

Vision: The Journal of Business Perspective

<http://vis.sagepub.com/>

Book Review: Phone Clones: Authenticity Work in the Transnational Service Economy

Diya Das

Vision: The Journal of Business Perspective 2013 17: 267

DOI: 10.1177/0972262913496806

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://vis.sagepub.com/content/17/3/267>

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

On behalf of:



Management Development Institute

Additional services and information for *Vision: The Journal of Business Perspective* can be found at:

Email Alerts: <http://vis.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

Subscriptions: <http://vis.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

Reprints: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

Permissions: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

Citations: <http://vis.sagepub.com/content/17/3/267.refs.html>

>> [Version of Record](#) - Sep 19, 2013

[What is This?](#)

why projects do not become a strategic part of development work in organizations.

The authors have used three mechanisms to explain sustainability in their development work. The first mechanism is active ownership, which is analyzed by using a theory of project organization as an analogy to theories of work organization. The second mechanism is collaboration to generate joint knowledge formation, where theories on innovation systems, networks and cluster formation are covered. The third mechanism is development learning to create multiplier effect in a large project where theories on implementation, dissemination and strategic impact. Sustainability in development work can be studied in interaction between these three mechanisms which has been carried out by the authors.

The book is an example of the contribution made by the structural funds to development through better project work and management. Success in project-based development work requires a deeper understanding at different levels and among the different players (i.e., people responsible for programmes, project case handlers, project owners, steering groups, project management personnel, participants, et al.) of how projects should be organized and operated.

Rajen Mehrotra

8, Horizon View (First Floor)
138, Genl. J Bhosale Marg
Nariman Point
Mumbai-400 021
Maharashtra
India

Kiran Mirchandani, *Phone Clones: Authenticity Work in the Transnational Service Economy*, Cornell University Press, 2012.

DOI: 10.1177/0972262913496806

The Indian call centre industry is a fascinating example of globalization of work since this industry was primarily created with the process of off shoring of service work from countries like the US and UK, followed by Australia. There was no domestic Indian call centre industry to speak of before that and also currently about 80 per cent of the industry is directed towards customers in these western countries (Holman, Batt & Holtgrewe, 2007). Thus, the industry becomes an important site to investigate the concerns and issues that are raised in the processes of globalization. In *Phone Clones*, Kiran Mirchandani studies this industry and produces a comprehensive account of the lives of the employees who work these global jobs. The book is a focused account of the lived experiences of these

call centre workers that Mirchandani deftly puts together on the basis of an impressive 100 interviews she conducted over 10 years—a period that was marked by some of the highest growth years for the industry and ones that encompassed important shifts in the way they conducted work.

The idea of ‘authenticity work’ is a powerful theoretical concept that Mirchandani defines as the attempts or work that is done to legitimize a specific experience. While much of contemporary capitalism rests on the authenticity of experience provided, for example, through the authentic culinary experiences like an ethnic restaurant, or even authentic cultural experiences in travel, Mirchandani argues that in this industry, ironically, authenticity of the call centre worker rests on a certain notion of ‘faking’ of their customers. All customer service rests on making the customer feel valued and helped and it lingers around the idea of a conversation with an ‘authentic’ person. The problem in this industry is how can employees in India *sound* authentic to their western customers, given ideas of race and nationality that question the legitimacy of the Indian workers as authentic representatives of these western firms for their customers and thereby render them to be somewhat ‘deficient’. The identity of the Indian call centre worker is problematized even more with the politically charged rhetoric where offshoring is construed as essentially the loss of jobs of one nation to another, and therefore signifying a certain kind of gain of one at the expense of the other. What sets the Indian international call centre industry apart from any domestic counterpart is this attempt to create authenticity and legitimacy of the workers. This book provides an excellent description of the myriad organizational practices that employees are subjected to, in order to create the impression of authentic customer service. Not only does it trace these subjections but also how the employees process and often resist them. The process of producing the authentic service worker starts with the voice and accent training program that is designed to reduce the mother tongue influence in the individual’s way of speaking English and increase his/her skills to carry on a conversation with the western customer (as detailed in the chapter ‘Language Training: The Making of a Deficient Worker’). While, till 2006 the training included preparing employees to conceal their location in India and pretend to be located in the client country, the practice ended since the customers often did not believe it. This change brought in a renewed backlash that is very effectively elaborated in the chapter ‘Hate Nationalism and Outsourcing Backlash’. Since then the employees are required to represent this complex identity of an ideal customer service personnel who is both familiar with and easily understood by their customer, and yet distant in his/her location. They are, thus, equipped to deal with the anger and the anxiety of the customer in an efficient and professional manner. This

identity complex that is delivered through an effective deployment of emotional labour is produced through not only rigorous training, but a close monitoring and supervision of the employees, and creation of a workplace culture that reinforces the being of this new Indian worker. Such identity practices of the Indian call centres are unique in the history of globalization of work and have been studied from many different disciplinary perspectives including business, geography, performance studies, economics and sociology, and have also led to a body of creative work (novels, plays and movies).

Mirchandani's book makes significant contributions to the literature on call centres and to discourses of globalization at large and stands out as one of the first comprehensive ethnographies of this industry from the perspective of the lived experiences of the employees. The author effectively captures the 'fabric' of this work through her interviews over the years, and in exploring the many different facets of this work. The chapters 'Surveillance Schooling for Professional Clones,' 'Being Nowhere in the World: Synchronous Work and Gendered Time,' and 'Don't Take Calls, Make Contacts! Legitimizing Racist Abuse', are rich accounts of different aspects of creating authentic call centre workers in a global economy. More importantly, Mirchandani makes a significant theoretical contribution through her analysis of the idea of authenticity as a hallmark of contemporary globalization. This analysis of identity work in Indian call centres raises larger questions of constructing professional identities in a post-colonial context that struggles to establish its own authenticity even though it often rests on processes of mimicry and ambivalence (Bhabha, 1994; Das and Dharwadkar, 2009). An intersectional analysis of the call centre workers' race,

class, gender and nationality, that is simultaneously embodied and disembodied through this kind of work, shows not only the constructed nature of identities but also the politically fraught condition of workplace identities.

While Mirchandani weaves in her theory very meticulously and eloquently with the interviews, one is left wondering about how such this kind of authenticity work over the years impact these workers. Some reflective accounts of the different ways this work affects these individuals' own sense of their identity would have enriched their stories and generated an even better understanding of their struggles.

This book is a must read for anyone who is interested in not only understanding the workings of the Indian call centre industry but also those who seek to make sense of the complex identity negotiations that workers are subject to under conditions of globalization of work. It is also extremely well written and would be meaningful for both scholars and practitioners of global work.

References

- Bhabha, Homi. K. (1994). *The location of culture*. London and New York: Routledge Press.
- Das, D., & Dharwadkar, D. (2009). Cultural mimicry and hybridity: On the work of identity in international call centers in India. In Bobby Bannerjee, Vanessa Chio & Raza Mir (Eds), *Organizations, markets, and imperial formations: Towards an anthropology of globalization* (pp.). Cheltenham, UK: Edward-Elgar Publications.
- Holman, D., Batt, R., & Holtgrewe, U. (2007). The global call center report: International perspectives on management and employment. Available online at www.globalcallcenter.org

Diya Das
Bryant University