

Book review

Phone clones: authenticity work in the transnational service economy

Kiran Mirchandani (2012), Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press. 174 pp. \$23.95/£14.95.

Cornell University Press adds to its stable of high quality socially enquiring research on contemporary work and working lives with the monograph *Phone Clones: Work in the Transnational Service Economy* by Kiran Mirchandani. Readers of this journal will be especially familiar with the lively research trajectory surrounding the development, organisation and management of call centre work since the mid-1990s. Emblematic of the rise of service jobs in the new economy, call centres utilise advances in information and communication technologies to routinise, standardise and mass produce voice to voice customer service and sales work, in the process recalibrating how such work is done, when it is done, where and by whom.

Call centres have been a focus of significant work research interest, and a welcome and distinctive feature of much of this output has been its emphasis on the lived experiences of front line workers. Mirchandani's comprehensive account adds an important contribution. The rich seam of call centre research has documented the nature of the call centre labour process, providing insight into what are frequently high pressure work routines experienced as an 'assembly line in the head' (Taylor and Bain, 1999) and explored the differences between quality and quantity workflows, finding a general pull to quantity (Taylor *et al.*, 2002). Such research has raised questions about the disassembly of knowledge work and re/appropriation of skills and 'attitudes' (Callaghan and Thompson, 2002), work intensification (cross selling, highly specific call handling, data collection targets and performance penalties), its limited autonomy and often stressful nature and the many forms of emotion work involved in voice based customer service provision (Korczynski, 2003; 2005). Research has theorised monitoring practice, paradoxes of Human Resource Management, variations in management style and forms of bureaucratic, infonormative and cultural control (Frenkel *et al.*, 1999; Houlihan, 2002; Fleming and Sturdy, 2009), the role of the customer (Bolton and Houlihan, 2005) and the economic and political backdrop of call centre development (Ellis and Taylor, 2006). Breaking away from a monolithic and oppressive account, call centre research has also highlighted employee agency and the dynamics of collective and individual resistance to be found, including humour and absenteeism, and pushes toward and away from union organising as both managers and workers subjectively shape, respond to and adapt customer service work routines (Taylor and Bain, 2003; Houlihan, 2006; Bain and Taylor, 2008). Weaving all this together are analyses of the broader social, economic, structural and cultural implications of this new economy work, increasingly global in character (van den Broek, 2004; Taylor and Bain, 2005; Poster, 2007; 2011; Matos, 2012). These themes are explored in *Phone Clones* in compelling detail, but more than this, the narrative is firmly recast from a sector or geographic study to a well-reasoned analysis of some of the core fabrics of globalisation.

One of the most significant facets of call centre work is its footloose nature and capacity to be segregated or outsourced. Viewed through a Western lens, call centres are seen as emblematic of patterns of work relocation, largely in the pursuit of reduced labour costs, whether from high streets to regional office parks, from in-house departments to outsourced service providers or from local settings to far away shores. In

parallel, working hours have extended, following the sun to cater for a worldwide 24/7 customer base, as boundaries of time and location simultaneously shrink and expand. Viewed through a more global lens, a significant question becomes how the standardising workflows of call centre work play out in different cultural and geographical contexts, and what it really means to be part of a transnational service economy. *Phone Clones* takes us squarely to one such frontier: India, where in large numbers, young professional women and men have embraced the employment opportunities and the newly middle class, Westernised lifestyle of business process outsourcing and call centre work. Yet rather than portraying this as an offshoring debate, Mirchandani invites us to examine such issues through a transnational lens, incorporating a more political, feminist and critical analysis of the global economic regime.

