

Experiencing depersonalised bullying: a study of Indian call-centre agents

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ABSTRACT

This article uses the concept of depersonalized bullying to explain the way in which call-centre agents employed in international call centres in Mumbai and Bangalore, India experience their work as an oppressive regime. The characteristics of this bullying regime can be attributed to the service level agreement between employers and clients which determines organisational practices. Call-centre agents' professional identities and material gains facilitate their acceptance of their tough work conditions, causing them to participate in their own oppression. As well as clarifying the concept of depersonalised bullying, the article highlights the critical role of capitalist labour relations in workplace bullying, allowing for a contextualised and politicised understanding to emerge.

The organisation-workplace bullying interface

Workplace bullying is defined as subtle and/or obvious negative behaviours embodying aggression and hostility, characterised by repetition and persistence, displayed by an individual and/or group to another individual and/or group in the context of an existing or evolving unequal power relationship (Adapted from Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf & Cooper, 2003; Hoel & Beale, 2006; Tracy, Lutgen-Sandvik & Alberts, 2006). Research in the field has focused on the interpersonal dimension (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf & Cooper, 2003; Liefoghe & Mackenzie Davey, 2001), and hence it is not surprising that the engagement of the organisational framework in the understanding of workplace bullying has largely been confined to socio-relational conceptualisations (Keashly & Harvey, 2006) emphasising that various work conditions operate as environmental factors that give rise to interpersonal bullying (Hoel & Salin, 2003). Hoel and Beale's (2006) appeal to expand the field to include contextualised and politicised understandings of workplace bullying bring into play the notion of depersonalised bullying (Liefoghe & Mackenzie Davey, 2001), highlighting socio-structural dimensions (Keashly & Harvey, 2006).

Hoel and Beale (2006) maintain that there are various forms and degrees of oppression, exploitation and control in the workplace that constitute an inevitable feature of capitalist labour relations and that provide critical insights into workplace bullying. In a capitalist labour market, employed work has the purpose of profit making which can only be sustained through continuous exploitation. Management

enforced compliance with employer-oriented norms of workplace behaviour is central to the shared experience of employment, and disciplinary sanctions to enforce the rules of the workplace remain central to the employment relationship. Bullying forms part of the day-to-day routine of managing labour and is endemic in labour management practices associated with making a profit. Conceptualisations of bullying at work, therefore, need to go beyond the interpersonal and socio-relational realm to embrace the organisational level of analysis (Ironside & Seifert, 2003).

Liefoghe and Mackenzie Davey's (2001) research is the only empirical work so far on the concept of depersonalised bullying. Drawing on participants' subjectivity, they demonstrate that the organisation itself is the bully, with bullying being attributed to the organisation and its practices. Bullying is institutionalised, with subordination not being related to personality clashes between individuals but to a more Taylorised approach based on impersonal laws applied to supervisors and subordinates (Liefoghe & Mackenzie Davey, 2001).

Through our empirical research on the subjective work experiences of Indian call-centre agents employed in international facing call centres in Mumbai and Bangalore, India, we further the substantive area. This paper highlights the complex aetiology, manifestations and implications of depersonalised bullying and describes and explains employees' responses to their experiences. It engages the extra-organisational business context and the organisational control process and its reliance on inclusivist and exclusivist HRM (human resource management) strategies as well as the roles of agents, supervisors and managers in its analysis. Through the findings, the concept of depersonalised bullying is clarified, allowing for a definition to be developed.

The call-centre industry in India

The call-centre industry in India is located within the country's emerging ITES-BPO (Information Technology Enabled Services-Business Process Outsourcing) sector whose major constituent is global offshoring operations. While the Philippines, South Africa, Latin American and Eastern Europe states are emerging locations, India remains the pre-eminent site for offshored business activities, accounting for 46% of all global offshoring (NASSCOM/National Association of Software and Service Companies-McKinsey, 2005) and offering 'an unbeatable mix of low costs, deep technical and language skills, mature vendors and supportive government policies' (Walker & Gott in NASSCOM, 2007: 29). While the key catalyst for this has been globalisation, aided by India's liberalisation and various central and state government initiatives (NASSCOM, 2006), India provides significant labour cost arbitrage. The large English-speaking and technical talent pool available in India is a critical component of this process (NASSCOM, 2006).

While call centres account for about 60-65% and back offices for about 35-40% of the services provided (Taylor & Bain, 2006), certain key service categories, namely finance and accounting, customer interaction and human resource administration, account for 89% of industry revenues. Services are housed in MNC (multinational corporation) captive, MNC third party, Indian third party (all of which are

international facing, i.e., serving overseas clients and customers¹) and domestic service provider organisations (NASSCOM, 2005), located principally in Tier 1 but now expanding to Tier 2 and 3 cities (NASSCOM, 2005 & 2006). Though there has been considerable diversification in the range of processes delivered from India and there certainly has been growth in higher-value and professional knowledge process outsourcing (KPO), the evidence strongly suggests that, in overall terms, the ITES-BPO industry in India still tends to provide largely standardised and routinised services of low complexity, emphasising mass production and customer service (Taylor & Bain 2006), in keeping with the mass customised model (Batt & Moynihan, 2002; Frenkel, Korczynski, Shire & Tam, 1998).

Direct employment in India's ITES-BPO sector was calculated at 553,000 in the financial year 2006-2007 (NASSCOM, 2007), the sector having become an important avenue for employment, especially for the country's youth. While this workforce is covered by a variety of labour laws promulgated in various Indian states as well as central legislation, the popular notion held in Indian society (and maintained and promoted by ITES-BPO employers, aided by government apathy) is that the labour legislation and related institutional measures do not apply to this sector (See Noronha & D'Cruz, 2009, for a detailed discussion). This augments India's attractiveness as a global offshoring destination. As Taylor and Bain (2005) maintain, India remains attractive to companies who wish to capitalise on the possibilities for flexible labour utilisation and the absence of trade unions in the Indian call-centre sector.

Though the recent rise in labour costs is being offset by declining telecom costs, lower depreciation and other infrastructure costs, improvements in productivity and utilisation and scale economies, the attempt to sustain the long term viability of India's cost advantage has resulted in the adoption of process excellence tactics and a range of other strategies. These include increasing company size and facilities that enable an increased volume of processes to be handled, as well as strategies to increase productivity through reengineering and optimal use of equipment and labour that make it possible to maximise efficiency (NASSCOM, 2006).

