

Embodied Voice and Embodied Differences in Call Centre Work¹

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The aim of the paper is to examine the ways in which the employees’ body and especially embodied use of voice is utilised as a resource in interactive service work in call centres. The focus of the analysis, based on interviews with call centre employees and team leaders, is on employees’ embodied experiences at work. Simultaneously, the focus of analysis is on the cultural meanings given to bodies, which are intertwined with the expressed experiences. The everyday work in call centres is based on speaking on the phone and therefore the employees’ bodily appearance is concentrated on their voice. The embodied use of voice is the employees’ central resource and occupational skill and, furthermore, the embodied use of voice is included in the service work quite indistinguishably. From the employers’ point of view, various kinds of embodied voices are needed to represent the different services and products and in this respect the employees’ age and gender are intertwined with the distribution of work tasks.

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Introduction

Bodily aspects and the embodiment of work are usually associated with unskilled, often physical work but seldom with white-collar jobs. Consequently, it has been suggested that when the interaction between the customer and employee is based on modern systems of communication such as the telephone, e-mails and text messages, even a hint of the body disappears (Morgan et al. 2005, 4). However, my starting point is that any work and occupation contain embodied expectations and require the employees' embodied labour. Moreover, all employees are embodied in some way. In the case of a call centre, the interviewed employees and managers invariably brought up various bodily aspects of work, which refers to the everyday work in call centre as embodied work.

In this paper I will consider the ways in which job assignments are intertwined with the dimensions of embodied attributes, such as age and gender and, moreover, with other differences such as expected heterosexuality, ethnicity and language proficiency in the context of interactive service work in call centres. I ask, how is call centre work embodied? I am also interested in how the work is done and the ways in which embodiment is an integral part of the work. Additionally, my aim is to analyse what kinds of expectations are set to the employees' embodied use of voice.

The research material consists of 45 semi-structured interviews collected in the office of an international call centre, located in the southern part of Finland.² The youngest interviewees were in their early twenties and the oldest were almost at retirement age. With a slight simplification it could be argued that the interviewees consist, on the one hand, of young people with little occupational training or of students who need extra money. On the other hand, the interviewees consist of middle-aged women in their forties or fifties, with a long work history as clerical employees. (Koivunen 2004, 7–12)

The interview questions did not include any specific queries about the employees' embodiment or the bodily aspects of their work. However, every interviewee said something that I interpret as an utterance about the bodily aspects of the work. The interviewees described their experiences of embodiment and bodily aspects of the work, which are simultaneously intertwined with the cultural and social meanings associated with the body. All the interviews were conducted during the employees' work time at the workplace. However, the employer did not allow observing the employees at work.

When analysing the interviews, I follow the phases of qualitative analysis presented by Pertti Alasuutari (1995, 11–17). The analysis consists of two phases: firstly, the purification of the observations and, secondly, the interpretation of findings, or as he calls it, the unriddling or solving of the mystery. I began by reading and classifying the research material and identifying the observations that are, according to my interpretation, about embodiment and bodily aspects of the work. Then, I further reduced the amount of data by combining the observations by finding common denominators or themes. Such themes that conjoin the bodily aspects are: age, gender, ethnicity, office spaces, supervision and control and, lastly,

2 The interviews were conducted in the years 2001 (23 interviews), 2003 (5 interviews) and 2005 (17 interviews). In 2001 the interviews were conducted within the project number 49213 "Gendering Practices and Transformations at Work" funded by the Academy of Finland. In 2003 I conducted the interviews for my Master's thesis "Work commitment in a call centre" (Koivunen 2004). In 2005 I conducted the interviews for my dissertation within the project number 207373 "Gendered work communities, conflicts and social capital" funded by the Academy of Finland. Both projects are led by Päivi Korvajärvi. The majority of the interviewees, that is to say 22 persons (15 women and 7 men), are customer service agents. Ten interviewees (6 women and 4 men) are team leaders, who also work in the customer service in addition to their supervisory tasks. The data also includes 13 interviews with managers. In this paper, the analysis is concentrated mainly on the employees' and team leaders' interviews, not so much on the managers' interviews.

aesthetic labour. Most of these themes are further combined to a common denominator I call “the embodied use of voice”. I interpret the embodied use of voice as an important skill and resource in call centre work.

