeah.” I nod. “That came through really strongly in the research didn’t it ... the whole ‘helping people’ motivation, and all the values and identity processes that went along with it. It was across the board for the ones who stayed.”

“Yes. That’s right. And based on that, one of the things I did was sit down with some CSRs who have been successful for some time. I was interested in finding out what their characteristics were. Then I worked out some questions that would elicit some of those characteristics from candidates; how they would be in certain situations. So it was all good. We’ve been doing that more and more successfully each time. We keep process re-engineering it each time. That’s been a real help. So we’re getting the right people into the place. And conversely we’ve had some hard challenges with staff who were obviously very, very unhealthy being here, either from a performance factor or by non-attendance. They were just opting out, other parts of their lives were more important. So we’ve had a lot of turnover as well.”

“What would your churn be, percentage wise?”

“It was 34% last year, and of that 20% was internal.”

“So people moving about the organisation ... that’s quite common isn’t it?”

“Yes. Yes it is. About 15% do. Our managers have now got a performance measure on turnover. We’re looking at 20% this review period which finishes in June next year – that’s exclusive of internal movement. I expect we’ll be well within that.”

Sean stretches and smiles. “I think some things are coming to fruition now ... but it’s like I was saying to you the other day, it’s a long process. In one of your chapters you had a really neat quote about trying to change organisational culture ... Well our National Operations Manager, Matt Jackson, he’s quite new, an extremely scientific chap from a planning background ... I think he tends to feel we can say, “this is the new rule here” and as a result of that the whole culture will change.

“Ah” I interrupt, “in my experience those schooled in that worldview tend to see organisational change in very ‘entitative’ and mechanistic terms. As I mentioned in chapter two, it is a way of knowing that assumes people and organisational systems are observable and knowable entities with stable and defining characteristics. The emphasis tends to be placed on inputs and outcomes rather than complex social processes ...”

“Yes” Sean agrees, “So I sent him that quote ...”

I can’t help but laugh out loud. “I know the quote you mean. It’s the one from David Collins, an organisational sociologist. He talks about those attitudes and assumptions being rather arrogant and ‘begging belief.’”⁸⁸

“Yeah ... yeah he does.” Sean chuckles too. “That’s the one. I went down to Wellington a couple of weeks ago and I was walking past his desk ... he’s actually printed it out, he’s laminated it, and he’s put it up on his computer screen. I said “Matt, what have you done!!!?” And he said, “Oh, I haven’t been able to get that out of my head ...”

⁸⁸ The passage appears in chapter six, on page 180.

A wonderful sense of satisfaction warms me. It seems the research is proving useful, and is moving people in unexpected ways. “Good for him” I respond.

“Yes,” replies Sean “In neuro-semantic that’s called ‘mind lining.’ It’s when your brain is just receptive enough to embrace a good idea coming in ...”

“Yep,” I agree wholeheartedly. “Receptivity and timing is everything!”

Sean is nodding enthusiastically too. “Yes. So we’ve seen changes in our attendance, changes in recruitment, and we’ve seen changes in the quality system as well. We used to call it monitoring, we now call it assessment. So for example, if you’re taking a call and I’m assessing you, I’ll sit next to you and just watch and hear, see what you’re doing. I’ve now got some core guidelines which I’ll make note of and then I’ll talk to you about the call, and if there are any things in there which were technically incorrect, make an adjustment. However, it’s an encouragement – it’s an opportunity to encourage you.”

“Right. This is very different from the punitive framework around call monitoring which was so strong when I was shadowing staff.”

“Yeah, exactly. That was very, very strong. There’s been a real erosion of all those rules. There were just so many of them. You know, a lot of the work of the Quality Coaches, and they weren’t really Quality Coaches, they were really quality control people in some respects. They were checking whether the ‘T’s were crossed and the ‘I’s were dotted. We’ve just made a decision to take that out of the Key Performance Indicators for the CSRs; which is really big. We used to call it ‘Quality,’ but it wasn’t really. Now we are encouraging our staff to have integrity, so that they want to get it right for the client each time.

“This really is a remarkably different perspective Sean.”

“Yes, it’s good. The CSRs like it.”

“So what does this sense of integrity mean for call times, because I take it they are still limited to certain parameters?”

“Well, what we say now is, “your call will take as long as your call will take,” but if you remember the three-legged stool, you need to understand that part of client satisfaction isn’t just the person you are dealing with on that call, it’s the next person, and the next person, and so forth. So again, it’s lifting their awareness from the moment to the bigger picture. And I tell you, with the calibre of staff that we are recruiting now, they’ve got the head space to be able to take in all of that, and more. Some of them, lots more. Some of them are outstripping people that have been here for years. They are offering up changes and feeling safe to do that as well.”

“That sense of trust and safety is a big one.”

“Yes Sue, it is. And I need to tell you, all these things have certainly been partially a result of your work here. It was a catalyst. I know you’re a modest person, but it is, really it is.”

I think I’m probably sparkling with delight. “It’s been a phenomenal learning experience for me Sean, and a real privilege to work here.” My grin widens, and I chuckle mischievously. “It’s all been a bit like the old ‘Bums on Seats’ mantra, hasn’t it?” He looks puzzled. “You know ... ‘The Right People, in the Right Place, at the Right Time, Doing the Right Things ...’ Oh the delicious irony!”

Sean erupts into gales of infectious laughter.

“But seriously,” I continue when the mirth has abated a little, “As you said a while back, our timing was spot on. People really seemed to embrace the research process on all sorts of levels. Yeah, there were lots of different motivations for doing so, but at the end of the day you were receptive to what was occurring, and able to make some changes; lots and lots of important changes as it turns out. But as you know, change is complex, much more multifaceted than we often recognise, and always ongoing. Our research here highlighted the incremental, fluid and organic processes that are making us, and our organisations, moment-by-moment. I think there was tension at times, as people struggled to get to grips with this, with a sense of becoming and learning with/in the flow. Because we didn’t build the more conventional action research feedback loops into the research design. Initially that made it frustrating for some of the CSRs and managers, particularly those who wanted me to come up with ‘answers.’”

