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Subjects, Subjectivity, and Subjectification in Call Center Work

The Doings of Doings

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In postindustrial society, paid labor is increasingly characterized as tertiary labor rather than primary or secondary labor and commonly mediated by computer and telecommunication technologies. However, there are few ethnographic studies on the production of the subject and subjectivity in postindustrial workplaces. This article reports a poststructurally informed ethnographic research in four telephone call centers, focusing on how technological and managerial practices are deployed and continuously oriented to in subjectification processes. The result, although "rational" and "real," is shown to be a construction of concerted compliance and secondary adjustments through strategic processes named *shadowboxing with data*. Implications for the study of subjectivity and subjectification are discussed.

Keywords: *subjectification; subjectivity; poststructuralism; call center; labor*

As societies continue to change in the period referred to as postindustrial (Bell 1973; Ritzer 2000a; Zuboff 1988) or postmodern (Cooper 1994; Hardt and Negri 2000; Marcus 1998), the forces acting on society and its members are in rapid flux. One such change is the fact that work in Western societies is, since at least the 1970s, decreasingly characterized as primary or secondary labor and increasingly characterized as tertiary labor or service work. Another influential change has been the rapid adoption and introduction of computers and computer and telecommunication networks to regulate nearly all facets of work, especially where they permit continuous surveillance and continuous and rapid production of "objective" examinations of worker performance (Poster 1990; Winiecki 2004). This is particularly the case in telephone call centers, an expanding sector of service work characterized by a high incidence of technology mediation.

With immersion of workers into combined regulatory surveillance and examination systems and deployment of various forms of training proper use and compliance with those systems, workers are expected to behave in accord with the norms encoded into those systems—norms programmatically consistent with "productive" and "quality" work as defined by the organization. However, like all systems, there are always gaps with which workers can exercise judgment in ways that may deviate from what the organization expects. Management responses to such variations sometimes appear in the form of ad hoc "counseling" and "coaching" tactics that continuously orient workers to the "representation" of one's self in productivity and quality statistics. These tactics reflect an unquestioned acceptance of organizational goals and imputed objective truth of these data and actively attempt to convince workers to similarly accept these data and modify their own behavior to fulfill the organization's goals for productivity and quality work.

Orientation to "the stats" representing productivity and quality permeates the knowledge and action of all workers—management and labor alike. When posed to both management and workers, questions about the interconnection of the design of labor processes and tools and "coaching" and "counseling" practices got replies orienting to the organization's desire to conduct business in a manner that is as economical, calculable, predictable, and controllable as possible—a commonsense orientation that can be associated with a formal "program" incorporated into the organization and its functions (for example, see Ritzer 2000b; Shenhav 1999). These are explored in terms of labor process and management as (1) disciplinary practices and (2) governing practices.

In addition, the use of "psy" (psychological) tactics by management to "counsel" workers to align themselves with technological and rule-based components of the work environment produces a continuously adaptive network of forces that can induce rapid changes in how individuals know their selves in terms of "the stats" and thus how they conduct themselves (Cameron 2000; du Gay 1996; Rose 1999; Winiecki 2004). Within a poststructural orientation, this can be characterized as a "doing" of the *intentional* programmatic goals of efficiency and economy. The production of a "stats oriented" subjectivity is more than a simple "unintended consequence" on account that spontaneously occurring variations in the way subjects are "supposed to" know and conduct their selves are found to be subsequently oriented to in actions of both management and labor. The "doing" of these ongoing changes in subjectivity can be characterized as a continual "shadowboxing with data" in which organizations and workers alike affect various kinds of tactics to influence how workers "look" or "see themselves" in the

stats. Thus, there exists an ongoing but somewhat anonymous and ethereal "strategic"[1] power affecting subjectivity, which affects the process of subjectification itself.

This multifaceted process is illustrated here as it occurs within four telephone call centers. Implications for the sociological study of subjects and subjectivity in society are discussed.

Method and Field Sites

Interest in conducting this study began when several graduate students of mine took part-time jobs in local call centers to support themselves. Passing discussions with them frequently led to expressions of frustration with work in these "communication factories" (Cameron 2000), especially on the topics of close regulation over how each call was accomplished and the tight pacing of work. Invariably, their descriptions referenced "the stats" (statistical aggregations "representing" productivity and the quality of work) and consistent feelings that they were subjected to "total" surveillance and oppressive labor practices that prevented them from actually doing what they thought to be "customer service." One of them characterized it this way:

> I want to help the customer, and when you're able to do that, the job is almost fun! But the way things are set up, all I can do is follow the rules and parrot the scripts. I want to do *customer service* but I feel like the organization actually *prevents* me from doing that!

However, despite discomfort with the labor process and management practices, they found the workplace to be rational, the statistical representations of their work "objective" and on those grounds unable to mount any "objective" attack on them. Another student, who was a trainer in a call center at that time, referenced "the stats" as " . . . just the way it is" and reflexive of " . . . the right way to do customer service." In one conversation where these students were all present, the former agreed that the organization's way of doing business was, despite their discomfort with it, about what they would expect of any modern business.

Given variation in these casual reports, I was curious about the technical processes by which "the stats" were produced and the social processes in call centers. Coming from a poststructural orientation toward researching social life, I was interested in the social construction and deployment of knowledge in these workplaces and how sociotechnical knowledge affected workers' subjectivity. The poststructural analytics described here are not intended to

replace conventional structural theoretical positions, especially as they apply to the study of labor issues (for example, the thoroughgoing Marxian orientation of Braverman [1974], the neo-Marxian orientation of Burawoy [1979], or the Weberian "ideal-typical" orientation of Ritzer [2000b]). Rather, it is intended to inspect the "doings" of everyday "doings" that escape more conventional theory and commonsense thought (Foucault, in Dreyfus and Rabinow 1983, 187), and in so doing provide new "tools to think with" when analyzing social subjects, subjectivity, and processes of subjectification in modern institutions.

The possibility of a fieldwork based study using poststructural theory was also interesting on account that most poststructural studies of subjectivity and subjectification are performed on secondary and tertiary literature—one of the primary criticisms of that form of research (for notable exceptions, see Cameron 2000; du Gay 1996; McKinlay and Starkey 1998a; Winiecki 2004, 2006). I considered that this project could add to the empirical literature using a poststructural orientation.