Based on years of research (2002–2009) and detailed interviews with stakeholders including 100 Indian call centre workers (in the cities of Bangalore and New Delhi, and latterly in the ‘new’ call centre city of Pune), Mirchandani builds a case that the Indian call centre story is not simply another narrative of customer service labour process. Rather, she argues, it offers a means of understanding the social relations of difference, and accessing the inner micro processes of economic globalisation. In this analysis, the politics of class, gender, race and capital are enacted (and exploited) through the daily negotiation of borders by Indian customer service workers, and their required performance of ‘authenticity work’—legitimacy building activities necessary for a transnational customer service encounter to be successful. Mirchandani conveys the nuanced nature of authenticity work—the sense of identification or empathic social relating to put customers at ease—but particularly, its reliance on a delicate, and often deferential construction of sameness and difference. Early in the book, to make this point, a 2006 cover of *Time* magazine emblazoned with the tagline ‘India Inc.’ is analysed by Mirchandani as a tellingly idealised Western image of the transnational worker or ‘phone clone’: a fair skinned, traditionally dressed Indian woman—exotic, yet familiar, responsive and non-threatening, confident, but ultimately, subservient. Mirchandani describes this weaving of competing statuses—being made familiar, while rendered different—as the basis for an economy of identity and authenticity work. She shows how India’s colonial history, the impact of English language training, convent schooling and a legacy of deference, combine to construct an idealised workforce for this transnational customer service industry. Mirchandani also observes how by dint of transnational work organisation, history continues to be re-enacted, reproducing social hierarchies and further embedding notions of superiority and lack in the eyes of the other—noting that while Westerners are allocated the superior role of customer, Indian call centre workers often see themselves as more highly educated than their often hostile and angry counterpart.

Indeed, in contrast to the downgrading of semi-professional work spoken of in the West, the early years of Mirchandani’s research noted a flight to call centre work by highly educated Indian professionals, as international call centre workers in India are relatively well paid with examples among her respondents of doctors, lawyers and school principals who made significant salary gains by migrating from their professional roles to call centre work. In later years of her research, this pattern then shows signs of significant change towards recruitment of student labour.

Thus in common with some other researchers of Indian call centre labour process (van den Broek, 2004; Taylor and Bain, 2005; Poster, 2007; 2011), Mirchandani’s use of qualitative and longitudinal methods allows her to tell a dynamic story, charting the unfolding experience and its changing nature over time. Throughout her accounts, we access a rich picture of the ways in which Indian call centre workers, like call centre workers everywhere, experience the rigours of highly selective recruiting and intensive performance management systems. But we see more than simply this. The unilateral imposition of highly Westernised office spaces assertively over-riding local mores with a global (Western) culture and workplace value set, offers a metaphor for where things differ, and how the transnational service worker is actively constructed and socialised, replacing the ‘deficient’ Indian worker and culture. The ‘chaos’ of India, is replaced with ‘shiny glass buildings and office parks’. Mirchandani describes how MTI (‘mother

tongue influence') is used to connote the impact of accent on communicativeness and comprehension for Western ears, with careful selection for minimal and 'neutralisable' MTI effects, and training interventions to help Indian call centre staff sound familiar (Westernised) to their customers. Most fundamentally of all, many Indian workers are dislocated from their cultural context by their working hours, mainly working night shift to be available to Western callers during *their* daylight hours. To do so, they pay a high personal cost, distanced not only from their ordinary selves during working hours, but through the timescape of night work forced to sleep when friends, family and cultural experiences outside their sector are most accessible, to absorb the sometimes low cultural understanding of such choices, and to undertake tricky domestic and childcare arrangements—a state so eloquently described in Ch. 6 as 'being nowhere in the world'. In these complex ways, Indian call centre workers are reformed as familiar for their customers, their cultural norms carefully edited and refocused for Western tastes.

At the same time, however, their difference is traded upon: they are less expensive global workers, a core inequity presented as the acceptable face of cost saving globalisation. These tenets are drawn out in detail in Ch. 2 where historical and regional language patterns are reviewed and, in Ch. 3, where the painful experience of 'backlash' is discussed. The agent is a mediator between the organisation's rules and the customer's world, performing the role of buffer—often on the receiving end of customer displeasure, at the restrictions of the service, at the loss of local access, at the seeming threat of 'stranger danger'. Irrespective of skills and education, Indian call centre workers are deemed acceptable only if they 'sound right', while all responsibility for being understood is allocated to the individual worker. They must slow down their speech, avoid 'Indianisms' and instead adopt 'Americanisms' or 'Britishisms', while the Westerner customer is allocated the superior role of judge. For a time it was common to task agents to lie about their location and 'fake' a Western identity, through knowledge of local weather systems and TV show plots, despite the widespread poor success of this strategy. Since around 2005, agents are instead trained to absorb this tension with 'understanding and empathy', and to regard their capacity to do so as a skill. As the book well documents, transnational service workers are often subjected to anger and hostility at their role as 'job thieves'. Only rarely are agents reported to stand up for themselves, and then in quite mild ways such as reminding an abusive caller that it is they, not the customer who is skilled in multiple languages.