This paper is organised into four sections. First, I give a brief introduction to previous research about embodiment in work. Secondly, I describe the everyday work at a call centre in terms of the preconditions and restrictions for the employees’ embodiment. Thirdly, after these themes, I concentrate on the requirements to the employees’ embodied attributes such as age and gender, which are set by the employer, client companies and customers. Finally, I consider the importance of the aesthetic labour done with the assistance of embodied voice in the call centre. My aim is to develop novel views about the bodily aspects of paid work within the new kind of service work, which takes advantage of the advanced integration of computer and telephone.

Embodiment and Work Research

Since the 1980s there has been a growing interest in the body and embodiment within social research. The definition, appreciation and shaping of the female body has always been a key question in feminist social research, although within some feminist theory building and feminist activism the body is deliberately dismissed. This has been done in order to avoid identifying womanhood only with an anatomic body. (Palin 1996, 225–226) Within the research orientation of paid work, embodiment has rarely been found a topic worthy of attention. However, there have been some discussions that bring embodiment and waged work together, especially in Great Britain but also to some extent in Finland (for example Brewis 2000; McDowell 1997; Tyler & Hancock 2001; Honkasalo 1984 and Julkunen 2004). Yet, as far as I know, there is no research that considers the embodied use of voice.

According to previous research the bodily dimension of work varies in accordance with the content of work, workplace and the work requirements. In customer service work the emphasis is usually on the appearance of employees. For example in the hegemonic masculine and elitist world of finance, the difference between women and men employees is culminated in a woman’s body. In other words, women’s body remains as a sign of difference and inferiority to men regardless of the masculine way of action, work culture and, moreover, work dress. At the same time, however, both women’s and men’s embodiment and appearance have become a crucial part of their occupational success and bodily appearance is a part of the occupational contribution and human capital. (McDowell 1997)

In addition to the work related duties and tasks, employees have to work for their groomed bodily appearance. For example flight attendants’ gendered and lived bodies become organisational bodies when they internalise the surveillance and control of their bodies into self surveillance. In this way, the women’s aesthetic organisational body turns into an organisational icon which is considered as “natural” to women. (Tyler & Hancock 2001; Hancock & Tyler 2000)

In work, as in other instances, women are defined on the basis of their embodied attributes. Women’s conception of their body is largely constituted by comparisons with other women’s bodies, other people’s reactions and beauty ideals. Often women’s bodies are labelled as flawed in terms of excess: too feminine, too unfeminine, too motherly or too young for a high-powered occupation. (Brewis 2000; Brewis & Sinclair 2000) In addition, the work for groomed bodily appearance has become a part of the divisions of class and work. Creating images by means of a groomed appearance is associated with a high socio-economic status, successful business and customer service. Also, people with ageing bodies are expected to gain self and body which are compatible with the modern working life. (Julkunen 2003; 2004)

The possibilities to resist any of the expectations and demands expressed to employees at work are few, and many times the only means to oppose are bodily symptoms, such as exhaustion and depression. In factory work, women's bodily symptoms are interpreted as resistance to surveillance and, at the same time, as a possibility to experience one's body. In this way the surveillance and control in addition to an uncertainty about one's job, are leaking through the body. The bodily aspect of the job appears as women's topics related to their aches and pains, tiredness, sleeplessness, and more largely as topics related to the accidents, murders and rapes reported in the media. (Honkasalo 1984; 1993) In a similar way, the employees' narratives of anger can be interpreted as embodied, withdrawn and as individual resistance to the injustices at work. Incidents of injustice have hollowed out a place for memories in the experience level of the body and these injustices are expressed with the language of emotional experiences. In the context of paid work, the emotion of anger is associated with experiences of bodily agony and suffering, powerlessness and fatigue, exhaustion, depression and in worst cases, incapacity to work. (Virkki 2004)