Facilitated by my relationship with these students, informal and formal meetings with management were scheduled and accomplished at two of the call centers in which some of my students worked. One of these was *DeliveryWorldwide*, a call center for an express delivery company. The other was *BigTech*, a call center run by a computer equipment manufacturer.[2]

These meetings culminated in agreements for extended fieldwork. Concurrent to these meetings, I acquired permission from the "human subjects committee" at my university. I subsequently began full-time fieldwork in May 2002. I alternated, one week at a time, in observation at these two call centers, until mid-August 2002. Alternating location by week was appropriate on account that the cycle of meetings, statistical reporting periods, and other bureaucratic matters in these organizations commonly occurred on a weekly or biweekly basis. During the following academic year, I made regular site visits to conduct interviews with call center agents and management personnel at these two call centers.

During that academic year, following an on-campus seminar over my research, one of the attendees approached me and told that she was an employee at *MHealth*, a regional insurance company with a small call center. She offered to put me in contact with management at the company with the idea that I could include that organization in my research. After several formal meetings with management, similar agreements were signed and I planned to commence fieldwork at that call center in May 2003.

In a casual meeting with faculty colleagues that year, I also met the director of nursing for a local medical center. The topic of my research came up,

and he offered to put me in contact with the director of the center's telephone triage nursing call center called *MedAdvise*. The now familiar meetings with management were conducted, and agreements were signed to conduct fieldwork at that call center beginning in May 2003.

Both *MHealth* and *MedAdvise* also required that I attend training on requirements of recently passed legislation to protect the identity of medical patients—the HIPAA law (health insurance portability and accountability act). *MedAdvise* also required me to secure permission from the medical center's internal committee for research on human subjects prior to the commencement of fieldwork.

Similar to what was accomplished during the summer of 2002 and the subsequent academic year, I alternated weeks in full-time fieldwork at *DeliveryWorldwide*, *MHealth* and *MedAdvise* during the summer of 2003. Acquisition of a local research grant at my university facilitated a one-course load reduction from my faculty job, and I continued fieldwork three days per week at *MHealth* and *MedAdvise,* during academic year 2003 to 2004. During this time, I continued regular visits at *DeliveryWorldwide* and *BigTech* to conduct interviews with personnel. Fieldwork concluded in April 2004 at all four sites.

Research participants were selected using a snowball method. I started by asking my management hosts "who is a good person for me to talk with?" After securing informed consent from that person and observing and interviewing with them for one or more shifts, I asked him or her for the name of another person who might be open to participation in the study. As I got to know people, I began selecting participants myself based on their participation in processes in which I was interested.

The collection of official documents and the taking of photographs of artifacts and work procedures were conducted to satisfy purposive sampling and theoretical sampling requirements. I simply asked participants if I could have copies of documents used or created in the course of work (with personal information blacked out) or if I could photograph the events observed. I coded these documents and photographs with time and date codes and similarly coded fieldnotes, interview notes, and transcripts so that I could reconstruct events and processes in data analysis sessions.

In total, more than 100 call center agents and management personnel participated in this research. Data supporting this research were collected in nearly 2,000 hours of participant and nonparticipant observation, 138 interviews, and included 768 official documents and more than 1,700 photographs. I basically "went to work" with agents and supervisory personnel in four call centers for complete eight- to twelve-hour shifts during fieldwork.

Fieldwork was conducted in all shifts (commencing as early as 5:00 a.m. and ending as late as midnight, including weekends). I also attended management and supervisory meetings and employee evaluation sessions when permitted.

The Research Venues: Four Call Centers

BigTech

The *BigTech* call center is a "help desk" for computer peripherals. It is one of five domestic call centers and an increasing number of international call centers run by the parent organization. At the start of fieldwork, it employed about nine hundred agents, about 80 percent of them male. At the completion of fieldwork, it employed roughly three hundred agents. This was due to an aggressive effort to reduce costs by moving operations to lower cost subcontractors in India. Agents at this call center answer between five and twenty calls per day, and the duration of calls range from several minutes to several hours, depending on complexity of equipment and problems to be solved.

DeliveryWorldwide

DeliveryWorldwide is a customer support center for a national delivery company. At the start of fieldwork, it was one of twelve domestic call centers run by the company. By the end of fieldwork, three domestic call centers had been closed or consolidated, and the company had been bought by an international express delivery company. Throughout fieldwork, this call center employed about one hundred agents, roughly 80 percent of them female and about 20 percent part-time workers. Agents took four types of calls from customers: (1) scheduling pickup of packages, (2) customer complaints, (3) questions about billing records, and (4) general inquiry calls. Agents answered as many as two hundred calls per day. Calls were highly scripted, and the organization informally required that agents' average fewer than two and a half minutes per call.

MHealth

The *MHealth* call center is a subset of a regional health insurance and counseling services company, employing five agents. Agents addressed customer requests to authorize insurance benefits, clerical and process-oriented questions from health care providers and clients, and performed clerical

processes. During fieldwork, the call center employed between three and five full-time agents. At various times in fieldwork, one or two of the agents were male. Agents generally answered thirty to fifty calls per day.

MedAdvise

MedAdvise is a telephone triage nurse call center, colloquially known as "dial a nurse." It is affiliated with a large regional medical center. There are seventeen Registered Nurses (RNs) working in this call center. RNs answer calls related to medical health care concerns of citizens—who may or may not be patients of the hospital or affiliated physicians. Of the seventeen RNs working in this call center, only two are scheduled for full-time shifts. The remaining fifteen RNs work from .2 full-time equivalent to .7 full-time equivalent. Remaining members are scheduled for fractions of full-time shifts. During fieldwork, there were two male nurses working at *MedAdvise*.