Methodology

This paper draws on a study whose aim was to explore employees' subjective experiences of work in international facing call centres in Mumbai and Bangalore, India. Keeping in mind the objective of the study, a phenomenological approach was considered to be appropriate, and van Manen's (1998) hermeneutic phenomenology was adopted to explore the essence of participants' lived experience. Following van Manen's (1998) approach, conversational interviews were used to gather experiential narrative material. Though the interviews were unstructured, they were guided by the fundamental question that prompted the research. Yet this focus did not preclude exploring other issues that emerged during the interview, since we were aware that

1 The reader must note the distinction between clients and customers. Clients are the entities seeking services from Indian/India-based service providers while customers are the clients' service recipients who by virtue of being served by the agents/employees of the service provider are also referred to by the latter as customers.

these could generate important insights into the phenomenon under study. Informed consent, voluntary participation and confidentiality marked the ethical protocol of the inquiry.

With most organisations being unwilling to permit us access to their employees or the operations floor (only one call centre in Mumbai gave us access to a few of their employees and this was negotiated through personal contacts), we resorted to snowball sampling initiated via personal contacts. All interviews, held at the convenience of the participants, were conducted in English and lasted between one and two and a half hours. Interviews were recorded on audio-cassettes with the permission of the participants. No participants objected to the use of the recorder once its advantage of accuracy was spelled out to them, and its presence did not appear to hinder their responses. During the interview, observations about the participants were made and written up after the session ended. Data recorded on the audio-cassettes were later transcribed verbatim by the research staff. The quotations in this article are drawn from these transcripts.

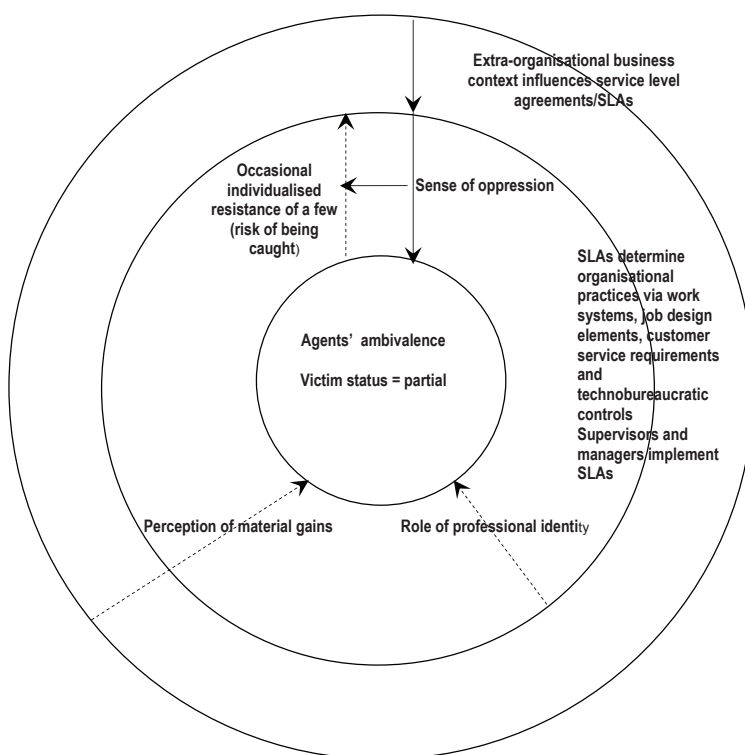
Fifty nine agents, 34 from Mumbai and 25 from Bangalore, employed in international facing call centres participated in the study. Thirty nine worked in inbound processes, 12 in outbound processes and eight in both inbound and outbound processes. There were 29 women and 30 men whose ages ranged from 20 to 55 years, with the largest number in the 22-25 year age group. Forty participants were unmarried and forty were graduates. The average monthly salary of participants was approximately Rs. (Indian Rupees) 12,900, based on a range of Rs. 8,000 to Rs. 25,000. All the participants were employed by either MNC captive, MNC third party or Indian third party organisations and served overseas clients and customers. None of the participants were members of trade unions.

Thematic analyses were undertaken, including sententious and selective approaches, following van Manen (1998). In the sententious approach, each transcript was read as a whole to capture the core or essential meaning of participants' experiences. In the selective thematic analyses, categories, patterns and themes that contributed to the core theme were identified. That is, each transcript was read repeatedly and significant statements relating to and illustrating the various dimensions of the core theme were identified and demarcated. These were read and reread to formulate conceptual meanings and explore the essential qualities of the experiences described, and themes were identified in the process. The essential elements of agents' experiences were embodied in the core theme of 'being professional'².

2 The core theme that captured the essence of agents' experiences was 'being professional'. The notion of professionalism embraced agents' identity, altering their self-concept and enhancing their self-esteem. According to agents, professionals possess superior cognitive abilities, advanced qualifications and a sense of responsibility and commitment to work. They prioritise work over personal needs and pleasure, behaving in a dignified and restrained manner and performing optimally and rationally while on the job. Professionals comply with job and organisational requirements, absorbing emergent strain. Under such circumstances, not only do agents perceive gains accruing from their job as consistent with the notion of professionalism but also transactional psychological contracts of employment as means of discipline are similarly justified. Though resistance is displayed by some agents occasionally, this is described as a temporary outlet to ease job-related strain, co-existing with professional identity – it is not an indicator of anti-work or anti-employer sentiment. Indeed, agents' professional identity precludes engagement with collectivisation attempts which are seen both as inconsistent with the essential features of professionalism and as redundant in instances where employers

A second important theme closely linked to the core theme that emerged during the analysis process was that of an oppressive work regime. Participants repeatedly used this term to describe their work context. We used Miles and Huberman's (1994) data analysis techniques to explore this theme further. That is, through the use of various tools such as charts, matrices, event lists, causal networks and memos (Miles & Huberman, 1994), we identified related themes, categories and patterns emerging from the data. Linkages between these themes, patterns and categories were examined, and interpretations were made (Patton, 1990) in order to understand participants' references to and experiences of the oppressive work regime.