The central themes within the earlier research have been the appearance of employees and the bodily symptoms displaying the experiences of resistance and injustice. My own view diverges in that I focus on the body as a resource. Also in this case the aesthetic of the body becomes significant, while restricted to the use of the embodied voice. What is common to these previous studies is that the body is considered more or less socially constructed. The body is constructed in an interaction between the body and the social context and, moreover, embodiment is a way of experiencing. This is my premise as well. The body is simultaneously a material, physical and biological occurrence which does not derive from social relations. I consider the body as concrete and impossible to pass by; without a body we cannot exist in this world. Moreover, I consider the body as dynamic, and hence, the body can be conceptualised in various ways in diverse strategic occasions.

Everyday Work in a Call Centre

Call centres can roughly be divided, on one hand, to in-house call centres and, on the other, to independent subcontractor call centre firms to which other firms outsource their activities. This paper deals with the latter type of call centre. Call centres are not a well known branch of industry in Finland, although it has been estimated that there are over 50 000 employees in various kinds of job assignments in call centres (TV-news TV1 14.1.2005). There are over 100 customer service agents, mostly women, in the call centre I am focusing on. The number of the employees varies constantly because of the high number of employees with fixed-term contracts and, accordingly, the high turnover.

The service work done in call centres is basically interactive communication with customers with the assistance of technology, in practice with the integration of computer- and telephone technologies. Accordingly, there is space for interaction in the junction of technology and the employees' body (Korvajärvi 2004, 127). The basic tasks of customer service in a call centre consist of, for example, taking in telephone orders, help desk tasks, selling and processing advertisements, telemarketing, dealing with overdue payment reminders, conducting telephone surveys and interviews, and taking care of customer appointments as well as answering and brokering services (TES 2003–2005).

In spite of the versatility of the basic tasks, the work is described in the interviews as rather monotonous and repetitive. The monotony and repetitiveness of the work is commonly illustrated by saying that it could be done in sleep, although talking to someone else always requires vigilance (Cameron 2000, 14). The interaction with customers is carried out with the aid of written scripts which are adapted by every agent to their own use. In addition to this, the agents do share their experiences about what utterances they have found effective and what not.

While working, the employees sit in front of their computer screens and keyboards with a headset on. Some of the agents deal with inbound calls, some make outbound calls and some both initiate and receive calls in turns. The inbound calls from customers are funnelled to the non-occupied employee, who simultaneously sees from the computer screen how to answer. This way the agent knows with which corporate client's greeting to answer. Software does not connect agents to calls with no answers or busy lines, but only connects to agents those calls that are answered.

The agents are bound to their work stations when they are working and they cannot freely move around in the open-plan office. Instead, they have to sit still in front of their desks with a headset and microphone on. The agents are not just talking, but typically using a computer keyboard and mouse simultaneously. Moving around is restricted by the wire of the headset but also by acoustics. The low partitions between the workstations are designed to lower the speaking voice so that the agents do not disturb each other. If the agent stands up, for example, the speaking voice travels over the partition and disturbs the other agents.

Sitting down when working diminishes the employees' possibilities to vary their working positions. Additionally, the employees are not able to decide the positions of their own bodies because the places are designed and restricted in advance. The agents have to settle themselves to a place and position given to them. Similarly, the unquestioned practice of the call centre is that the agents do not have their "own", steady workstations. Therefore the agents may have to change workstations during the work day.

Team leaders are the agents' immediate superiors, who train, support, counsel and give feedback to them and report the results to corporate clients. The surveillance of calls is a crucial part of the team leaders' work. Every call is recorded and the team leaders also listen in to the calls in real time. The agents do not know when she or he is listened to, but agents do know that the calls are recorded and may be listened to in real time or at a later time. The interviewed agents told me that the advantages of the surveillance are more important than the slight discomfort they may feel. First of all, the recording protects the agents in case the customer complains and offers a different view of the telephone conversation than the agent. Secondly, the real time surveillance is useful when the agents are given immediate feedback in order to improve their performance.