“What like me!?” Sean laughs again.

“Yeah, like you” I roll my eyes. “Remember the quote in chapter two, about a more conventional way of working ... where the consultant comes in, has a look around and then supposedly provides a ‘recipe’ for improvement ... I don’t think that works so well. And anyway, you guys are the experts, not me. What we’ve been doing here is building holistic relationships and trusting connections that allow us to tap into, explore and understand a little better, our always-in-process lives ... “Living life as mindful inquiry” as Judi Marshall (1999), Valerie Bentz and Jeremy Shapiro (1998) would say.”

“Absolutely” Sean is as animated as me now. “I think what really works is to encourage people to examine their own values and motivations. That’s what you facilitated and continue to facilitate as well. I’m not sure if I’m breaching any copyright but I will continue to quote from your work.”

“Cool, that what it’s for. We’re in process. I’m really pleased the written version is proving so useful because it’s been a real challenge to write inclusively. To tell stories that work with/in, and for, diverse constituencies. Daniel McLaughlin (1993) has said that:”

At a minimum, critical engagement for university-based researchers begins with the need to reinvent research conditions that prize abstraction over narrative, theory over practice, and the researcher over the researched. As difficult and as rife with contradictions as it occasionally may be, we must enable our research subjects and colleagues to deal with us on an equal footing (p.239).

“That’s what I’ve tried to do here.”

“And you’ve succeeded” Sean smiles. “I know I’ve teased you every now and then about the tendency to lapse into foreign academic tongues. Some of it has definitely been a stretch.” His eyes dance. “But the stories ... once I began to read, I couldn’t put them down. Like the writing about Frankie, it was really moving for me. In the call centre she certainly was ‘larger than life,’ she was a full-on person. I remember who her manager was, and I consider what happened to Frankie almost unforgivable. I thought, I’m responsible for that ... I don’t want my staff having such displeasure

and such, such a need to be so duplicitous in their life. I mean to have such a completely, totally different home life from work life is just so unhealthy. You'd need a recruitment strategy that recruited schizophrenics really, for people to do that successfully. I know through my own self-reflections that the more I have to pretend, and the longer I have to sustain it, the more tiring and exhausting it is. It's a miracle she lasted so long and was able to be strong enough to get through all that."

As Sean is speaking I glance up again, across the colour and the vibrancy that is Frontline today. Frankie would love this, I muse. "Again it comes back to values and motivations Sean, and that much bigger picture of who she was, and what she wanted to do, and how she felt about the things that mattered to her ... they were huge drivers for her."

"She was a huge success in her family." Sean looks saddened.

"Yes she was."

"She was able to help her people, and connect with the young people, and that continued to give her enough support to get through all the other awful stuff. So when I think about Frankie's story I think ... I need to ensure with my managers ... in practical ways to encourage them to get into the bigger picture ... where their staff are."

My hands are making circles in the air. "We need to widen the lens ... open up the circle ... Jean-Claude Garcia-Zamor (2003), a Professor of Public Administration, in the School of Policy and Management at Florida International University, acknowledges our human connections and opens the circle to a planetary level. Way beyond any religious connotation, he calls this interconnectedness 'spirituality.' He maintains:"

Spirituality is about acknowledging that people come to work with more than their bodies and minds; they bring individual talents and unique spirits. For most of the twentieth century, traditionally run companies have ignored that basic fact of human nature. Now they explore spiritual concepts such as trust, harmony, values, and honesty for their power to help achieve business goals. Spiritual needs are fulfilled by a recognition and acceptance of individual responsibility for the common good, by

understanding the interconnectedness of all life, and by serving humanity and the planet. Therefore, when one speaks about bringing spirituality into the workplace, he or she is talking about changing organizational culture by transforming leadership and employees so that humanistic practices and policies become an integral part of an organization's day-to-day function (Garcia-Zamor 2003, p.360).

“I think in our own way, here at Frontline, you and I, and Frankie, Matalena, Jasmine, Richard, Tina, and all the other CSRs and managers participating in this research process, have created a form of spiritual synergy in this wider sense. By energetically challenging the status quo on so many levels, we've explored and shown the value of our 'bigger picture' connections.”

“Yes.” Sean takes a measured breath, exhaling slowly, his brow furrowed in thought. “Yes” he nods, “we *are* in a much bigger circle. I guess it comes right back to where we started. To the ideas you introduced right at the beginning of this research in chapter one. About connectedness and circles ... What was it again ...?”

“Ah,” I smile, “Parker J. Palmer and T.S. Eliot. Exactly”

How can we move beyond the fear that destroys connectedness? By reclaiming the connectedness that takes away fear. I realize the circularity of my case – but that is precisely how the spiritual life moves, in circles that have no beginning or end, where as T.S. Eliot writes we, “arrive where we started/And know the place for the first time (Palmer 1998, p.58).

“Yes, that's it.” Sean looks up thoughtfully, and gazes across the busy call centre floor. “And know the place for the first time,” he echoes quietly. Then turning back to me, he smiles “what we've shared is not lost through time or space; it becomes part of who I am. Because it's not about the call centre process, it's about us. All of us.”

* * *

APPENDICES

Appendix One: Initial Research Proposal

Beyond ‘Family Friendly’ Policies Towards ‘Worklife Organisational Solutions

January 2000

Departments of Management and Employment Relations and Sociology

The University of Auckland

Statement of Research Topic

This research seeks to move the complex issues of work-family interconnection beyond the individualised and gendered policies and benefits approach of traditional ‘family-friendly’ initiatives. The research considers the importance of job creation and staff retention and development in a knowledge based economy, by reframing ‘worklife’ integration as a systemic issue related to social and organisational norms, and paid and unpaid work processes and practices.