Disciplining Work and Workers

Workers are subjected to a multifaceted apparatus of techniques and technologies that discipline the conduct of work. In the sociology of labor, this is referred to under the auspice of labor process (Bain and Taylor 2000; Braverman 1974; Burawoy 1979; Wardell, Steiger, and Meiksins 1999). In general, this is accomplished through training, design and use of tools that sequence tasks and regulate pace, and forms of evaluation through which worker conduct is made measurable against organizational norms. It is also accomplished informally through tactics that continuously reorient workers to regulation immanent in official tools and regulations (Burawoy 1979; Edwards 1990; Jermier, Knights, and Nord 1994; Knights 1990).

On the surface, call centers in this research are similar to the norm depicted in the literature (Bain and Taylor 2000; Barnes 2004; Paulet 2004; van den Broek, Callaghan, and Thompson 2004; Winiecki 2004). The worker is enclosed in a large, open office space, partitioned into cubicles and "attached" to a computer and phone system through use of a telephone headset and computer terminal.

This compartmentalization and "attachment" of workers to technology systems provide conduits through which workers are subjected to both individualizing and totalizing forces that exert disciplinary forces on their conduct. Individually, workers in each organization use specially designed database software, which imposes sequence and pacing on the work. This is

accomplished by the ordering of fields into which particular data requested by scripted questions is to be entered. Although individual workers *could* ask scripted questions in many different orders, it is *faster* to follow the sequence of questions and associated data entry fields in the software. With the combination of software designed in this way and explicit or implicit time targets on a worker's average call length, workers normally comply with forces built into this apparatus. When all workers are subjected to the same forces, the organization is able to inspect and evaluate their work using "totalizing" rubric and metrics (Bain and Taylor 2000; Beirne, Riach, and Wilson 2004; Callaghan and Thompson 2001; Cameron 2000; van den Broek 2002; Winiecki 2004).

The computer system—called the "automated call distributor" (ACD) – accomplishes this by both delivering work to agents and monitoring aspects of their activity. The ACD forwards incoming calls to workers currently not speaking with customers. If all workers are currently busy, the ACD puts the incoming call into a queue and automatically forwards it to the next available agent so that customer hold times are minimized. The ACD continuously monitors all workers and inscribes particular aspects of each worker's conduct into a database. Calculations on these inscriptions produce a regular record of each worker's productivity, which may then be compared to organizational standards for average call length, number of calls worked per hour, and so forth. Each worker's productivity is regularly displayed on reports generated from the ACD.

Figure 1 displays a facsimile of a productivity report produced by the ACD at *DeliveryWorldwide*. Color coding of individual cells relative to the "key" at the lower left of the report has been added by a team leader in the call center and exemplifies (1) how what is "seen" by the ACD is converted into a form that "says something" about the individuals inscribed and at the same time (2) provides a warrant for management action on workers who are "seen" to be producing below the desired rate. This display of statistics renders both a hierarchical observation (view of all workers according to the same categories) and normalizing judgment (ability to judge all individuals according to a normative standard) over all workers at once.

The ACD also enables covert phone taps or "barging" by supervisory personnel on agents' phones so that their work can be monitored in real time for the purpose of rating quality components of their work—use of computer-based policy manuals, "friendliness" in the worker's voice, and so forth. These ratings are regulated by a specially designed form that guides its user to apply a company prescribed set of rules defining "quality" and inscribe ratings that define the worker's conduct against the rules. This form requires

Figure 1
Productivity Reports, Goals, and Embedded Coaching

Agent name	ACD Calls	Avg Talk Time	InBd Ext Calls	Out Bound Calls	OutBd w/in Cntr	Total OutBd Time	OutBd Per-cent	Total AUX Time	Total Train Time	Total ACW Time	Avail Time	Staffed Time % Avail	% Avail	Calls Per Hour	NCPH
Totals	**929**	**2:16**	**9**	**108**	**27**	**3:06**	**10.4**	**4:06**	**:00**	**3:35**	**6:18**	**52:33**	**93.17**	**17.7**	**20.1**
	151	1:40	2	19	3	:33	11.2	:36	:00	:36	1:03	7:03	91:50	21.4	25.2
	144	2:17	1	13	5	:11	8.3	:21	:00	:37	1:00	7:46	91.96	18.5	21.3
	58	2:25	0	17	3	:21	22.7	:25	:00	:15	:25	3:47	93.36	15.3	17.2
	64	2:08	3	8	0	:08	11.1	:09	:00	:22	:14	3:23	68.74	18.8	20.3
	115	3:06	1	3	2	:06	2.5	:14	:00	:19	:47	7:36	95.73	15.1	14.9
	148	2:05	2	17	7	:35	10.4	:49	:00	:27	:54	7:33	93.90	19.3	21.9
	100	2:30	0	14	6	:22	12.3	:34	:00	:42	:52	7:40	90.78	13.0	14.7
	151	2:07	0	17	1	:47	19.1	:52	:00	:14	:50	7:40	95.54	19.7	22.6

Term Goals

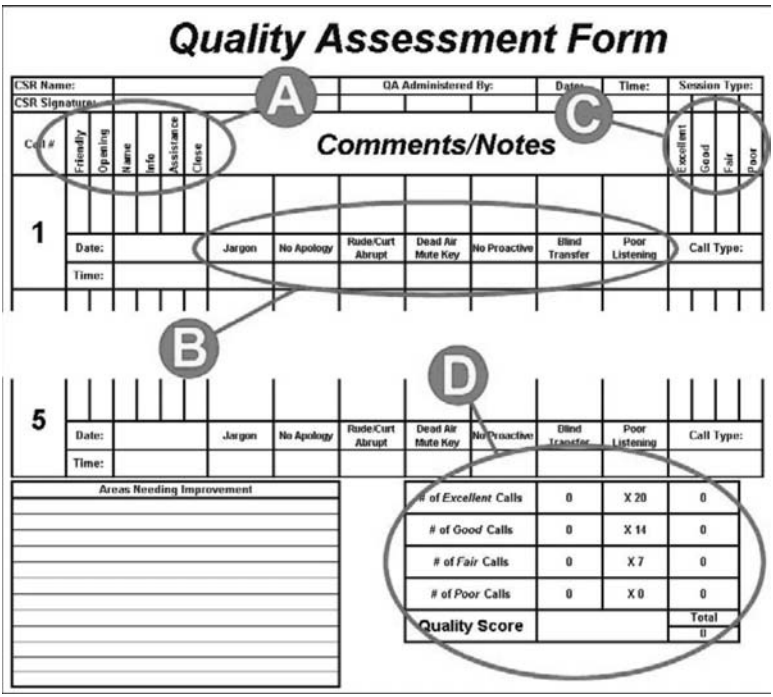
Talk Time≤ 2:00
OB% ≤ 15%
% Avail ≥95%
NCPH ≥25cph

Wow! Great Job!