Team leaders work beside the agents, in contrast to the managers. The managers' offices with transparent glass doors are located above the open-plan working area of the agents and team leaders. It is said that the transparent doors make the managers more approachable but the stairs leading to the upper floor does not conform to this meaning. The glass doors also make it possible to see the whole working area beneath with only one glance. It would be well founded to divide the large working area into smaller sectors with silencing screens in order to cut down the noise. However, this would make it more difficult to supervise the area with gaze. The open area does not allow privacy or loudness, nor, for example, hidden expressions of emotions.

Requirements Related to Age and Gender

The interviews with the call centre employees indicate that especially age largely defines women. From the employers' point of view, certain bodily aspects of the employees are more wanted than others. For example one team leader explained that the fact that she has a female body prevents her from getting a promotion to more demanding job assignments. This is because she is expected to get pregnant. She says:

I think that at the moment I am in the risk group where they expect me to take maternity leave. This is how it is, too much speculation I think. It annoys me, otherwise I would've been willing to take on the challenge, but I think that this is how it goes.

As she explains, she does not expect to get a promotion any more, although there have been informal discussions about her willingness to move on to middle management. She would be eager to stay at the call centre and to “move on to new challenges”, but only with the promotion. In this way, the female worker’s body is automatically associated with the expectation of having children, which is considered to be contradictory with promotion and more demanding tasks. However, no expectation occurred that having children would have an effect on the team leaders’ present tasks and duties.

Employees who have already passed the typical child rearing age may well find that their age restricts their chances at work. Thus the ageing body may be found as a reason not to change jobs. Women as young as in their late thirties may be afraid to make any kind of a career move because their age might militate against them when seeking another job (Brewis 2000, 173). According to Raija Julkunen (2003, 184), there is nothing wrong with the ageing employees – whatever age they may be – except the fact that they are ageing.

The apprehension about the consequences of ageing did occur also in the interviews of the call centre employees. Some interviewees in their fifties told that because of their age, they have not considered changing the job. For example, Riitta has thought about resigning, but she has come to a conclusion that her age would act against her finding another job:

I will be 54 next so I still have some years left, but in any case. Often with old workmates we have talked about when we are sometimes really angry that, hell, what should we do? But then we come to the conclusion that no. We do not have a chance.

Women’s work experience is seldom valued and the ageing female body is often a nuisance which bonds the employee to her present job. This is despite the fact that when a woman has turned forty her best working years are not yet over. The age of one’s body is a powerful criterion, on which the employees, especially women employees, and their embodiment are evaluated. (Julkunen 2003) In contrast, none of the interviewed men employees considered their age as a disadvantage or an obstacle at work in general or in this particular job. This is because in gendered work cultures women’s and men’s bodily aspects seem to be valued differently.

The interviews with the call centre employees clearly indicate that client companies may want to decide with what kind of voices and images they want the call centre to represent them to customers. Some of the clients wish, for example, that every call centre employee willing to work on this commission, calls them, and they select the suitable voices. The interviewee responsible for recruitment describes the process:

We have a lot of clients who give certain criteria what kind of a person they want, what kind of a voice, what gender. These days they give a rather strict profile of what we should be like. Not long ago we had a client who did not accept any agents outright but he wanted each agent to call him first and he then asked certain things of the agents by phone. At the same time he heard what kind of voices the agents had. Does he want that his company is represented by such voices, what kind of an image and idea of the company is conveyed to the clients through the voice? In others words, he picked the voices that he wanted and as a result not everybody got in the campaign on the basis that the client did not approve their voices.

Thus, the call centre recruits and hires the employees in the first place, but among these employees, corporate clients may select suitable voices for their commissions in this way. The selecting and voice profiling may be very detailed. For instance, voices have to be associated with a certain age, gender, life-style, hobbies and so on. Although the employees’ embodied attributes define their job assignments, it does not necessarily exclude anyone because different job assignments require different kinds of voices. Depending on their

products, clients may expect, for instance, a youthful and sporty voice. Some clients may favor an adult, more grown voice with recognised experience of life, all-round education and the capability to have a more than shallow conversation. This kind of voice is described as trustworthy and convincing.