Figure 1: The oppressive work regime



Findings

The participants' description of the oppressive work regime is depicted schematically in Figure 1. Their concept of the oppressive work regime embraced the organisational context, stemming essentially from the SLA (service level agreement) the employer organisation had entered into with the client. These SLAs determined organisational

protect employee interests (Noronha & D'Cruz, 2009).

practices in terms of work systems, job design, customer service requirements and techno-bureaucratic controls. The employer organisation's implementation of the SLAs contributed directly to the oppressive work regime. That is, supervisors and managers (henceforth also referred to as superiors) engaged in overt and covert aggressive behaviours to ensure the fulfilment of the SLAs. Participants' narratives highlighted the role of macroeconomic, extra-organisational factors in determining the SLAs and the organisational context. While participants acknowledged their tough work conditions, their professional identity and the material gains from their jobs facilitated acceptance of these, causing them to participate in their own oppression. In recognition of their ambivalence, participants' victim status can, at best, be termed partial. Nonetheless, the presence of occasional individualised acts of resistance as a means of coping with work-related strain, in spite of the risks involved, was described.

The dynamics of the oppressive work regime

Participants described their work environment as oppressive but attributed this to the SLAs that their employers had entered into with their clients. The SLA is a formalised agreement, either temporal or project-based, between the participants' employer organisations (the offshored Indian/India-based service providers) and the overseas client to deliver stipulated services to the clients' customers who were also located overseas. SLAs lay down the process and outcome requirements of each particular service, the fulfilment of which is critical to the continuity and/or renewal of the contractual relationship between the two parties. With competitive advantage being the key focus, employer organisations diligently implement their clients' expectations. SLAs thus form the basis for organisational practices, setting the work context for the call-centre agents. Indeed, according to our informants, supervisors and managers resorted to intimidatory tactics to ensure the fulfilment of the SLAs. Participants, while acknowledging how SLAs impacted them, emphasised that their employer organisations were merely enacting the SLAs – that is, superiors at various levels of the organisational hierarchy had no choice but to ensure that SLAs were met and their aggressive behaviour in this regard was involuntary and impersonal – and hence no particular person in the workplace was considered to be responsible for the oppression that they experienced.

Agents maintained that the dynamics of doing business in a globalised world played an important role. Clients were relocating their operations to low cost developing countries to maximise revenues, minimise costs and maintain competitive advantage, and their choice of country and of service provider as well as the nature of SLAs were in keeping with these ends. If service provider organisations were unable to comply with the SLAs and provide a conducive set-up for business to flourish, the clients would switch their business to other organisations. Moreover, if the business context in the country did not facilitate clients' success, they would relocate to other, more attractive destinations. Under such circumstances, employer organisations took pains to ensure the appropriate extra-organisational and intra-organisational business environments and to fulfil their SLAs. Delivering on these counts, in their view, was necessary for the continued success of India's ITES-BPO sector and the competitive position of their organisations.

Finally, everything boils down to the SLAs. They [SLAs] dictate the shifts, the targets, the quality, the customer interaction. And they [employer organisation] naturally have to execute it – because if not, the process will go elsewhere. So they [employer organisation] don't bother one way or the other – just deliver ruthlessly.

The team leader and the operations manager often just scream to get the work done. But it is for the [employer] organisation's good. They have no choice. Clients' expectations have to be met. If you do badly, they will humiliate you privately and publicly for days on end. Someone or the other is always being pulled up on the call floor. So that uncomfortable atmosphere is always there – and it is quite stressful. But it is not personal, they are just getting the work done.

In order to meet clients' requirements, employer organisations created 8-9 hour shifts with two 15-minute breaks, one 30-minute one and 5-day work weeks. Shifts were developed to match the time zones of customers located in the USA, UK, Canada and Australia. This not only meant that agents had to work during the Indian night but also that they had to undergo periodic changes in their work timings as the shifts rotated fortnightly or monthly. Participants worked in teams, headed by a team leader (TL), and were required to report half an hour before their assigned shift for team meetings. During these meetings, TLs indicated the daily requirements, proposed updates, provided individual and team feedback and attempted to energise the team, as well as checking the functioning of equipment. Attendance was recorded via log-in and log-out data. Participants mentioned how such strict observation of time meant that they could not log out of their systems or leave their seats even to go to the restroom (if it was an emergency, they had to seek permission from the team leader to do so).

What makes matters worse is the early reporting – we have to come well in advance before the shift. So that eats into one's personal time. It is so tough. And leaving one's seat during the shift – it is impossible. Because it will be tracked and you will be thrown out. Whether you are unwell or you want to go to the bathroom, you have to sit until the TL allows you to get up.

Participants had to meet targets, the specific nature of which were linked to the particular processes they were working on. Whereas inbound call-centre agents had to take the maximum number of calls possible in a shift, for outbound call-centre agents, targets were fixed in terms of completion of specific number of units pertaining to the particular process being performed. Agents were always encouraged to achieve beyond their specified targets, and being able to do so augmented their incentives and added to their visibility and opportunities for growth. Inability to reach the assigned target resulted in the employee being sent for retraining, which essentially meant notice of dismissal. In addition, agents had to maintain specific time limits for the actual call (also known as AHT/average handling time of the call) and for call wrap-up while also having to pick up calls within a certain number of rings (call waiting time) and being unable to drop calls, alter their position in the call queue or leave calls incomplete (call abandonment rates).

The focus is on targets and superiors' non-verbal signs tell you how you are doing.

Sometimes, they are so subtle but the message is clear. Some of my friends get scared, in fact.