I build on recent literature which calls for a systemic approach to work and family interdependency as a necessary and viable organisational way forward (Buxton 1998; Franks 1999; Lewis and Lewis 1996; Parasuraman and Greenhaus 1997). Similarly, this work is based on the theoretical premises developed in my Masters thesis where I reconceptualise ‘work’ beyond narrow economic considerations and revalue it as a holistic social enterprise that encompasses both paid and unpaid activities in the public and private spheres (Copas 1999). In this project I seek to identify current barriers to a ‘boundaryless’ (Fletcher and Bailyn 1996) way of thinking about human endeavour in order to develop adaptive and productive conditions under which

organisations will be prepared to consider 'worklife' issues as central to business goals.

I intend to undertake collaborative, qualitative, case study, action research within clearly defined and participant agreed research protocols and parameters to promote these aims. My project comprises three self-contained 'worklife' case studies based in New Zealand call centres. The focus on 'teleworking' in call centres links to on-going research by one of my supervisors Dr Wendy Larner.

Supervisors

Dr. Wendy Larner, Senior Lecturer Sociology and Dr. Judith Pringle, Senior Lecturer Management and Employment Relations have agreed to supervise this research.

Intentions/Objectives – A Threefold Approach

In order to understand how complex and interconnected 'worklife' strategies are constituted, arranged and prioritised from the perspectives of both employers and employees this research will adopt a threefold approach.

1. The research aims to explore how individual employees' frame and manage their 'working' lives in terms of personal identity and values, and to detail definitions of work and how it is constituted. I seek to understand how employees define success, power, career, personal and professional development, and consider if and how these definitions change in particular employment/personal circumstances. Much as been written about the 'worklife' experiences of women in paid employment, particularly those at managerial level (see for example - Buxton 1998; Ellis and Wheeler 1991; Kaltrieder 1997; Marshall 1995; McKenna 1997). However the voices and experiences of the majority negotiating the tensions of combining paid and unpaid work at less lofty heights of an increasingly insecure employment hierarchy are scarce indeed (Franks 1999; New Zealand Federation of University Women 1996). To address this gap in the literature this research will focus on women call centre workers with caring responsibilities. A significant contribution to gender, organisational and sociology of work literatures should ensue.

2. The research will also explore the above themes from the perspectives of the employers in tandem with identifying the central business goals on the employers at each case site. I will investigate of and how these variables relate to each other in order to understand how the processes and practices that constitute and reflect organisational and culture 'norms' help or hinder systemic 'worklife' integration.
3. Within the agreed parameters of the research protocols I intend to examine the strengths and weaknesses of the 'worklife' definitions, policies and practices (both formal and informal) that emerge from the data collected in each case study situation. This will be undertaken with a view to collaboratively developing equitable systemic strategies and policies that provide 'win-win' outcomes for both employers and employees at each site.

Research Methodology

A collaborative, action based research method employing a partnership approach (employer, employee, researcher) will be designed. I intend to use a qualitative multiple case study framework, with each call centre case being self-contained, that is representing a single unit of analysis (Yin 1989).

Call centres have been chosen as possible case sites for a number of reasons:

- They are being promoted by the New Zealand government as a growth area in a globalising knowledge based economy (*Trade New Zealand Call/Contact Centre Alliance Initiative* 1999).
- Call centre workers are predominantly female and mothers returning to paid work have been actively targeted by some personnel companies as possessing the required 'highly developed' communications skills necessary for the work (Larner 1999, p.9).
- Staff turnover is high in the teleworking environment and call centre managers are searching for ways to reduce this. Recent international research in this area has highlighted a business case argument to be made for work-family flexibility to counter high staff 'churn'. However, policy recommendations

continue to be framed by traditional ‘family-friendly’ parameters (Belt et al. 2000).

Some or all of the above factors may make this employment area particularly receptive to the research initiatives I am proposing.

The Rationale for Three Different Employment Sectors.

Public Sector: There is a historical propensity for public sector organisations to be more proactive in the area of family-friendly initiatives. However questions as to whether this continues in a restructured marketised environment remain to be answered. The move to a market model of governance has also seen a shift in focus toward client/customer services and needs, and despite the fact that there are many monopoly organisations in this sector (for example Work and Income New Zealand, Inland Revenue and local government call centres) this may affect management and work organisation practices.

Private Sector (a) Banking and Finance: Traditionally a feminised and low paid workforce. However this is a highly competitive sector with a proactive focus on customer service to maintain a competitive edge. Does the rise of ‘telebanking’ and online financial services offer new employment/career prospects for women in this sector?

Private Sector (b) Transportation: Historically a male workforce. One of the earlier sectors to adopt call centres (airlines, travel agencies) and may be further advanced in terms of operational/organisational practices. For example the Air New Zealand call centre has been identified as operating to ‘best practice’ industry standards.

Within each case study qualitative data will be generated by semi-structured interviews with employees. I will also ‘shadow’ (non-participant observation) informants in both their organisational and domestic spheres for a pre-determined period. These observations will generate additional qualitative data about organisational and domestic culture (both formal and informal). This process may strengthen, or contradict, information gained through the interview process. Another possible methodological strategy is the use of ‘worklife’ diaries (a variant of the ‘time

diary' approach). Participant employees would be asked to fill in a diary detailing both the subjective and objective dimensions of the 'worklife' arrangements over the course of the research period. This would enable the dynamic interplay of organisational/institutional "scripts" and personal "stories" to be compared and contrasted at each site (Arthur, Inkson, and Pringle 1999).