Almost! Keep Working!

Please work on this

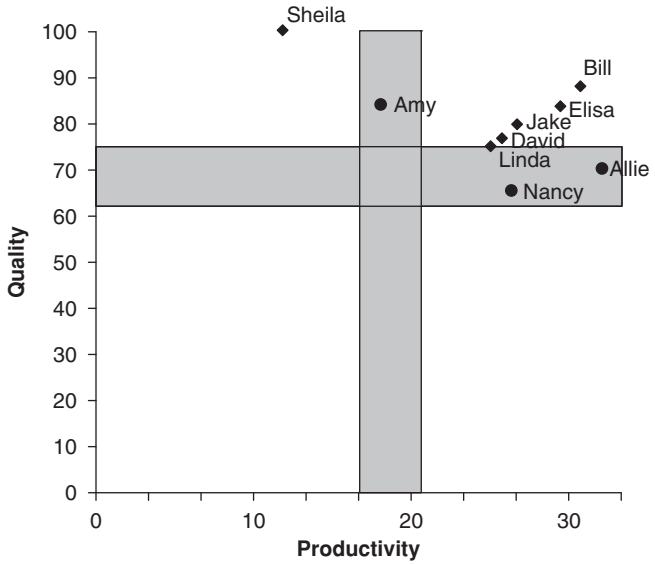
Figure 2
Quality Rating Form



that ratings be converted to a numeric form, which allows each worker's productivity and quality score to be computed and rendered as a single rating number. Figure 2 displays the form used at *DeliveryWorldwide*.

At "A" in Figure 2, a set of seven items that *must be included* in each call are listed. The evaluator puts a tick mark in the space under each item if the agent performs it in the call being rated. If an agent commits any of the seven proscribed items shown at "B" in Figure 2, the evaluator marks it with a tick in the space above that item. For example, failing to use the customer's name will result in the call being scored "fair" (3 on a 4-point ordinal scale, 4 being the lowest possible). ("Fair" will result also if the agent is not deemed "friendly," if the scripted opening is not performed, if the agent provides inaccurate policy information, does not offer additional assistance before ending

Figure 3
Combined Productivity and Quality Ratings[3]



the call, or does not voice the closing script.) The evaluator refers to a companion set of rules (not shown) that indicate how items at "A" and items at "B" accrue to produce an overall rating of *excellent*, *good*, *fair*, or *poor* for that call ("C" in Figure 2). After five calls are rated, the evaluator converts these ratings to a numeric score using the formulae at "D" in Figure 2 to produce the agent's quality rating for the month. Similar to the automatic creation of productivity statistics, the quality rating form exerts a technological force on individuals doing the rating, such that all worker ratings may be treated similarly. The result is a hierarchical observation and normalizing judgment relative to what the company defines as "quality."

Taking each agent's productivity and quality scores, the organization is able to represent each worker as a point on a two-dimensional graph (Figure 3)—what one call center called "qualictivity." Like inscriptions of productivity (Figure 1) and quality (Figure 2), qualictivity permits the organization to collapse many discrete categorized observations of each worker (hierarchical observation) into a form that appears to make many individuals visible all

at once, such that each agent (more correctly, the dot made to represent each agent) is made comparable to each other agent and against company-imposed standards. In Figure 3, the hierarchical observation is displayed as the major axes of the graph—productivity and quality—and the normalizing judgment is imposed by the horizontal and vertical gray bands identifying minimum acceptable performance.

Belied by their apparent simplicity, what is accomplished through these three interlinked hierarchical observations and normalizing judgments is the production of a highly selective, organizationally established, and imputably objective set of data that "says" something about each worker as a subject.

However, it is not only technological and regulatory forces imposed by computer software and quality measurement forms that affect discipline of workers' conduct. The simple fact they are aware of being monitored exerts a panoptic force on them, to which workers typically respond with compliance (Callaghan and Thompson 2001; Clegg 1998; Foucault 1995; Taylor and Bain 1999). This panoptic force operates both through the publicly visible statistics and easy line-of-sight surveillance immanent in the fact that workers are arrayed in open-backed cubicles visible by anyone walking past. Clark, an agent at *MHealth*, described the latter:

> . . . you feel like you're living in a fishbowl. Anyone who walks past can look in on you. My heart beats faster when I hear people walk past . . . . you can't help it!

Similarly, Sheila, another agent at *MHealth*, said

> When Oliver [manager in charge of the call center] stands in front of the [stats reports], your heart just about stands still. If he goes over to [the supervisor's] cubicle after looking at it, it's like the world is about to stop! I just turn around and really start paying attention to what I'm doing!

Both Clark and Sheila evidence the effect of disciplinary power in the call center. In so doing, they reify and reinforce this power and allow it to penetrate into their perceptions and actions (Callaghan and Thompson 2001; P. Taylor and Bain 1999; S. Taylor 1998; Winiecki 2004).

Panoptic forces were exposed in another way at *BigTech* when Jany, an agent with five years of experience as an agent at *BigTech* and three years in other call centers, told me that she and other agents on her team were growing increasingly frustrated by the fact that one individual on their team was habitually producing very low stats and "bringing down our team's averages." This was especially troubling, because their supervisor had informed

them their team stats were being overtaken by an outsourced call center. She said,

> [T]hose stats are all the company sees! If they see [the outsourcer] is doing better than us, what's to stop 'em from laying all of us off and sending the work to India!? We've gotta get our stats better so we have a chance to show the company that we're better and deserve to keep our jobs!

When Jany told me this, stats were posted with only a code number for each worker rather than a name. Consequently, she said, "the guys who have the lowest stats are safe—we don't know who they are! They can hurt themselves if they want to, but when they start hurting us, then we're mad! We want to get those guys to improve their stats so we can keep our jobs!"