During phases when call volumes were high or targets were not being met, agents were made to stretch their working time so that they had to forfeit or shorten breaks, work beyond their shift hours or come into work on days that were designated as their weekly holidays or on public holidays. It is relevant to mention here that the public holidays (both national holidays and festivals) observed in the call centres were not Indian holidays but those of the customer group being served. Moreover, quite often, agents received no overtime for the extra work put in. It was generally those failing to meet targets or put in the required log-in hours who were asked to work on holidays. *There is no choice – if they say to stretch, we have to stretch. It could be during the shift, during the week, during the weekend. Or it could be on holidays also. If you don't meet the target, you are in trouble and there is no escape – either retraining or dismissal. So one is always tense.*

Emotional labour remains central to task performance in call centres³. There is a strong emphasis on communicating effectively with customers. This encompasses clarity and accuracy of communication, adherence to scripts, avoiding providing wrong information and misleading customers, politeness, cordiality, sensitivity and patience (particularly with irate customers). All this has to be accomplished in a virtual context, concomitant with other process requirements, in real time. The agents we interviewed had been trained to believe that since customers could decipher their moods, the espousal and display of a positive frame of mind was important in order to induce a similar demeanour in customers, to enhance the perceived quality of the service interaction and to leave behind a favourable impression about the client company. To this end, agents were encouraged to empathise with and absorb customers' reactions, apologising to them for any perceived or attributed problem or inconvenience even if it was not their fault. At the same time, maintaining objectivity was emphasised. Agents were not allowed to develop personal relationships with customers or display any partiality towards them. Agents thus had to engage with customers closely enough to perform effective emotional labour, ensure customer satisfaction and promote client interests while simultaneously meeting other qualitative and quantitative performance criteria; failure to do so invited punishment.

For Indian agents working in international facing call centres, training in emotional labour skills went beyond the scope of customer interaction and satisfaction to embrace cultural, linguistic and geographical dimensions linked to the lives of the overseas customers. Cultural training included exposure to various facets of customers' society including its geographical location, political boundaries, time zone, climate, history, demographics and way of life. While agents' fluency with English and neutral accents were checked at the time of recruitment, linguistic training emphasised the adoption of accents appropriate to specific customer groups and familiarity with local speech such as the slang and colloquialisms of the customer group being served. Agents also took on Western names as pseudonyms and engaged in locational masking⁴. These latter four

3 For a detailed discussion of emotional labour in India's international facing call centres, see D'Cruz and Noronha (2008) and Noronha and D'Cruz (2009).

4 Locational masking, a term coined by Mirchandani (2003), entails refusal to divulge the geographical location of the offshored call centre and the agent. Non-disclosure agreements between employer organisations and clients forbid agents from revealing their identity and the location of their call centre, and hence they are trained to

requirements were laid down by client companies within the SLAs to ensure that their customers remained comfortable and willing to divulge personal information during service interactions, and retained an illusion of continuity with the company's previous quality standards even after the migration of services via offshoring.

Agents accepted these cultural and linguistic requirements, the adoption of pseudonyms and locational masking as part of their jobs, maintaining that these facilitated customer ease and service interactions and protected them from customer abuse on racial grounds. But locational masking precipitated stress. Participants who were required to claim that they were based overseas needed to know enough about their purported location to be able to answer customer queries. While organisations took care of this via cultural training and provision of current and updated information about the customers' location on the call floor, some participants did admit to uneasiness. According to them, since they could not anticipate all the questions customers could pose, it was possible that they may be at a loss at some point in time.

I find changing my identity very upsetting. Some of my colleagues also say the same.

But what to do? Clients' demands have to be met. Saying you are in the customers' location is the worst because you can get caught – but here also, the SLA has to be followed. It is very stifling.

Appropriate handling of irate and abusive customers formed part of the SLAs. Some customers displayed racial and ethnic animosity ranging from subtle comments and sarcasm to explicit comments and cursing. It was not uncommon for customers to refuse to speak to, transact with or buy anything from Indian agents. Quite often, agents had to face the ignominy of customers hanging up. Customers displayed scepticism and cynicism about Indians' ability to help them out, given that India is a developing country. Moreover, they harboured discomfort and distrust about sharing personal and sensitive information with people from another country, particularly in matters relating to their finances and social security. There were also frequent reports of instances of customers expressing anger over the general offshoring trend and holding agents responsible for the unemployment situation in their own countries.

Though customer reactions evoked disappointment, distress and helplessness in agents, customer abuse had to be handled with professional finesse. Even hints of a negative backlash against a customer (whether through an impolite response in English, abuse in an Indian language, non-verbal cues or cutting off the call) would invite termination of employment. Agents accepted their employers' organisational directives about customer abuse, recognising the role of client requirements, and the need for organisational survival and process retention in this.

Customer abuse can just take you off-balance for the whole shift. Sometimes, I feel like screaming back. After all, every human being has basic dignity so why should we put up with these insults because of the colour of our skin?

avoid answering such questions from customers. In response to customer queries, agents were trained to say that they were headquartered in the clients' or customers' country. If quizzed further, they either refused to disclose any more information about their location, citing security reasons, or they would mention that they were located in Asia. Only if the customer persisted or if customer inquiries narrowed down to the specific place from where they were calling, would agents divulge the truth or allow the customer to hang up.

But then, I cannot – I would lose my job and the process will go back and everyone will lose their jobs. The SLAs are very clear about these things and they [employer organisation] maintain it carefully.

Participants' narratives alluded to numerous monitoring and surveillance mechanisms employed by call-centre organisations. Apart from technology-based systems directly related to task performance⁵, agents spoke about the presence of security personnel who conducted random checks of their person and their belongings prior to them entering their offices. Lockers were provided by the employer within the office premises but outside the call floor for agents to store their belongings during the shift. Agents were not permitted to carry anything (including a piece of paper, a purse, a mobile phone, water or eatables) into or out of the call floor, and security personnel manning the electronically-operated doors at the entrance to the call floor ensured that they complied. All materials required for task performance were provided inside the call floor, as also were drinking water and sometimes tea and coffee. Such practices were described as part of the client's specifications to maximise the security of the process and the protection of customers' interests.

Technology dominated these participants' work context and work experience. Automated call distribution (ACD) systems were the means through which calls were distributed and queue numbers and waiting times were displayed. With ACD technology systematising control, management could set and measure daily output without the need for constant and direct control while agents experienced restricted autonomy. Agents from inbound call centres recounted being confronted with prominent digital displays which emphasise the number of stacked calls waiting to be answered. Predictive dialling (PD) in outbound call centres ensured that customer calls were diverted automatically to agents who were currently not engaged on another call. Not surprisingly, then, on days when the call flow was very high, agents had to take back-to-back calls. During such times, they enjoyed neither breathing space nor breaks.