The immediate managers of participating employees will be interviewed, as will the Human Resources Manager who has overall responsibility for the centre. This should provide further insight into both formal company policies and an alternative view of more informal organisational practices. The contact will also generate documentary forms of evidence for review (e.g. formal policies and mechanisms for dealing with 'worklife' issues). Themes, patterns and discontinuities will be identified, and the cross-referencing and triangulation of these data sources will ensure rigour.

Following these processes I will undertake a preliminary analysis of the data and this will be fed back to all parties. A collaborative focus group meeting will then be set up to discuss the knowledge generated. The goal of the research at this stage is to take advantage of a strategic opportunity to work toward equitable processes of 'worklife' integration. Similarly in terms of my action research methodology, there are procedural intentions for participants to arrive at shared understandings and to work toward collective action and outcomes based on discussion, listening, reflection and mutual learning (Fletcher and Rapoport 1996, p.154).

Proposed Time Line

I have been awarded a University of Auckland Doctoral Scholarship for a three-year term and intend to complete within that time frame.

Complete a literature review, contextualised internationally, but with specific focus on New Zealand to identify existing policies and practices in the area. Apply for and have ethics approval given. Approach potential case sites for participation in the project, undertake initial meetings and obtain informed consent for the research to proceed [**6 months**].

Set up collaborative frameworks and carry out research. Conduct employee/employer interviews and organise the writing of 'worklife' diaries. Conduct 'worklife'

shadowing (non-participant observation). Engage in preliminary data analysis and feedback. Undertake focus group collaboration and strategy development. Undertake further process analyses following collaboration [**18 months**].

Write up process and findings [**12 months**].

Probationary Year Goals

At the completion of the first probationary year I expect to have written the literature review/theoretical chapter. Also I expect to have identified and contracted case study sites and detailed the existing ‘worklife’ policies and procedures in each of these sites.

Provisional Chapter Headings

- ❖ Introduction.
- ❖ Literature Review and Theoretical Chapters.
- ❖ Three empirical chapters: case studies one, two and three.
- ❖ Conclusion.

* * *

Appendix Two: Introductory Letter to the Organization

To the Call Centre Manager/Human Resources Manager

A Collaborative ‘Worklife’ Research Project

Working Title: Beyond ‘Family Friendly’ Policies: Towards ‘Worklife’
Organisational Solutions

My name is Susan Copas and I am an interdisciplinary candidate enrolled for a PhD degree in the Departments of Sociology, and Management and Employment Relations at Auckland University. In my doctoral research I want to explore aspects of a new, more integrated approach to managing organisational life beginning to gain ground in New Zealand. An example of this approach, which acknowledges the interconnectedness of various life contexts, is characterised by the Equal Employment Opportunities Trust’s (EEO) year 2000 change in focus. In its promotion of equitable workplace practices EEO has replaced its ‘Work and Family’ focus with the more inclusive and holistic expression, ‘Work and Life’.

The main aim of the research is to understand how people organise and manage the connections between paid work and life outside the workplace, and to identify what sorts of things would help manage these connections better. The study will investigate the views and experiences of both employees and management through a collaborative action research process, involving interviews, observations and focus groups. Action research promotes broad participation in the research process and supports initiatives leading to more satisfying outcomes. The research design and process is intended to facilitate both knowledge and communication with a view to improving organisational culture and practices through the development and refinement of equitable ‘worklife’ systems.

A call centre has been strategically chosen as a site for this research because with the enormous movement in communications technology this sector is being promoted at both government and industry levels as a growth area in a globalising knowledge based economy. Call centres have also been characterised as ‘the workplace of the future’ and as such may lend themselves to the development of innovative workplace policies and practices

You are invited to take part in this research because you are an Equal Employment Opportunity employer and participation in this project could benefit both your organisation and your employees in several ways.

Benefits To The Organisation

Effectiveness of ‘worklife’ initiatives

The collaborative research process and results would enable you to evaluate the effectiveness of your organisation’s existing ‘worklife’ policies and practices. It will also identify areas where communication channels and policy may be developed to improve current practices. This should lead to improved outcomes in the recruitment and retention of valued staff.

Organisational recognition and value for life outside the workplace through the development of a site and systems based approach to ‘worklife’ interconnection could lead to beneficial changes in organisational culture. This could result in productivity gains and decreased absenteeism.

Employees’ perceptions

The research will provide an opportunity to receive feedback about employees’ perceptions of both current formal organisational policies and informal ‘in-house’ culture, and to identify any shortcomings.

An investment in a collaborative research process involving staff at various tiers in the organisational structure, including a willingness to develop and implement equitable changes, indicates a proactive management stance to equity issues. Employees’ perceptions of management initiatives and fairness in this area can affect their commitment to the job and/or the organisation, and ultimately the rate of staff turnover. It is desirable to be aware of and manage the perception of fairness in order to develop and maintain valued employees and eliminate unnecessary recruitment costs.

Participation

Following your organisation’s agreement to take part in this project I would like to arrange a meeting with the Call Centre manager and/or Human Resources Manager to discuss setting up the research in the centre. This will include organising procedures and protocols for implementing the research phases. With the exception of some aspects of the observations, the proposed research will be conducted on-site. I would like to involve twenty Customer Services/Support Representatives (CSRs), Eight Team/Shift Leaders and the Centre Manager in the project. These staff encompass the standard organisational structure of most call centres. The study consists of eight stages – detailed below.

I would like to review documentary evidence of the Centre’s current work and life management policies and practices. This would include a review of existing policies concerning such things as maternity, parental and sick leave and any other formal provisions in this area.