Jany told how she and other agents pressured their supervisor to post the stats with individual agent's names instead of code numbers. Eventually, the supervisor acquiesced. Jany described the result: "[o]nce our names were on the board we didn't have to do anything. The low guys got their acts together and now the stats are [improved]."

While Clark's and Sheila's statements demonstrate how workers focus these forces on their selves, Jany's episode demonstrates how, when workers are oriented to themselves as members of a group, agents will spontaneously direct disciplinary force on others in terms of group relations made apparent by the way stats are presented. Together, these episodes illustrate ways individuals take disciplinary forces and exert them on their selves and others, thus activating and translating the programmatic goals of the organization (Beirne, Riach, and Wilson 2004; Callaghan and Thompson 2001; Holman, Chissick, and Totterdell 2002; Taylor and Bain 1999; Taylor et al. 2002; Winiecki 2004).

This constellation of technical, rational, and social forces are most economical when workers are brought into alignment with the organization's desires and adopt the organization's values and statistical representations as an accurate image of their selves rather than having to be continuously disciplined by process and regulations. It is normal for this to be attempted, in part, through organized training activities in which workers are provided with company expectations and knowledge and skill for meeting those expectations.

However, because training never captures all the workers' actions, resulting forces are never total. Workers retain considerable discretionary authority in the exertion of knowledge and skill (Barrett 2001; Beirne, Riach, and Wilson 2004; Callaghan and Thompson 2001; Knights and Vurdubakis 1994; McKinlay and Starkey 1998b; McKinlay and Taylor 1998; Taylor et al. 2002;

Wardell, Steiger, and Meiksins 1999). Other tactics by both management and labor are commonly deployed and cohere into a network that affects workers' perceptions of the organization's desires and an implicit responsibility to fulfill them. Many of these tactics orient to getting workers to adopt the rationality embedded in these disciplinary systems and to "see themselves in the data" so that they become self-regulating workers.

Governing Perceptions of the Self

In call centers, tables, lists, and charts of "the stats" are ever present. Stats reports are printed and displayed daily at *DeliveryWorldwide* and *MHealth* and monthly at *BigTech*. At *MedAdvise*, stats are presented individually and not posted publicly but are common knowledge. At each organization, agents and management use these data somewhat differently in attempts to produce a relation between measured productivity and quality and workers' subjectivity.

You've Got to See Yourself in the Data

At *DeliveryWorldwide*, all agents are aware of the subjectivizing implications immanent in the stats and the individualizing commentary of their team leader (see Figure 1), but exhibit concern in different ways. For example, Jane, a novice, part-time agent, reflected how disciplinary power affected her assessment of self and her own personal tactics.

> I've gotta work on controlling my calls. [My team leader tells me that] I let the customers ask too many questions and my call time is more than [the company] wants. Sometimes I see I'm in the "grey zone" [see Figure 3]. I keep asking to be moved next to Pat [an agent known for high productivity stats] so I can learn how she does it.

When I asked how she came to want to learn how to "do it" like Pat, she gestured toward the display on the bulletin board, saying, "I just see how *everyone else* is doing better than me. I don't like the way I look on the board." Contrast this with Gray, a six-year veteran whose facility with the tools and rules of the job is admired by many:

> I don't worry about my stats that much. I'm mostly concerned with answering the customer's questions and solving their problems. Sometimes I have to take ten minutes with a customer to do that. Most of the time it goes faster and when it's all averaged out, I'm usually not too far away from [company

> targets] wants. But if yesterday's stats were way off, I might put more effort into decreasing talk time for the rest of the week.

Gray exposes knowledge of the ACD's gaze that Helen appears not to have; because many of the statistics produced by it are actually *averages*, every call does not have to be completed under the organizational goal of two minutes thirty seconds or less. He can vary effort depending on the context of the call and what he knows his stats were yesterday, and so forth. However, although reacting differently to the rows and columns of data on the stats reports, both share a common perspective—they demonstrate their orientation to *how they look* in the data and alter their minute-to-minute or day-to-day practice to produce a satisfactory statistical representation of their self in the data. They are using the stats as a metaphorical screen on which they shadowbox and vary subsequent tactics in reaction to how the ACD report—their "shadowboxing screen"—reflects the organization's construction of them, back to themselves.

This concept of "shadowboxing with data" manifests another power immanent in the panoptic technologies in the workplace, activated in the way workers are enclosed, partitioned, observed, inscribed, deconstructed, and then reconstructed statistically. When a worker is provided with regular feedback in a particular way and information of what it means (to the organization), the worker is expected to "see oneself in the data" and actively change to produce the appearances the organization wants. The expectation to "shadowbox" in this way was told to me by Rhonda, a team leader at *DeliveryWorldwide*—"[e]veryone on my team is experienced. . . . I expect them to read the [stats] and know what they have to do to meet the standards."

Similarly, during a period of fieldwork at *MHealth*, because of understaffing and persistent computer problems, the call center rarely met its productivity expectations. With a group of relatively novice agents having only a few months of experience each, Kam, the call center supervisor, took an opportunity at a meeting of the agents and pointed at the printout of yesterday's statistics (documenting failure to meet any of the organizational goals) and implored,

> You have to be able to *see yourself in the data*. . . . This [stabbing the page with her finger] is how we see you and this is how you should be seeing yourselves. Each of you know better than I do what's going on minute by minute and if you're aware of how we're seeing you, you can adapt to the conditions in order to make sure the stats come out right!

At *MedAdvise*, Bonnie, an administrator with some duties linked to the clinical staff in the call center, noted,

> [The nurses are] paying attention to other things as they work a call when they could *also* be improving their speed. They *have to be* focused on the patient and on making accurate charts [the official record of a call], but there are ways to do it faster.

Rhonda, Kam, and Bonnie are orienting to the way labor process is divided into components and aggregated into a normalizing judgment, and how each component can be refined or accelerated by performing it differently, thus producing different statistical representations of the worker. They also make it known that the worker is responsible for ensuring that this refinement is accomplished. Kam goes farther and asserts that the worker should "see one's self" in the data, accept the organization's view of productivity and quality as a sufficient "representation" of the worker such that they will alter their behavior to produce a "proper representation" of one's self in the statistics.