In addition to targets, agents' work is regulated by numerous quality and quantity parameters, and technology facilitates their monitoring and measurement. The ACD system throws up a range of statistics, and various 'hard' or quantitative measures are

5 Call-centre technology includes automatic call distribution (ACD) and predictive dialling (PD) systems. The ACD system automatically processes incoming telephone calls and distributes them to agents' headsets while simultaneously generating a constant stream of up to 200 sets of statistics about the activities it coordinates, including call volume, duration, wrap times, wait times and abandonment rates at the call centre, the team and the individual agent levels. Not only does the ACD system set the pace of work and monitor performance, but managers and supervisors can also view these statistics, as they are generated in real time, on their desktop computers, and can track each employee's activities throughout the day. Aggregate information from the ACD can also be made available to everyone in the call centre, via displays on large electronic display boards throughout the office. Often ACD systems are connected to one or more databases using computer telephony integration (CTI) software, which allows for customer records to appear on the agent's screen at the same time that the call comes through on the headset. In addition, some ACD systems also incorporate interactive voice response (IVR) technology that may be used to obtain preliminary customer information before a call is connected to an agent (Adapted from McPhail, 2002). Predictive dialling (PD) technology is used in outbound call centres to telephone large pre-programmed lists of customers. Predictive dialling involves programming a database of customers into a computer which then 'telephones' them, via multiple-dialling, in a predetermined order. It is generally used in conjunction with an ACD system which, when a potential customer answers a call, automatically transfers it to an agent. If the centre also has CTI, the customer's details will simultaneously appear on the agent's screen. If a number is engaged or rings a certain number of times without an answer the computer moves on to the next number (Adapted from McPhail, 2002).

collected routinely and regularly for each call-centre agent individually and for each work team collectively. These include call waiting time, average call handling time (AHT), call wrap-up time and call abandonment rates. 'Call barging' (where TLs, quality analysts and other superiors – and in some cases, even clients – listen in simultaneously but remotely on live calls to evaluate agents' performance) and 'side-jacking' (where TLs, quality analysts and other superiors physically sit next to agents and listen to and evaluate their calls) also form part of performance management. In addition, since all calls are recorded and stored in archives, calls can be retrieved at any time and analysed for the purposes of evaluation and appraisal. It was not uncommon for recorded calls to be randomly pulled out by analysts in the quality department and examined in terms of call opening and closing, customer interaction including sensitivity, politeness, warmth, understanding customer needs and handling irate customers, adherence to the script, fluency in the English language, understanding of the product/service/process, use of a neutral accent, maintenance of prescribed procedures including assistance offered and information provided, accuracy of documentation, and other parameters specified by the client.

One is on the edge all the time – everything is monitored from the time you step into the call floor till the time your shift is over. So how many calls, how long each call lasted, how you spoke, what you spoke, how long was the interval between calls...it never ends, day after day. I feel tense and anxious all the time. And they keep records too. If you make a mistake, Quality will just scream at you. It has happened to some of my friends – it made them so disturbed. But then one has to deliver or else get out.

The use of call-centre technology as a monitoring and measurement device did not spell the end of human supervision. TLs, stationed at a central point on the call floor, were always in a position to oversee the operations and keep an eye on the agents, in addition to having a master screen on their computers which tracked and highlighted in real time the ongoing work of each individual agent in the team. It was not uncommon for superiors, including TLs, project managers and operations managers, to privately or publicly pull up agents either individually or in groups. Agents spoke of their supervisors and managers striding up and down the call floor, reprimanding or egging on their team. Experiences of being individually identified and publicly pulled up for poor performance in front of team members were reported. Private dressing downs of individual agents and of entire teams were also described. Though agents admitted that such experiences were harsh, and both hurt and humiliated them, they maintained that it was their responsibility to perform and deliver and that superiors were merely doing their jobs.

The TL or the operations manager will stand behind you. If you are not performing, he will scold loudly. It is very humiliating. Everyone is quite sincere in doing their job – so when these shouts happen, we feel that we are useless. Of course, they [the TL and operations manager] are just doing their job but still it is difficult for us also. Insults from customer, yelling from boss, 'targets', 'quality'...'perform', 'deliver' – it gets overwhelming.

The demands associated with call-centre work precipitate strain in the agents. Temporal adjustments due to shift-based work wrought havoc on their biological clocks, resulting in increased susceptibility to illness. Though most agents' bodies adapted

with time, for a few, health problems persisted. It is worth noting however that those whose bodies had adjusted to nocturnal schedules found themselves physically compelled to maintain the same schedule on their weekly and public holidays. Aggravating this predicament was agents' inability to leave their seats during the shift. Uninterrupted call flows, apart from entailing incessant listening and talking which lead to oral and aural complications, necessitated continuous use of various kinds of technology, resulting in sensory-motor problems linked to the visual and auditory systems and repetitive strain injury (RSI). The sedentary nature of the job, coupled with the almost complete absence of any significant chance for locomotion during the shift, caused stiffness, cramps and backaches. Reducing or eliminating breaks interfered with agents' eating habits. Where breaks were permitted, long queues in the cafeteria forced them to choose fast food or skip their meal altogether in order to be back in time to log in, affecting their nutritional intake. Extension of the work day and the work week also exacerbated health problems. Commuting to and from work also played a part. Though employer organisations provided agents with transport, not only were the distances covered long, but the practice of pooling agents living in spatially proximate localities into a single travel group also extended travel time. The state of India's urban infrastructure added to the problem. Strain on the agents was also exacerbated by their superiors' aggressive and hostile behaviour, aimed at ensuring the realisation of the SLAs.

With agents working during the afternoon, evening or at night (and having little opportunity to be connected with their extra-organisational social networks during work time) and sleeping during the day, as well as the mismatch between Indian public holidays and agents' public holidays (determined by the customer group being served), work-life balance was severely disrupted. Agents reported problems related to spending time with family members, keeping in touch with relatives and friends and completing personal chores and household duties. Organisational demands for team outings, team get-togethers and office gatherings, conducted with a view to developing and reinforcing team bonding and organisational commitment, further hampered work-life balance. Declining these organisational invitations resulted in disapproval from TLs and other superiors and was perceived as a lack of compliance and commitment which affected agents' career prospects.