Initial interviews of all participants. During this audio taped interview, open-ended questions will be asked about the respondent’s various ‘worklife’ attitudes and practices. This interview would take about half an hour, and would optimally occur

during work time. Copies of the interview transcripts will be given to all participants and at that time they will have the opportunity to clarify or correct them.

A one day observation of the interviewees. The purpose of this 'shadowing' undertaken in both organisational and domestic settings is to gather independent information about how people go about their work lives as distinct from how they talk about it. I will take written notes while following participants around.

A short follow-up interview with the participant will be undertaken to clarify the information that was gathered the previous day.

At the completion of stage four I would like to run separate audio taped focus groups with the CSR's and Team Leaders. The purpose of the focus groups is to share a discussion about the 'worklife' attitudes and practices of the respondents, building on their research participation to date.

I will undertake preliminary analysis of the data generated so far and provide all participants with a work-in progress report outlining major themes.

Once the report has been read I would like to facilitate a roundtable discussion of all participants (CSR's, Team Leaders and the Centre Manager). The purpose of this session is to identify areas where 'worklife' policies can be developed. The group will also be asked to nominate representatives to form a strategy team to oversee policy refinement and implementation.

Twelve months from this roundtable discussion I would like to meet with members of the strategy team in a focus group session in order to discuss the evolution of policy, and evaluate any workplace changes that may have taken place as a result of this research project. Again, with the permission of the participants, I would like to audio tape this session.

Confidentiality and results

Should your organisation agree to take part in this project you are free to withdraw up to one month after taking part in the first interview. You can be sure that no identifying material will be used in any reports on this research without your permission. All information gathered will be securely stored at all times, and according to the University of Auckland Ethics guidelines, at the completion of the project, all information will be securely kept for six years, and then professionally destroyed.

The data generated by this project will be used to develop and extend the knowledge base around the equitable management of work and life issues. It may also result in practical improvements in this area for your organisation. Copies of all written reports and publications resulting from this study will be made available to you and to all the participants.

Thank you very much for your time and consideration of taking part in this study. If you have any queries or wish to know more please contact me by either telephone or email.

Susan Copas
Telephone: 376 1331
Email: s.copas@clear.net.nz
s.copas@auckland.ac.nz

If you have any queries or concerns regarding your rights as a participant in this research you may contact my supervisors:

Dr Judith Pringle
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The University of Auckland
Private Bag 92019
Auckland
Telephone: 373 7599 extn. 7282

Dr Wendy Larner
Department of Sociology
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Private Bag 92019
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Telephone: 373 7599 extn. 8661

For any queries regarding ethical concerns please contact:

The Chair, The University of Auckland Human Subjects Ethics Committee
The University of Auckland, Research Office
Office of the Vice Chancellor,
Private Bag 92019
Auckland
Telephone 373 7599 extn. 7830

This study has received ethical approval from the University of Auckland Human Subjects Ethics Committee on 21/06/2000 for a period of three years.

Reference: 2000/152

* * *

Appendix Three: Invitation to Staff to Participate

[Insert printed form]

Appendix Four: Interview Goals and Schedule

The following 'goals and schedule' were developed early in the research process in conjunction with the initial research proposal. The inclusion of this early thinking gives some insight into how the process has evolved.

Goals

While I am interested in activities and events - the context for the stories - my major goal is to tap into "the web of feelings, attitudes and values that gives meaning to activities and events" (Anderson and Jack 1991, p.12).

My absolute priority is in listening to the interviewee's individual thoughts and experiences as they tell their story. Therefore: "the process of analysis should be suspended or at least subordinated to the process of listening" (ibid, p.15). It is really important that I leave my own preconceptions at the door.

I need to think about encouraging people to reflect on the meaning of their experiences.

Three Ways of Listening (all taken from Anderson and Jack (1991)).

Listen to the person's moral language. Moral evaluations of the self allow us to "examine the relationship between self-concept and cultural values, between what we value and others value, between how we are told to act and how we feel about ourselves when we do or do not act that way" (ibid, p.20). Attending to the moral standards used to judge the self allows the researcher to honour the individuality of each person through observing what values they are striving to obtain. Let the interviewee structure the interview so as to express their uniqueness in its full gender, class and ethnic richness.

Attend to meta-statements. These are places in the interview where people spontaneously stop, look back, and comment about their own thoughts or something they just said. Meta-statements alert us to a discrepancy within the self - or between what is expected and what is being said. They tell the interviewer about what categories the individual is using to monitor their thoughts, and allow observation of how the person socializes feelings or thoughts according to certain norms.

Listen to the logic of the narrative, noticing the internal consistency or contradictions in the person's statements about recurring themes and the way these themes relate to one another. Contradictions in the logic of the narrative may allow glimpses of how people deal with conflicting cultural ideals in a particular socio-historical context.

This way of thinking demands a shift in methodology from information gathering, where the focus is on the right questions, to interaction, where the focus is on process, on the dynamic unfolding of the person's viewpoint. The primary goal is to go behind conventional, expected answers and tap into the personal construction of the

interviewee's experiences. This shift of focus from data gathering to interactive process affects what the researcher regards as valuable information. Interactive exploration doesn't have to be intrusive, it can be as simple as asking 'what did that (event, experience) mean for you?'

As Anderson and Jack (1991) note: "Incorporating these insights has helped us learn how to remain suspended and attentive on a fine line between accomplishing our research goals and letting the participant be in charge of the material in the interview" (ibid, p24).

Proposed Areas of Interview Topics: A Guide

Thank you for taking this time to talk to me. In this interview I am interested in finding out your views and experiences about the connections between your paid work and your life outside the workplace.

This interview is completely confidential; everything you say will remain anonymous. There are no right or wrong answers - I am interested in your honest reflections and judgments about your worklife experiences.