In call centre, work tasks related to the body's health or intimacy products are done by women. Further, for example, someone with a voice that sounds young and girly rarely works in technical help desk. This is because a young and girly voice is not considered as assertive and trustworthy customer service and especially male customers feel irritated if a woman who sounds young advises them on technical problems. Instead, young boys can work in technical help desks if they have a manly voice. Generally men are more often than women selected to work with products or services considered as technical. Similar gendering distribution of tasks is also found in previous studies (Korvajärvi 2002, 11–12; Belt et al. 2002, 25–26). In this way age and gender has an impact on the work tasks, although the majority of products and services do not require a certain age and gender. The agents have to present a voice which is compatible with their gender and with the product they are representing on the telephone. Thus gender is one bodily aspect that has to be heard in one's voice; it has to be recognisable as either a woman's or a man's, otherwise it is useless when contacting customers.

Workplace culture and work tasks include gendered work styles, which are gendered expectations of action deemed appropriate to a competent female or male employee. The gendered work styles associated within various work tasks define interaction, bodily movement, gestures and tones of voice. Work styles are also explicitly or implicitly heterosexualised. When repeated on a daily basis, these work styles produce presentations of properly gendered styles, which become a part of the workplace culture. (Kuosmanen 2002)

In service work, the heterosexualised and gendered work styles appear for example as the idea that a male employee's manly voice appeals to female customers. This is explicated by team leader Joanna:

If we approach a lot of female customers it is good that there are men. They like, these middle-aged women, the fact that there is a male voice. It is quite true that it often works much better.

Some interviewees explained that a man's voice appeals to women customers and, similarly, women employees are able to "sweet talk" to men customers, as the point was expressed. According to the interviews, the employees' voices, speaking and customer contacts are regarded as heterosexual without a question. There is no place or potential for other kinds of sexualities than heterosexuality. What is more, the heterosexualised work style appeared only in relation to customers but not to colleagues and therefore it seems that the heterosexual expectation is taken advantage of in customer relations.

The Aesthetic of the Embodied Voice

The interviews gave the impression that the employer and the management did not pay much attention to the employees' appearance. Yet they did pay a lot attention to the employees' voice and speaking, which are constantly supervised and given feedback. However, the interviewees, both women and men, recognised the requirements for their bodily appearance. A couple of interviewees commented how a view phone would increase the demands on the aesthetic appearance and one interviewee contemplated how customers could be tricked into believing in the agents' aesthetic appearance through the view phone. This is how one agent, Leena, comments the impressions constructed with the use of voice:

I think the customers at the other end really think that some 40-year-old good looking woman in a suit is calling. And if they saw what the people here are really like, looking like this and hair standing on end and all, they probably wouldn't buy a thing.

Both women and men employees in various kinds of customer service jobs are expected to present aesthetic appearance. This kind of stylised appearance in work has been called aesthetic labour (Witz et al. 2003, 34). In aesthetic labour, the employee's embodiment, gender and appearance are closely intertwined. The expectation of aesthetic labour is not directly written in the job advertisements or employment contracts. However, when job adverts are asking applicants to enclose a personal photo with their application, it refers to aesthetic labour expected at work (Warhurst et al. 2000, 11).

In call centres, visual aesthetic appearance is not expected because the contact between employee and customer is produced without visual perception. The agents' bodily appearance does not have to be especially groomed, except for the voice. Bodies are a part of certain service jobs in the sense that they represent what the organisation has to offer (Brewis 2000, 176). In call centre work, employees create images with the assistance of their voice.

The employees' aesthetic labour is expected to be in accordance with the images the client company wishes to create for customers. Image creation begins when an organisation recruits employees of certain age, appearance and body size. The reshaping of body is carried on when the employees produce and adapt their bodies in accordance with the employers' expectations. This kind of aesthetic labour considers the employees' bodies as material, which is shaped in order to match it with the expectations. (Tyler & Hancock 2001) The reshaping may continue after working hours by controlling exercise, cleaning and nurturing. In a similar way, a job may direct the employees' hobbies and interests. For example, the call centre employees whose task is speaking should avoid hobbies and activity that may encumber or harm their voice. This kind of avoidance of certain activities may be considered as a part of the employees' internalised self control.