The job really pays but it has its costs too. Health, family life, social life...everything suffers. One cannot even eat a meal in peace at work, because the break is too short, the queue is too long. But what I feel is that it is in the way we go about it – because of the SLAs, all this is happening. Our bosses also have no choice. Or lose the process.

The experience of physical and mental strain, under the circumstances, was inevitable. Health problems such as loss of appetite, changes in body weight, stomach acidity, nausea, constipation, colds and coughs, diabetes, blood pressure, insomnia, chronic fatigue and drowsiness, anxiety, depression, irritability and cognitive disruptions were commonly reported. While participants pointed out that they attempted to cope with physical strain and ill-health through medical intervention and maximisation of rest and sleep, sick leave to recover from illness was not easily

granted. The emphasis on mass customised production meant that employers laid down strict guidelines about granting leave. While agents with less than 6 months tenure with the organisation were not eligible for any kind of leave, agents whose tenure went beyond 6 months were expected to plan for and inform managers about their leave requirements well in advance. Taking leave without prior consent was considered to be an unauthorised absence. Employers went to the extent of blocking the bank salary accounts of those who absented themselves and refused to provide references for those who finally decide to quit because of the situation. Requests for leave with no notice even during instances of ill health were examined in the light of expected and/or ongoing call volume and targets, and were granted or denied accordingly. In other words, when the call volume and targets were high, agents were expected to report for duty no matter how ill they were. Agents who absented themselves, whether with or without intimation, were either warned or dismissed. In some organisations, the management kept a strict watch on people taking sick leave, going to the extent of checking out their homes or regular haunts as well as verifying medical certificates that were submitted.

My friend was so unwell on the shift itself. Still, they [TL and operations manager] did not permit him to take leave. So he did not turn up the next day. They called him on his mobile and said, 'No need to come back at all.', and put some one else in his place. There is no humanity in the call centres. I have heard similar stories from many of my friends.

Work systems, job design elements, customer service requirements and techno-bureaucratic controls all combine together to contribute to an oppressive work regime for agents. Though on the one hand, participants' tasks lacked variety, complexity and autonomy, resulting in a routinised monotony, on the other hand, stringent quality and quantity performance parameters enforced via technology-based monitoring and surveillance ensured that the agents met the expectations of their employers and their clients, facing disciplinary measures, under a transactional psychological contract of employment, if they failed to do so. The agents interviewed in our survey maintained that their experience of oppression essentially emerged from the SLAs. Superiors' aggressive behaviours added to this but, in the participants' view, their superiors at various levels in the employer organisation were only implementing the SLAs that were so critical to retaining or renewing their contracts for particular process and thus for organisation success. They were therefore not held personally responsible for the oppressive work environment. It is relevant to add here that the process excellence agendas currently being adopted in the Indian ITES-BPO sector will exacerbate agents' experience of oppression still further.

The participants' descriptions of the work regimes made it very explicit that they regarded these regimes as oppressive. In this regard, their subjective experiences go beyond those observations about work conditions in international call centres in India by Poster (2007), Ramesh (2004) and Taylor and Bain (2005), justifying the use of the concept of depersonalised bullying (Liefoghe & Mackenzie Davey, 2001). In bringing out its relevance in the contemporary capitalist labour process (Hoel & Beale, 2006; Ironside & Seifert, 2003), these participant narratives allow for a contextualised and politicised understanding of this concept (Hoel & Beale, 2006).

Participating in one's own oppression

Whilst taking a firm stand that the work environment is oppressive, participants nevertheless displayed acceptance of it. Two sets of factors accounted for this contradictory response to the oppressive work environment: participants' professional identity; and the material gains associated with their employment in the ITES-BPO sector.

Participants reiterated that, since they were professionals, they could cope with this oppressive work regime. According to them, professionals possess superior cognitive abilities, advanced qualifications and a sense of responsibility and commitment to work. They prioritise work over personal needs and pleasure, behaving in a dignified and restrained manner and performing optimally and rationally while on the job. Professionals comply with the requirements of the job and the organisation, absorbing any strain that results. The notion of professionalism embraced agents' identity, and functioned in a pervasive manner to discipline them on the job. A vivid picture of the context surrounding their professional identity emerged from these narratives. Organisations cultivate the notion of professionalism in their employees through induction training, on-going socialisation, performance evaluation mechanisms and other elements of organisational design. Indeed, interviews that we conducted with call-centre managers⁶ confirmed that employer organisations inculcate the professional identity in their agents with a view to gaining their compliance and commitment to the realisation of the organisation's agenda. That professional identity is greatly valued as a symbol of social status and upward mobility in the Indian context facilitates this process.

Agents' professional identity precluded engagement with collectivisation attempts which are seen as inconsistent with the essential features of professionalism. Moreover, participants considered that collectivisation is redundant in situations where employers protect their employees' interests, particularly through career development and employee redressal opportunities.

Agents pointed out the various avenues their employers provided for career advancement. Many organisations had tie-ups with educational institutions for business administration and management courses, and those who took advantage of this opportunity were usually fully or partially funded by their employers. Similarly, agents reported that their employers had created avenues for vertical movement. Staff were notified of promotion opportunities through internal job postings (IJPs) circulated every quarter. It was emphasised by the organisations that career development was determined by performance and not by socio-demographic factors, seniority or intra-organisational social networks, with an emphasis on merit and objectivity. Furthermore, movement was fast-paced in that, for top performers, the

6 We attempted to deepen our understanding of the core theme and its constituents through in-depth interviews conducted with 40 call-centre managers in Bangalore and Mumbai employed by MNC captive, MNC third party and Indian third party call-centre organisations. Transcripts derived from the interview data (that were audio recorded with permission), were analysed using Miles and Huberman's (1994) techniques, and major themes with related secondary themes, categories and patterns were developed and interpretations were made (Patton, 1990). These managerial views supported our core theme. Moreover, while acknowledging call-centre organisations' reliance on the notion of professionalism, managers pointed out contradictions between employers' conceptualisation of professionalism as communicated to employees and the actual operationalisation of professionalism within the organisation (See Noronha & D'Cruz, 2009).

transition from an entry level post to a junior level supervisory post could occur within a year of joining the organisation.