1. Biography/Demographic Information:

- (a) Age, ethnicity, work history, including how achieved present employment status?
- (b) Family composition and history. How many children and when born in relation to paid work commitments and development of the family?
- (c) Do you have a partner, if so what is their occupation?
- (d) Income, personal income, household income? Can you indicate which number on this card applies to you for (i) your personal income and (ii) your household income.

2. Paid Work Attitudes and Practices:

- (a) How does work get done around here? What do you see as your typical 'working day' and can you tell me about it? (How organised, perceptions, problems?)

- **(b)** Are there aspects about the way your paid work is organized that make it more difficult or easier to combine work and personal life so that neither one suffers?
- **(c)** Awareness and/or use of formal policies provided by the organisation to manage work and life processes. For example maternity/parental leave, or use of flexitime provisions.
- **(d)** If formal policies/practices are or have been taken up, what are your experiences and opinions of how they worked out for you? Are there ways these could have been better managed, by you and/or by your employer?
- **(e)** Awareness of and/or experiences with informal organisational processes. Do you think this organisation acknowledges that you have a life outside the workplace? , Do you think there is an awareness of some of the things that are happening for you in your life? If so, can you give me some examples? If not, why do you think this is?
- **(f)** Do you feel there are boundaries between work and personal concerns?
- **(g)** Values, attitudes, philosophies towards the organisation? (How do you feel about working here?)
- **(h)** Do you think this organisation support skills and career development? How? – How do these processes sit alongside your life outside the workplace? (Are there parallels and/or disjunctions with personal life outside the workplace in this area?)
- **(i)** Time management around paid word practices?
- **(j)** What emphasis do you place on the paid work role in your life – how important to self/others?
- **(k)** How do you feel about the arrangements and practices you currently use to manage paid work? Are they working for you – could they work better, if so, how?

- **(l)** Thinking about the words we use to describe things, how would you describe your current experiences? Would words like 'combine' and 'balance' be appropriate, or what about the term juggling is that more accurate for you? Or would you choose some other descriptive words and can you tell me why?

3. Unpaid 'Worklife' Attitudes and Practices

- **(a)** Do you have childcare, elder care, extended family commitments – how are these managed?
- **(b)** Overlaps with paid work – how managed? (For example: children's school trips, sports days, are you able to participate? If so, how – if not why not?). What about supervising or helping your children with their homework, how do you arrange that?
- **(c)** Extraordinary circumstances, for example accidents/illness to self or others you are responsible for – how managed? What are your experiences of and feelings about organisational support (or lack of it) at these times?
- **(d)** 'Life' interests, hobbies, sports and pastimes – do you have them, how important are they to you and how are they managed?
- **(e)** Voluntary work/community service – do you undertake this, if so how managed, if not, why not?
- **(f)** What emphasis do you place on life outside the workplace – how important to self/others? If I asked you to draw this for me, or put it in some sort of diagram form – what would it look like?
- **(g)** Family values, attitudes and philosophies about what life means to you – how do these relate to your paid work role?
- **(h)** Is the person you are outside the paid workplace different from the person you are at work? Why? How?
- **(i)** How do you feel about the arrangements and practices you currently use to manage life outside paid work? Are they working for you – could they work better, if so, how?

4. Goals, Ambitions, Directions

- (a) Do you feel that you are able to do what needs to be done on the job and still have time and energy for outside commitments/interests – and still have time for a life?

- (b) What are your primary goals and ambitions at the moment, for yourself, your family, and your job/career?

- (c) Do these relate to each other, if so how?

- (d) Do your current ‘worklife’ circumstances influence your goals and ambitions? If so, how?

* * *

Appendix Five: Initial Report to Participants

Introduction: A brief overview of the study - purpose and method.

This research is looking at how people manage paid work in tandem with their lives outside the workplace. It is based on an emerging cultural framework that acknowledges work and life are interconnected in complex and multiple ways. The main aim of the project is to explore this arena from an organisational standpoint in order to generate equitable processes of staff retention and development as New Zealand moves towards a knowledge/service based economy. To do this I take a 'worklife' perspective into a large, technologically advanced site – a call centre. Call centres are important in twenty-first century New Zealand. They represent a rapidly expanding organisational form based on new communications technologies, are at the forefront of changing labour processes, and employ growing numbers of people in the service sector. Call Centres have also been characterised as 'the workplace of the future' and hence may lend themselves to the development of innovative workplace policies and practices.

The study explores the experiences (labour processes, attitudes and practices) of customer service staff and management through an action research process. Action research was chosen as a preferred method because it promotes broad participation in the research process. It is research with people rather than 'on' people. To date, data has been gathered in four separate phases. In phase one I collected documentary evidence of the centre's organisational structure, philosophies (including C.E.O. statements of formal organisational culture and 'style'), labour policies and practices. This material included employment contracts, recruitment procedures, Human Resourcing (HR) policies, health and safety measures, performance appraisal mechanisms, departmental structure and reporting processes and the like. During this phase I also attended and observed a number of management and CSR team meetings, and invited staff to take part in the study. In phase two I conducted unstructured in-depth interviews with research participants. The interviews asked open-ended 'who are you' questions about personal and professional life, motivations, hopes and goals, as well as questions about work and life practices and how these were experienced and managed on both a day-to-day basis and in a more global sense (the 'bigger picture'). Every interview was transcribed verbatim and each person received a copy of their interview as soon as possible after it was conducted.

On completion of the interviews, phase three involved 'shadowing' participants across the course of a typical worklife day. Each observation lasted between eight and twelve hours and in most instances included a period of time spent after work in either domestic or transitional settings. During this time I took detailed notes of all work and life interactions and processes as I observed how participants dealt with the day's events both inside and outside the organisational systems and setting. Exhibiting significant goodwill and trust towards me, all participants agreed to take part in this intensive stage and I observed twenty-three members of the research group in this way. Unfortunately, I was unable to shadow one CSR due to the conflicting demands of our respective work and life schedules during this research period.