Amidst all this dislocation, Mirchandani shows how the call centre agent learns to perform authenticity work to help cover the gaps and build legitimacy and navigate the historical and often tricky transnational relationships. The task becomes to apply cultural glue by 'being yourself, but being someone else at the same time'. Someone else imagined by customers and employers as the ideal transnational worker, 'both close to and distant from customers in the West' (3). Authenticity work in this way is negotiated, complex, continually shifting, individual and situational and in Mirchandani's account includes elements of subtle feminisation and tolerance of 'racialised othering'.

This performance, she suggests, need not mean a loss of one's real identity, nevertheless, that identity is continually shaped, reshaped and traded upon. For example the 'supersonic' growth of call centre outsourcing to India in the 2000s is noted as a product of intensive government branding of Indians as idealised transnational workers, alongside a coalition of media and business interests discursively investing call centre workers in representing their country to the world. Such messages sit alongside prevailing Hindu values around work as spiritual service to one's family and community, but also strong disciplinary regimes enacting professionalism and constructed Western values of productivism, consumerism and aestheticism. And indeed, Indian call centre workers are well paid relative to other roles and are encouraged to be active consumers of the Western goods and lifestyles they support. Ultimately, however, the view from the West it is implied, is that the virtue of the transnational worker is in their being far away, and so we see offshoring for what it is: 'importing the work, but not the body' (20).

It must be noted that Mirchandani specifically set out to study international call centres workers serving 'the West' (primarily the UK and America, and to a smaller extent, Canada and Australia). The longitudinal nature of the study provides a sense of cultural immersion, such that Mirchandani seems able to reflect and to engage with the Indian call centre experience as both an insider and an observing Westernised outsider, mirroring the 'same/different' dynamic she describes. Her focus on the front line worker experience is rich and valuable, although further engagement with managerial, client and customer perspectives would deepen the study substantially. A notable aspect of the methodology is the integrity with which participants were recruited, with word of mouth and snowball sampling suspended because of anonymity compromises, and respondents recruited singly through newspaper adverts. A significant strength of this book is its extensive and very readable integration of research literature in the Indian call centre field and the elaborate chapter notes provided.

I found *Phone Clones* to be an informed, informing and engaging read. It is filled with the voices and occasionally writings of Mirchandani's correspondents, and these are used to build a credible theoretical development around authenticity work. Together they paint a vivid picture of the lived experience of the transnational service work, replete with 'gaps and ironies that are far from the unproblematic cloning of Western identities, work cultures and lifestyles' (100). These include precious moments of real connections made with callers, as well as the many appalling expressions of nationalism and hatred projected into agents and the frequent employer violations and dehumanising conditions endured. However, I would suggest at times perhaps too much superiority is rhetorically attributed to the customer, and an undifferentiated view of Westerners is inadvertently reinforced. While the systems clearly espouse this, other research with call centre customers suggests that far fewer trust or buy into the notion of the sovereign customer than its rhetoric suggests, instead becoming functional transactants or occasionally moral agents seeking to repair dehumanising aspects of the role (Bolton and Houlihan, 2005). It would certainly be interesting to engage with customers of Indian call centres as part of this study. In conclusion, this is a lively, accessible and pacy account of life as a call centre worker that offers a nuanced and thoughtful insight on authenticity work—built through the continual negotiation of sameness and difference—as a means of establishing legitimacy in an often uneven, historically shaped transnational context—and offers careful description of the many elaborate systems that produce and reproduce the transnational service worker.

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