Numerous avenues existed for redressing grievances. Agents informed us that, in keeping with a professional style of management, openness of communication in terms of content, form, style and route were valued. Therefore, in addition to periodic employee satisfaction surveys, 'skip-level meetings'⁷ and open forums with superiors, employees with grievances were free to approach anyone in the organisation from the CEO (chief executive officer) down to the TL or someone in between via email, letters, telephone conversations or face-to-face meetings. It was strongly emphasised that the professional atmosphere in the organisation precluded the victimisation of complainants.

Agents expressed the opinion that collectivisation in the Indian ITES-BPO sector would not augur well for its continuity and growth. Currently, overseas clients appreciated India as an offshoring destination not just because of the superior workforce but also because of the macroeconomic business environment of the country. Collectivist activities would pose a serious hindrance to this, resulting in a relocation of activities to other places in South and South-East Asia and South America. Such a development would have micro-level consequences for agents because their employment prospects would be severely and adversely affected.

It suits their employers very well that their employees take this position. From agents' narratives and managerial interviews, it appeared that companies take pains to nurture this stand. Cultivating agents' professional identity is an important step in this direction. The organisations then build on agents' self-concept, highlighting the disconnect between professionalism and collectivisation, which is strongly associated with blue-collar work in the popular mind in the Indian context. Providing avenues for grievances legitimises the employers' claims, promoting the view that trade unions are redundant. That employer organisations do not recognise unions further complicates the agents' perspective. They had been told by their employers that associating with unions could result in dismissal from their jobs. Finally, the organisations' insistence that trade unions would hamper the growth of the Indian ITES-BPO sector, with implications for employment opportunities, sealed the agents' opinions on the matter.

The material gains associated with agent-level jobs in international facing call centres in India play an important role in influencing participants' responses to the oppressive work regime. Personal remuneration and organisational facilities work to strengthen their compliance with and commitment to work-related demands. Participants were well aware that such returns were not available in other sectors of the economy and hence reasoned that it was in their interests to meet work requirements in order to ensure the continuity of the ITES-BPO sector.

The participant narratives underscored the extent to which the ITES-BPO sector, especially global offshoring, had altered India's job market. Employees in this sector, particularly those working for MNC captives, MNC third party and Indian third party organisations, received attractive pay packages, performance incentives in financial and

⁷ A 'skip-level meeting' is a type of structured interview carried out by someone who is not the immediate line manager of the interviewee, either from the HRM department or a manager at least one level removed from the situation, designed to gain an insight into how the organisation is perceived from below.

material forms as well as various allowances and facilities such as food allowance, night shift allowance, transport facilities and medical/health services.

Given the limited employment opportunities for those with a liberal arts or science degree as well as the poor returns at the entry level in many technical and professional fields, it is not surprising that the ITES-BPO sector is widely regarded as the most viable means currently available for achieving a decent quality of life. Those who had prior work experience in other sectors, which paid meagrely, compared the returns received from each sector, highlighting in the process the reasons why the ITES-BPO sector was so much sought after in spite of the challenges it presented. Participants emphasised the sense of independence and self-reliance that their income allowed them, demonstrating changes in their self-concept.

Job titles also played a role. Terms such as 'customer care officer', 'call-centre executive', 'customer care executive', 'contact centre representative' and 'customer support executive' by which centre tasks were designated invoked images of white-collar, professional work and upward mobility, enhancing agents' self-esteem. Participants often also experienced status enhancement by association with overseas clients and customers and employment with MNC organisations, as well as through opportunities to visit clients' locations in foreign countries for training purposes, where applicable. The comparative opulence of the physical infrastructure and material artefacts of the employing organisations also augmented participants' sense of gain.

Professional identity and material gains influence participants' acceptance of their oppressive work environment. Displaying ambivalence, agents participate in their own oppression and hence their victim status is partial.

Developing employee loyalty to and identification with the employer organisation, making employees completely dependent on the employer organisation for the protection of their interests, refusal to recognise trade unions and collectivist endeavours and privileging transactional psychological contracts of employment illustrate the engagement of the HRM strategies described by Peetz (2002) as 'inclusivist' and 'exclusivist', adopted as a means of facilitating the organisational control process. Socio-ideological control via the identity regulation process (Alvesson, 2001; Alvesson & Willmott, 2002) serves as the primary organisational control mechanism, paving the way for participants' acceptance of the oppressive work regime and other inclusivist and exclusivist HRM strategies. In this manner, employees' idiosyncratic behaviour is circumscribed and conformity is ensured in a manner that serves the organisational agenda (Hatch & Cunliffe, 2006).

Courting further oppression

Some of our participants pointed out that a few agents need periodically to find outlets to cope with work-related strain. Extending the call wrap-up time during which relevant information from the phone conversation is keyed into the system, altering their position in the call distribution queue by pressing the release button on their phone, entering wrong customer email addresses into the system if the call did not proceed satisfactorily (so that feedback cannot be obtained from that particular customer), extending restroom breaks, unnecessarily transferring customers' calls and

delaying the disconnection of calls were some of the ways in which a few agents gained some breathing space. Customer abuse was sometimes dealt with either by placing the phone in mute mode and cursing the customer aloud in the presence of team members or by pressing the mute button and enabling the loudspeaker so that the team could collectively listen to, make fun of and enjoy the customer's tirade.

Agents were able to decipher when their calls were being monitored either because of a tell-tale echoing or beeping sound that accompanied such activity or from the call monitoring data sheet, and they would take special care to ensure that their performance was optimal during those times. Sometimes, agents collaborated to help ease the strain for other members of their team. That is, when agents filled in for TLs who, for some reason, could not monitor calls, they would manipulate the entire system by asking their team members to give a list of calls on which they had performed well.

While similar activities have been labelled as resistance in other studies (Bain & Taylor, 2000; Knights & McCabe, 1998; Mullholland, 1999 & 2002; Sturdy & Fineman, 2001; Taylor & Bain, 1999), our participants maintained that such behaviour on the part of agents, which is occasional and individualised, does not harbour any anti-work or anti-employer sentiment but simply serves to release pressure. Agents engage in these activities in spite of their sense of professionalism while also knowing full well that if their employers discover their behaviour, they will be dismissed.