Following the observations, in phase four I facilitated three focus groups – two involving the CSRs and one with the members of the management team. Building on some of the issues being raised by the research process, the focus groups discussed various interconnections between work and life including how these related to being an effective CSR or manager in the call centre. The groups were asked to define what it meant to be an effective CSR or manager and to discuss some of the organisational enablers and barriers to becoming one. These focus groups have also been transcribed verbatim and added to the individual interview data sets.

Participants

Twenty-four staff members are participating in this research – eighteen customer service representatives (CSRs) and six from the centre’s management team. Together they encompass a broad range of ethnic identities, ages and life stages. At the time of the interviews participant ages ranged from late teens to early fifties. A variety of life stages and family configurations are also represented. These include early career singles with no dependents, custodial and non-custodial single parents, and parents in both nuclear and reconstituted families with children ranging from infants and preschoolers to those with non-dependent adult children and grandchildren.

The call centre has a diverse cultural profile with three main ethnic groups – Maori, Pacific Island, and Pakeha (New Zealand European) predominating. Figure 1 compares total staff percentages in these groups with those in the participant research group. At the time of the interviews Maori and Pacific Island staff comprised a majority at CSR level and Pakeha a majority at management level.

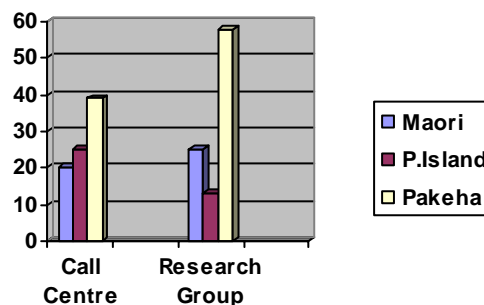


Figure 1

Those in the research group also span a number of employment profiles and patterns seen in the call centre more generally. Length of employment ranges from those who have worked in the centre since its development and set-up just over four years ago, to new staff employed during the course of this research. In line with the overall staff profile of the site, the majority of participants in this study are women; however the number of men contributing does approximate the general male/female staff ratio (90% female/10% male in the centre; 83% female/17% male in the research group). Similarly, both part time and full time employees figure in this study with the majority being full time staff. Again this mirrors a typical employment pattern in the centre.

Data Sets and Analytical Process to-date

For ease of analysis I have divided the research material into three main data sets. These being:

1. Formal organisational documents and reports, researcher notes of management and team meetings.
2. Interview material – individual and focus group.
3. Worklife shadowing observation notes.

I am treating each data set as an individual unit at this stage, but working simultaneously with the material detailing and coding emerging themes. Qualitative data analysis software is being used to organise and analyse the electronically formatted data (this includes all the interview material, some documents, and the transcribed notes I made at the end of each observation detailing my impressions of and questions about that day).⁸⁹

It was evident very early on in this research process that a quality/quantity conundrum loomed large in the organisation of work processes in the call centre. Both CSRs and managers talked repeatedly of the frustrations and difficulties involved in attempting to provide a consistently high level of quality service given the daily volume of calls that must be answered within the tight call handling times that are set at a national level. During the course of each CSR worklife observation I noted both the content and timing of every call answered, taking detailed notes of CSR/client interactions as each call progressed. Beyond the very detailed statistics from the Management Information Systems (MIS) that drive labour processes at this site, this research strategy has generated a wealth of previously unavailable qualitative data about each call. In order to understand more fully the way in which the organisation of work in the call centre is driven by the often conflicting priorities of quantity and quality, I am conducting a content analysis of this observational material along these two dimensions.

To begin with, this entails defining call interaction characteristics along a quality/quantity continuum and mapping each call onto this grid. I am defining simple, routine inquiries at the ‘quantity’ pole of this spectrum (for example; making a straightforward Case Manager appointment) and complex, individualised interactions at the ‘quality’ pole (for example; an enquiry as to how various types of part-time/casual work may affect Domestic Purpose Benefit entitlements and payments in a particular family’s situation).⁹⁰ It’s important to note that I am using this grid as an analytical tool to better understand call centre processes at the point of service delivery. It is an indicative and not a definitive instrument and my placement of calls on the grid is a matter of judgement. In doing so I intend to show the relative emphasis on quality and quantity, both numerically and qualitatively, as well as provide an indication of the diversity and range of calls taken in the centre on a day-

⁸⁹ I am using N4 Classic for this process – see www.qsr.international.com

⁹⁰ In many instances what may on the surface seem to be a routine action, for example a change of address, falls toward the quality end of the spectrum due to the number of actions required.

to-day basis. Initial sampling of this material shows a heavy weighting toward the ‘quality’ end of the continuum. In contrast to this, the current statistics driven emphasis on quantity in the centre tends to obscure the detailed nature of many calls which require individual attention to often complex personal situations.

Emerging themes and the organisation of the material

A number of themes are emerging from preliminary analysis of the data sets and these will be organised into four substantive chapters that form the core of the project. The complete research write-up (or thesis) will be divided into three broad sections. The first three chapters comprise a setting up and setting out, and detail the rationale for the research, and its theoretical and methodological drivers. These chapters will also give detailed descriptions of the case site, its labour processes, staffing and technological capabilities. As noted above, chapters’ four to seven make up the analytical heart of this work. Here I will elaborate the themes and processes that are emerging and detail how these relate to and extend the research drivers described previously. Chapters’ eight to ten apply the case site findings to wider policy contexts and organisational considerations.

Preliminary Chapter Template

1. Introduction

- Starting out. On Copas, Call Centres and work and life. How the combination of these elements led to the research journey embarked upon. The framework with which the study began and its exploratory agenda.