In addition to organizational expectations to orient to statistics as an image of one's self (an end in itself), in some cases the stats are portrayed as a piece of data the organization uses when deciding who is eligible for promotion possibilities in the call center, when they exist.[4]

Gatekeeping Incentives: The Stats as a Ticket to Organizational Advancement

In a series of interviews with supervisors and agents at *BigTech*, I learned that a program of regular meetings between supervisors and agents acts as a form of "internal screening" of potential candidates for organizational advancement. Supervisors indicated that access to promotions was, for all practical purposes, limited to those individuals who prove their ability to consistently produce high statistical ratings. This is because, as Rhia, a supervisor said,

> . . . [high productivity and quality stats are] what the company *requires* of agents. None of those things should be a surprise to the agent, because they [know that's what] the company wants. Once the agent has those things down, then we can start dealing with other things—like how the agent can get to do other things he or she wants to do and develop with the company.

In other words, workers are effectively impeded from any form of advancement in the company until they demonstrate their adoption of the basic forms of knowing one's self and the work and of conducting one's self in ways that meet the organization's expectations.

Demonstrating how a worker may respond to this, Syd, a QCS (quality control specialist) at *BigTech* who was promoted to that position from the job of a regular phone agent, said that when he was an agent, he kept copies of the quality rating form at his cubicle desk and used it to rate himself after each call he worked. In these self-ratings, he identified how he could change his conduct to meet the expectations inscribed on the form. He said that within a week after beginning these self-ratings, and for five consecutive months after that, he received 100% scores on all official quality ratings, telling me " . . . in the sixth month, I missed one, and in the seventh month I was (promoted to) a QCS!" When asked, he confirmed that his supervisor had told him the quickest way to be promoted into a different position in the call center—such as the QCS job—was to demonstrate consistent expertise on quality ratings. "The [rating] form made it easy for me. All I had to do was show that I could do *that*," as he pointed to a copy of the form on his desk. His supervisor did not tell him to drill and practice and review each call he performed against the rating form. *He* formulated that tactic freely to produce evidence his supervisor said would make a difference in possible promotions.

Members of management and workers alike thus latch individual practices to the disciplinary apparatus of the organization to facilitate worker adoption and accomplishment of its programmatic goals. These ad hoc tactics are not caused by the architectural, technical, or bureaucratic structure of the workplace; rather, they are *possibilities* left open by that structure, which are *activated* by members of the organization as shown above. However, it is not only in pursuit of productivity and quality that such ad hoc tactics are invoked.

Effecting Good Statistics Through Secondary Adjustments

At *DeliveryWorldwide*, on a day when I was observing and talking with Cassie, an agent with about five years of experience known for very high "productivity" ratings, I observed how she never used the "AUX" mode of the ACD to give her time to complete data processing following calls ("AUX" mode "tells" the ACD not to send any calls to the worker's phone). Instead, she would hang up from a call and allow the ACD to send her another call while she was completing data processing from the preceding one. However, instead of voicing the opening script as soon as a call connected to her phone, she would stay quiet and complete data processing. Only then would she begin talking to the already-connected customer. She described how this allowed her to produce a very high "% Available" ratio[5] and other effects:

> When I do that, I always get [a higher '% Available' ratio] than we're supposed to. It doesn't get me any more money or anything, but it keeps [the supervisor] off my back. She thinks I'm the best one here! I don't know if she knows how I do it—and she might be upset if she did—but I don't care. It keeps her off my back and that's all I care about.

Cassie takes advantage of her creative use of the phone system to work at a pace that does not stress her, maintain above expected statistics, and even impress the supervisor! By producing desired statistics, the supervisor doesn't bother her, and she reaps a second reward.

At *BigTech*, maintaining a particular "% Available" was also required. Two agents, Taz and Rae, had developed a practice that took advantage of the fact they had access to the ACD and its display of who was logged in and how long they had been waiting for a call. Because the ACD will send the next incoming call to the agent who has been idle the longest, they were able to determine who is "next in line" to receive a call and adjust their activities accordingly.

For example, if after completing a call and inspecting the ACD queue, they found there were several agents "ahead of them," they would not log into AUX mode while performing data processing to document the work conducted on the just-completed call. In doing so, they said, they were able to maximize their "% Available" while conserving their AUX allocation for "better use." Taz characterized that "better use":

> Normally, agents use AUX when they have to go to the bathroom, when you're logging a call or things like that. Since our calls last so long there's usually a lot of [data entry] we have to do . . . ! If we keep an eye on the queue, we can tell if we have to use AUX or not. . . . Most of the time I end up with lots [of AUX time] left over at 3:15—fifteen minutes before I'm supposed to go home—and I can log into AUX for the last fifteen minutes to guarantee I won't get a call and I can go home on time and pick up my kids. And just to make sure nobody can claim I left early, I log in and log out really fast, right at 3:30.

Rae said that using this tactic, he could actually show how he was logged in for greater than 100% of the expected time, though because doing so wouldn't "get me anything" (that is, any *financial* reward), he made sure he was always only meeting expectations. As he told me this, he waved at a set of "Performance Excellence" certificates pinned to his cubicle walls—awards based on his superior record! Both Rae and Taz demonstrated how they could make use of "forbidden" knowledge to adjust their practices to

both meet the organization's statistical goals and keep themselves safe from overtime work when they did not want it.

The tactics of Cassie, Taz, and Rae may be classified as "secondary adjustments" (Goffman 1961, 54ff, 199ff). Secondary adjustments instantiate practices that " . . . do not directly challenge [the rules of the institution] but allow [individuals] to obtain hidden satisfactions or to obtain permitted ones by forbidden means" (Goffman 1961, 54). Secondary adjustments are, therefore, acts of resistance that stay "below the radar screen" and alter an organization's workings in ways that do not affect appearances—in this case, the stats. The organization and its inherent blind spots or "spaces left free" (Foucault 1996, 57ff) both make such secondary adjustments *possible* and *obscure* their occurrence.