Clothing and appearance are considered as advantaged cultural codes when people are categorised. The social order requires clothing according to one's position and work assignments. Moreover, salespersons' appropriate work dress is considered as a skill which is included in their work (Aholainen 2003). Ruth Buchanan and Sarah Koch-Schulte (2000, 36–37) have written that they were surprised by the dress codes enforced in many call centres. The dress codes required dress pants or skirts of conservative length for women and for men a tie and a collar. Visible tattoos were frowned upon, as were piercings, other than earrings for women. Hair was required to be within normal spectrum of hair colours, and at a gender-appropriate length. All this conformity to appearance standards was made although the customers were unable to see the employees. Buchanan and Koch-Schulte assumed that the dress code was linked to either the disciplinary control of the employees and or to the construction of the work as professional.

This kind of demands did not occur in the call centre I am focusing on. Instead, the agents seemed to dress quite casually and without codes and demands set by the employer. One reason for this lack of demands may be the high turnover of the agents. The recruitment and training of new agents requires a lot of time and effort which leaves little resources for additional requirements. Secondly, supposedly any kind of dress code does not increase the job seekers' interest in the organisation and therefore the lack of dress code advantages the recruitment of new employees. Thirdly, the organisation is still seeking its own policy in many respects, which is well illustrated by the rapidly changing situations and constant manager replacements.

The call centre offers a job opportunity also for some minority members whose employment possibilities may be remote. For example the Roma women who have been recruited in the call centre had formerly been in this kind of situation. Some employers'

prejudices against Romas makes even well-educated Romas' employment opportunities rather poor (Suomen romanit 2004, 13). It is not very common for Romas to work in service jobs, especially when they are wearing their traditional Roma clothes, as they are in this call centre. If job seekers are interviewed and hired via telephone, which is in line with the work, any attributes related to one's visual appearance do not have an impact on recruitment. However, this is not the practice in the call centre, although the first contact between the recruiter and job seeker usually takes place via telephone.

From the employers' point of view, a Roma person can work as an agent and speak fluent Finnish without a concern about arousing the customers' potential prejudice against the Romas' cultural background. In contrast, immigrants with broken Finnish are not potential labour force for the case study call centre. It came up that previously one very eager immigrant had tried the customer service work. However, broken Finnish arouse very strong negative reactions and suspicions in the customers who responded in a way that made the immigrant not want to work any more. Thus, in terms of the employees' cultural background, there is a great difference whether ethnicity is only visually apparent or if it can also be heard in speech.

Embodiment Concentrated on the Voice

In sum, it is fruitful to emphasize the interactive work in call centre as embodied work because then the central resource of the employees, the voice, catches the attention it deserves. The employees are required to present embodiment which is concentrated on their voice. The voice expresses the employees' embodied appearance, their willingness to service and it helps to create and maintain the images of products. In call centre work various kinds of voices are basically permitted but only within certain limits set and controlled by the employer and the client company. Such restricting limits are for example age which is in line with the product's image, two distinguishable genders and the expectation of heterosexuality and aesthetics. In this way call centres deliberately maintain the impression that their employees are vital and attractive, although at the same time they may offer a job to employees who have remote possibilities to be recruited for face-to-face customer service jobs because of their appearance.

The work in a call centre is literally invisible to the customers because the interaction takes place via a telephone. The customer and the employee do not meet in the same space but in a space created by technology. In addition, call centres are invisible because a characteristic of the work is to contact customers on behalf of the client company while the subcontractor stays unrecognised. The consequence of this double invisibility may lead to the divergence of customer work, its wages and valuation so that face-to-face customer service is done exclusively by young, attractive and better waged employees. Then the voice-to-voice customer service jobs are for employees who only sound young and attractive while their surface appearance does not necessarily conform to this perception. This kind of segregation according to the employees' embodied attributes restricts the already narrow range of choices in working life.

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