2. Process and “Storytelling”

- This chapter sets out the theoretical and methodological basis of the project. It details narrative inquiry,⁹¹ participative action research, organisational and organisational change theories and work and life perspectives - both practitioner and academic. It describes how these various approaches inform my research process and relate to the study that follows.
- It outlines the multi-layered nature of the study which examines organisational and worklife behaviour/interactions at the level of the individual, the groups (CSRs and managers), the organisation (primarily the Call Centre but also as this relates to its place in the structure of DWI) and a wider social framework (changes in which provide the impetus for this study).
- It includes rich step-by-step descriptions of method (e.g. the detailing interviews, focus groups, shadowing phase and the observational notes to tape I recorded at the conclusion of each day on site). This chapter sets the stage for the next chapter, which is

⁹¹ A narrative approach is based on lived experience – that is, lives and how they are lived. It is always multi-layered and many stranded as it attempts to capture the contexts and the complexity of peoples’ stories (narratives) about their lives (experiences). See Jean Clandinin and Michael Connelly (2000) *Narrative Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research*. Josey-Bass Publishers San Francisco, and Barbara Czarniawska (1997) *Narrating the Organization: Dramas of Institutional Identity*. The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London.

3. The Context

- In many respects this chapter is the main ground setting chapter for the study. It moves down through the layers, beginning with the widest **political economic** context of public sector restructuring as it applies to the Department of Work and Income (DWI).
- From here it proceeds to an **organisational level** and details changes in technology and service delivery that have provided the impetus for centralisation, cost reduction and economies of scale – bringing the development and widespread use of call centres to prominence.
- On **call centres** – it situates this site in the New Zealand call centre environment – pointing to continuities and differences between the private and public sector models. It also details the DWI call centre’s somewhat unique positioning as an important public service provider of significant scale and complexity.
- From here it moves to the **micro level of lived experience** in this case site. This includes a general description of the case site - profile, policies, technology, and staff. The chapter is rounded out and concluded with a vignette - ‘a day in the life’ - at this call centre.
- **A Day in the Life: “The Tour of Duty”**⁹² Based on data from the worklife shadowing research phase: a compilation – though typical day in the life of a CSR in the Centre. The vignette will detail the range and depth of issues faced by frontline staff in the course of client interactions over the course of a working day. It will also describe the interplay of work and life during this period. The narrative begins before coming into work and ends at days end in a domestic setting.

Chapters Based Around Emerging Themes from the Data

4. Surveillance

There are multiple layers and levels to the nature of surveillance and control at this site including direct and indirect forms. As is common in many call centres there is widespread use of technology (management information systems, operations analysis, call monitoring, and staff audits) to keep track of staff and work flows. Added to this are departmental requirements such as an explicit “Code of Conduct”, a ‘clear desk’ policy (rigorously enforced at the time this research was conducted), corporate dress protocols and ‘norms’, (which generate conflict and contradictions around the dress code for mufti days and casual Fridays), and the use of a performance appraisal mechanism. Significant emerging themes are:

- The use of technology. The effect of the MIS and Operations Analysis on work processes and staff morale for both CSR’s and managers.
- Call Monitoring
- Audit processes – difficulties with for both CSR’s and managers.
- The use of the Performance Appraisal (PA) mechanism.
- Mufti and clothes regulations

⁹² This was how one of the CSRs described working in the Call Centre.

- Sick leave processes. Organisational/management processes around the issue of high levels of staff sickness and leave taken. CSR responses and the daily effects of sick leave issues on labour processes and cumulatively over time.

5. Time

- Time is emerging as ‘the’ predominant value’ system of the organisation. The way this value placed on time plays out. Key Performance Indicators (KPI’s).
- Time and customer service: definitions and effects. CSR perceptions and difficulties with the customer service role within time constraints.
- Time constraints and how this shapes and affects the work day.
- Different effects time factors have on management and CSR staff
- Flexibility.

6. Culture/Socialisation

- Organisational culture and cultural change – confusions, and contradictions and cynicism around the mixing of public service with what many at the site call ‘corporate culture’. and state and managerialism as influential arbiter of general cultural nuances at this site. Possible sub-chapter heading “Corporate Culture and the Public Service: Mixing Managerialism’s Metaphors”.
- The language of culture. “Clients and Customers” – the use of a “business” model. How this plays out in day- to day interactions between both CSR and clients and amongst the staff at the site.
- Communication. Technology as arbiter – benefits and difficulties.
- Trust.
- Values⁹³
- Social Capital in the organisation – how developed, how compromised.
- Change factors why implemented, to what effect (theorised and actual), and how staff deal with these.

7. Work and Life (Infusion)

- The storied lives of whole people. The interconnections, difficulties and contradictions as they play out in this research.
- Impact of home life on work.
- Impact of work life on home.
- Multicultural site. Different cultural contexts and meanings.
- Deconstructing the notion of work and life as separate spheres.
- Multiple identities. Staff members, colleagues, whanau, parents, friends, team mates, managers, coaches,

⁹³ Issues of identity and values –infuse much of the data, are important themes in this research and will feed into each of the 4 substantive chapters.

8. “Sundials in the Shade”⁹⁴

- A comprehensive discussion of the effects of all of the above as it relates to both frontline and management staff. What works, what doesn't - what is lost and why in the way work is organised in the Centre. The cost(s) of compliance to this particular workplace culture. Site specific discussion.

9. Inversion: From Human Resources to Resourcing Humans.

- How to do it better. Moving all of the above to a broader level. The implications of the study for the organisation of twenty-first century worklife and management practices. Some practical strategies and uses for the material generated.

10. Conclusion.

- The research journey to this particular end point. Stories, learnings and burning questions.

* * *

⁹⁴ Benjamin Franklin called wasted strength and talents “sundials in the shade.”

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