There are other ways workers can affect the appearance of productivity or quality statistics. For example, I observed Hal, another team leader, conduct quality evaluations. After tapping into the phone of Denita, an agent with nearly six years of experience, he waited until a new call started and began quickly scribbling notes on the evaluation form (Figure 2). After the call was completed, he remarked to me,

> That wasn't a very good [call]. She provided incorrect information when she answered the customer's question about shipment of live animals. It's not a common question and the company keeps changing their policy, so that's not too big a deal—but it'll hurt her.

As the next call began, Hal started scribbling notes again. From the team leader's desk, we could hear her typing very hard on her keyboard and telling the customer in a tired sounding voice, "I'm sorry but my computer's acting up again. This should only be a minute." After noticing a faint click on the phone like, indicating she had invoked the mute function of her phone to hide subsequent comments from the caller, we heard her from a few rows away in an anguished voice, "I HATE MY COMPUTER!" Hal nodded, "[it] sounds like she's having a really bad day."

Just then, Denita's team leader walked up, and noticing her name on the form Hal was writing on, said, "Oh! How's she doin'?" Hal remarked "not too good." Then, crumpling the rating form he said, "I think we're done for the night."

When I asked about this, Hal told me that it was late in the day and at the end of Denita's workweek—a time, he assured me, when any agent will show fatigue. "Plus, her computer is acting up, and it's probably not fair to do a rating of her today. She's a good agent, but things just aren't good right now."

A few weeks later, another team leader told me something else that may have been a factor in Hal's decision. She said that, at best, only ten calls are rated for each agent per month. Since agents at this call center commonly answer up to two hundred calls each *day*, quality evaluations account for only about .0025% of calls worked by an agent! Therefore, an otherwise "good" agent's monthly quality rating could be harmed by monitoring calls performed in a brief period when technical problems and *understandable* fatigue impede one's ability. She said she would "think twice" about doing quality evaluations for an agent when he or she was having what appeared to be a "bad day."

I asked Hal if this might have been a factor in his decision not to complete evaluations of Denita's work. He acknowledged that he would use knowledge of how much a "bad day" can hurt an agent's evaluation in a decision on whether or not to perform one.

Despite tactical dissimilarities, the effect of secondary adjustments described above is the same—individuals are able to produce statistics that affect the appearance programmatic goals are met. In doing so, they make use of knowledge about the technology, rules, or the work itself that "exceeds" the disciplinary power embedded in them. They show that acceptable or even exceptional quality and productivity statistics can be generated, even when agents are working in ways *other* than explicitly disciplined.

The Doings of Doings: Shadowboxing with Data

In the above episodes, several outcomes are visible. First, the disciplinary structure of the organizations is effective in regulating action of individual workers. This contributes to a programmatic goal of creating and maintaining economical systems. The incorporation of surveillance technology into systems also facilitates the production of an imputably "objective" image of individuals and the entire workforce in the form of statistical tables and graphs.

Second, management activates the disciplinary power of these statistical displays by making access to promotion possibilities contingent on consistent compliance and production of "good stats." Management makes use of statistical images to convince workers to adopt this statistical view as representative of their selves so that workers govern their own thoughts and actions through "shadowboxing with data."

Third, simultaneous with the above, workers demonstrate ability to deploy their knowledge of workings and "blind spots" in the organization's apparatus to continuously produce "good stats"—thus manufacturing what is seen officially as a "good subjectivity" for themselves—by unauthorized means.

Accomplishing this, workers manage to make management "shadowbox with data" such that *it thinks* the organization's programmatic goals are met.

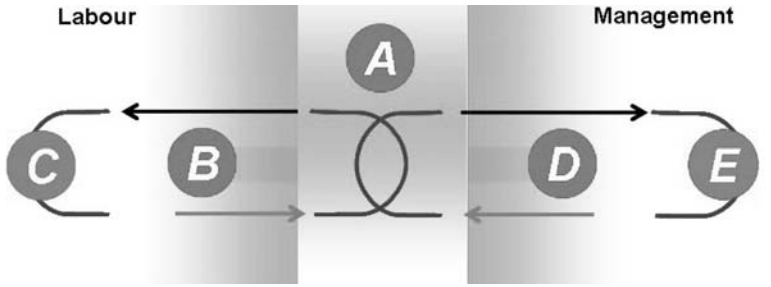
These agonistic practices I call "shadowboxing with data" all piggyback on the programmatic orientation to imputably "objective" statistics as evidence of productivity and quality but are activated by different individuals with four different effects:

1. Management orients workers to "the stats," attempting to equate a worker's perception of self with statistics that imputably "represent" him or her. When accomplished, a worker becomes self-managing to produce good stats as an image of one's self.
2. Management makes access to promotion opportunities contingent on production of "good stats." This tactic is successful when a worker is interested in promotion opportunities and willing to adjust his or her self to increase one's chances.
3. Personnel responsible for agent evaluation can insert (or prevent from insertion) data that represents a worker in particular ways in the official archive of data used to produce official ratings of a worker. This is a secondary adjustment based on a worker's knowledge of and value for conditions normally ignored in the organization's definition of quality. It works to incorporate "excess" knowledge surreptitiously.
4. Workers can expose themselves to or hide from the technology-mediated surveillance system such that they produce statistics indicative of a "good agent" regardless of "real" activity. This smuggles a worker's knowledge of the system into the official stats such that he or she can produce the appearance of good productivity or quality without following the letter of the organization's rules.

Each of these operates within the structure of the workplace—its architecture, technologies, and rules—and attains some measure of success on account of a normal organizational orientation to "the stats" as principal indicator of programmatic success or failure. Workers are expected to "shadowbox with data" to be what is expected. The statements and actions above demonstrate how workers have accepted the organization's efforts, even when exercising secondary adjustments. Although the programs and technologies used in these call centers appear to be *intentionally* aimed at manifesting an economical system, these same things produce opportunities and conditions in which actors can be seen to tactically tinker with the apparatus and its products.

Various ways of accomplishing "shadowboxing with data" show that management and individual workers are able to effectively alter the constellation of forces through which productivity and quality statistics are produced. In each

Figure 4
Shadowboxing with Data



case, stats are shown to represent not "objective" measures of productivity or quality but a socially (sometimes surreptitiously) constructed reality manufactured by three sets of values, desires, goals, and expectations (Figure 4).