Discussion

Our findings shed light on the concept of depersonalised bullying, helping to clarify its definition. We define depersonalised bullying as the routine subjugation, both covert and overt, of employees by contextual, structural and process-related elements of organisational design, which are implemented as required by supervisors and managers. Organisational agendas, influenced by extra-organisational demands and intra-organisational aspirations, coalesce to determine the intra-organisational environment influencing management ideology and organisational culture. These are manifested via organisational policies, practices, structures, technology, controls and leadership styles. Together, these elements of organisational design subjugate employees, ensuring their deference to organisational expectations. Supervisors and managers whose responsibilities lie in ensuring organisational effectiveness, implement organisational requirements across the workforce, resorting both to subtle and obvious aggression and hostility. While supervisors and managers neither single out nor target any particular employee nor harbour any intention other than the realisation of organisational imperatives, employees report an experience of physiological and psychological strain stemming both from work pressures and from negative behaviours. Depersonalised bullying contrasts with interpersonal bullying where targets are singled out and malicious personalised intentions are nurtured and manifested. It is the presence of negative behaviours that distinguishes depersonalised bullying from the generalised form of capitalist oppression, (neo) Taylorised work organisation and organisational control described in labour process theory. Of course it is still possible that interpersonal bullying could also occur in depersonalised bullying contexts.

These findings reinforce the emerging view within the bullying literature that changes in the business environment world-wide are bringing about concomitant changes in the nature of work systems, organisational design and job processes, with implications for employer-employee relations (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf & Cooper, 2005; Hoel & Salin, 2003). With these developments necessitating increasing levels of organisational control in order to realise organisational effectiveness and competitive advantage (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf & Cooper, 2005; Hoel & Salin, 2003; Lewis & Rayner, 2003) such that the achievement of goals justifies the means, organisations are not just providing a fertile ground for bullying (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf & Cooper, 2005; Hoel & Salin, 2003), but are in danger of themselves becoming bullies (Hoel & Beale, 2006). Ironside and Seifert (2003) emphasise that contemporary changes in the business world are fuelling the emergence of an intimidatory style of management which is in turn leading to a rise of bullying in organisations.

Inevitably, this raises the issue of organisational power. It is important to recognise that the issue of power remains central to the bullying debate, with an imbalance of power between the two parties being emphasised (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf & Cooper, 2003; Keashly & Jagatic, 2003). Yet the issue of power in the context of workplace bullying remains to be explored (Keashly & Jagatic, 2003; Liefoghe & Mackenzie Davey, 2001). In the literature on interpersonal bullying, some allusions to power relations have been made (See Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf & Cooper, 2003; Liefoghe & Mackenzie Davey, 2001), though the implicit connotation in the discussion at this level is that the power utilised in bullying is illegitimate power, located in the individual's aggressive nature (Liefoghe & Mackenzie Davey, 2001). It is precisely this argument that is currently challenged when notions of organisational-level power are called into play. Given the nature of the labour process in a capitalist set-up, accentuated by the influences of globalisation and offshoring, the line between legitimate and illegitimate power becomes increasingly blurred and needs to be clarified. As Alvesson and Deetz (1996) point out, power is fundamental to the functioning of the organisation and hence power imbalances and the inequalities they give rise to are inevitable. Because power is essential for understanding the relationship between organisations and their employees, the routine subjugation of employees through organisational practices may in itself be seen as constituting bullying, though organisations present these controls as being in the overall interests of employees. Such an analysis presents organisational interests as conflicting with the interests of individual employees, with the power imbalance between the organisation and the individual employees inevitably meaning that organisations are perceived as bullies (Liefoghe & Mackenzie Davey, 2001). The debate is succinctly summarised by Hoel and Salin (2003:205) who state that 'bullying may stem not so much from abusive or illegitimate use of power as from power which is considered legitimate, and tightly related to the labour process and managerial prerogative to manage'.

That the utilitarian instrumentalism of the hard HRM model is being camouflaged within the developmental humanism of the soft HRM model (Legge, 2006) aided by the organisational control process (Noronha & D'Cruz, 2009) and inclusivist and exclusivist strategies (Peez, 2002), cannot be denied. Not surprisingly, unitarist

ideologies are promoted within the organisation in such a way that employees' compliance, identification and commitment are strong, critical detachment is weak and organisational control is legitimised. Clearly, HRM operates as one-sided managerialism where employers' interests are represented, rather than as true unitarism which engages employers and employees together in the employment relationship. Indeed, the absence of discursive and pluralist ideologies limit the alternatives available to agents both in terms of world views and actions (Lewis & Rayner, 2003). Overall, employees' opportunities to resist and challenge managerial actions are becoming more limited in the contemporary context (Hoel & Salin, 2003), increasing their power deficit (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf & Cooper, 2005). That the fear of harsh personal consequences further restricts employees' choices must be recognised (Ironside & Seifert, 2003), particularly in the Indian context where similar employment opportunities enabling a decent standard of living outside the ITES-BPO sector are virtually non-existent. Yet, such developments underscore Ironside and Seifert's (2003) and Hoel and Beale's (2006) position that solutions to workplace bullying lie in pluralist approaches through collectivist endeavours. Ironside and Seifert (2003) cite evidence to support their view that improvements in working conditions, including freedom from bullying, are unlikely to come from management initiatives, and that the best route is from pressures within the workplace through the mobilisation of the countervailing power of workers, usually in the form of trade union organisation. Bullying is less likely to occur and is more likely to be tackled when it does occur if there is a strong and well organised trade union presence at the workplace.

Overall, the study findings take forward the perspective currently emerging within the organisation-workplace bullying debate that the organisation itself is the bully, fine-tuning contemporary depersonalised conceptualisations that draw on an organisational level of analysis (Hoel & Beale, 2006; Ironside & Seifert, 2003; Liefoghe & Mackenzie Davey, 2001). Participants' references to an oppressive work regime strengthen Hoel and Beale's (2006) thesis that victimisation refers to one end of the bullying continuum where individuals are singled out, while oppressive work regimes refer to the other end where everyone is subject to the same experience, emphasising that bullying is an umbrella concept (Einarsen, 1999; Rayner, Sheehan & Barker, 1999) whose scope is still being discovered.

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