The image in Figure 4 is intended to depict a section through a translucent screen "A" with labor on one side and management on the other. On the screen "A" is cast a shadow of the worker as a product of the official organizational apparatus, composed of observation tactics, inscriptions, examinations, and representation of the subject in statistical forms. This shadow is visible to both labor and management and is the imputably "true" image of the subject produced by the organization's apparatus.

"B" represents the individual agent's image of his or her self as influenced by the organizational "truth" shown to them in the shadow presented on "A." "C" represents the individual agent's background knowledge of his or her self: personal values, expectations, and goals; knowledge of how the organization sees and imputably values oneself; how the organization's apparatus operates and how "spaces left free" for secondary adjustments. Some of this exists as one's personal subjectivity before being exposed to the organization and some of it is "carried into" the individual's subjectivity by one's experience in the organization's tactics.

Similarly, "D" represents management's image of how the organization should function and how agents should conduct themselves as influenced by knowledge of the organization and the "truth" shown to them in the shadow presented on "A." "E" represents the management's background knowledge, including personal values, expectations, and so forth. As above, some of this

exists prior to being exposed to the organization and some is "carried into" personnel through contact with the organization's regulatory apparatus.

As depicted in the looping arrows in Figure 4, what labor and management see and come to know is affected by exposure to and experience with disciplinary and governmental practices orienting to statistical representations of one's self against an imputably objective standard within an imputably objective apparatus. At the same time, this knowledge influences one's conduct, and as it is performed, one's conduct is converted to official statistical forms. This includes any conduct that is influenced by one's knowledge and use of gaps in the apparatus, which allow for secondary adjustments, which in turn affects the "truth" about any given subject and the whole call center as reflected in "A."

Both labor and management are continuously able to draw on their background knowledge and values when producing actions that manipulate the appearance of particular images of one's self or one's position to the other—labor can introduce secondary adjustments and so can management. Figure 4 renders this as two intersecting and mutually influenced circuits. (It is important to note that although Figure 4 schematically renders these circuits as mirror images, actual tactics and strategies used by each group vary widely.)

The shadow cast on "A" and visible to both labor and management is affected not only by the official apparatus but also by the performance of strategic acts by both labor and management (invisible to the apparatus) that become inscribed in the official statistical forms. As symbolized by the interlooping of these actions at "A" in Figure 4, the shadow of the subject cast on the screen is affected by all of these actions at once. The result, although primarily shaped by compliance with norms and forms of the organization's regulatory apparatus, is continuously influenced by the surreptitious and "free" actions of subjects (both labor and management). The result is a socially established "objectivity" that is continuously influenced by its subjects as they are continuously influenced by it. The imputed "objectivity" is actually a set of both ongoing programmatically compliant and agonistic actions with the apparatus, with embedded and obscured secondary adjustments.

Conclusions

Overall, in a highly regulated workplace where architectural, technological, and regulatory tactics are both rationally and socially interconnected to produce a network of disciplinary and governmental forces on the behavior

of workers, there exists an unusual "doing" that arises directly from workplace regulation—the production of subjectivities based on but not entirely representative of statistical reductions of productivity and quality. These statistics and the subjectivities they assert arise from both compliant behaviors and secondary adjustments. The ongoing "shadowboxing with data" described above is an agonism affected by and affecting all parties as it produces a superficial appearance that nonetheless retains the *form* of official "truth" about the way things are functioning—the stats. This "truth" can exist on account of the presumptions of objectivity immanent in the rational business structures of these call centers, though both management and labor know they are acting in ways that fracture it. Subjects and subjectivities arising from "shadowboxing with data" are organizationally "real," while at the same time a product of the various actions influenced both by the agonistic compliance or secondary adjustments made possible in "top-down" structures of the organization and "bottom-up" actions of members. With poststructural approach, what these subjects and subjectivities are is found to be both more and less than meets the rational, statistically oriented eye.

The process of subjectification is not adequately described by the organization's structure or by workers' actions alone. It is an agonistic process continuously accomplished by the knowledgeable and creative actions of both management and labor within a conceptual "fold" (see Deleuze 1986) in the awareness and acceptance of organizational programs characterized by regulatory technologies permitting continual and rapid production and reporting of "scientifically objective" examinations of one's work and one's personal values and goals.

This research has implications for the study of social subjects, subjectivity, and subjectification processes, especially in what have been called postindustrial and postmodern workplaces and components of society. This follows from increasing use of networked computer and telecommunications technologies to regulate and survey work activities and superficially appear to reduce the conduct of work to "objective" statistical measures.

Where workers are faced with the notion that any single form of data is supposed to represent the self, one should expect that agonism over subjectivity and subjectification will occur at and around the production of such data. Only through ethnographic and poststructural study of individuals' thoughts and actions in proximity to these data will one find *how* workers and management interact with and use various disciplinary and managerial forces, *how* they "shadowbox" to affect an official version of their selves, and *if* and *how* they adjust the way they know their selves or innovate ways to make the organization "shadowbox" with its own way of knowing. By

getting past official organizational images of the subject and local knowledge of individuals at work to study the strategic "doings of doings" and resulting processes of subjectification, we can learn how we are produced as subjects in modern institutions.

Notes

1. In poststructuralism, "strategic" refers to more or less coordinated action(s) and outcome(s) that become recognizable only on post hoc analysis and which have far reaching implications in the dynamic field of social forces affecting subjects and subjectification (Gordon 1980, 246ff).

2. All company and personal names are changed. Descriptions of call centers are included in the following section.

3. The call center used this kind of chart following advice found in a book on call center management (Durr 1996). This figure is a facsimile of charts displayed in the call center. Following the organization's use of Durr's methods, it is a close approximation of that described and illustrated by Durr (1996, 92f).

4. However, promotion possibilities are not common in call centers (Belt 2002; Belt, Richardson, and Webster 2000; Hunt 2004; Taylor and Bain 2003).

5. The "% Available" ratio is the percentage of time when logged in that the agent is ready to take customer calls—see the third column from the right in Figure 1.

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