

Invisible work, invisible skills: interactive customer service as articulation work

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The concept of emotional labour provides an incomplete account of interactive service work, underplaying its invisible cognitive and non-routine elements. In interactive work, from customer service jobs in the fast food industry to 'knowledge work' and at those levels in between on which we focus here, many jobs involve 'articulation work'—the often unacknowledged management of awkward intersections among the social worlds of people, technology and organisations.

Introduction

As service sector work has proliferated in the past two decades, images of that work and the skills required to perform it have increasingly preoccupied labour process theorists. The term 'service' applies to a wide range of occupations, from professional to personal service work in industries as diverse as finance, education and retail. This paper does not attempt to cover the full range of service employment but limits itself to work involving interactions with customers, person to person or voice to voice, mainly, but not exclusively, requiring some level of technology-mediated information processing. Many of our examples are drawn from front-line and call centre work in organisations providing financial, account management, travel and other such services. We will argue that these forms of interactive service work and the skills that they require are best understood by bringing together three bodies of theory, based respectively on the concepts of the 'customer oriented bureaucracy', emotional labour and articulation work.

Conflicting pressures of managerial control in quest of efficiency and the requirement to meet customer needs shape the characteristics of interactive customer service

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work. These have been well registered in Korczynski's (2002) concept of the 'customer oriented bureaucracy', which gives rise to contradictory HRM policies, creating a 'fragile social order' (Korczynski, 2002). The widely used concept of emotional labour or emotion work, pioneered by Hochschild (1983), captures the work performed in maintaining this social order by managing reactions to the conflicts between customer expectations and the rationalised service deliverable within the capitalist system of accumulation and shareholder value. We agree with Bolton (2004) that the skills underpinning emotional labour are undervalued in part because of their 'invisibility'. But we also argue that the concept of emotional labour does not completely capture the nature of interactive service work. And, whilst the concept of 'knowledge work' may apply to non-routine interactive service work such as teaching, we agree with Thompson *et al.* (2000), that it provides an inflated characterisation of the more routine interactive service jobs. A new conceptual framework is needed to cover the combined cognitive, emotional and technological aspects of interactive service work performed at a range of levels of complexity and autonomy.

We believe that the notion of 'articulation work', which is also derived from sociology but taken up mainly in the sociotechnical literature on information system design, can be adapted to provide this framework. 'Articulation work' is a broad concept. Originally developed by the sociologist Anselm Strauss (1985; 1988; 1993), 'articulation'—linking together—is a part of any social 'action'. 'Articulation work' underpins any labour process. Much is ordinary and visible 'management work', but it also underpins the intersection of 'social worlds' and the tacit management of the 'fragile social order', which, as Korczynski (2002) demonstrates, arises during interactive customer service work.

The paper would have no point if it merely proposed a redescription of work processes using a different set of concepts. Rather, the paper suggests that the conceptual framework of articulation work helps to register phenomena that are all too often unnoticed, with important consequences for workers and those involved with skill recognition. The paper's first section explicates and maps the concept of 'articulation work', tracing its genesis and subsequent development. It notes how the concept registers the mostly 'invisible' labour that sustains work processes that are technology-based, interactive and/or service oriented. The second section reviews current conceptualisations of front-line interactive service work, building a platform to which we apply the articulation work framework. The third section argues that the concept of emotional labour is best seen as one element of a broader understanding of interactive service work as articulation work. This step of the argument is illustrated by examples drawn from a database of interviews conducted by one of the authors in the financial services, travel call centre and education industries over the decade of the 1990s.¹ The fourth section unpacks the 'knowledge work/low-level service work' dichotomy that, we argue, limits the analysis of interactive customer service work.

Articulation work: explicating and mapping the concept

The concept of articulation work was developed by the sociologist Anselm Strauss as part of a broader 'interactionist' theory of society (see Strauss, 1985; 1993). Strauss's sociological approach was based on fine-grained observation and the generation of 'grounded theory'. Despite the limitations of its methodological individualism (1993: 209), its focus on the 'micromechanics' of social situations succeeded in identifying the subtle processes by which the interactive customer service work process is 'embedded' in a social milieu (Granovetter, 1985). Thus, Strauss's approach is useful, because it can reveal aspects of 'work' that are in danger of remaining 'invisible'—in particular, the work of technology implementation and the tacit management of the 'fragile social order' (Korczynski, 2002) that arises during interactive customer service work. The approach is also suited to the analysis of learning and work as participation in communities of practice (c.f. Brown and DuGuid, 1991; Lave and Wenger, 1991).

Articulation work is *coordination* and *integration*. It is 'a kind of supra-type of work in any division of labour' (Strauss, 1985: 2, 8). But it is more than *mere* coordination.

It involves 'the working out and carrying through of work related arrangements' (Strauss, 1993: 87), the 'meshing' of the often numerous tasks, clusters of tasks and segments of the total 'arc' of work; the 'meshing' of the efforts of various workers and the units into which they are organised and the 'meshing' of actors with their various types of work and tasks (Strauss, 1985: 8). It involves *following through*, *following up* and 'working things out'. 'Interactional' processes are important—negotiating, compromising, lobbying, coercing, threatening, educating—through which arrangements are established, kept going and revised (Strauss, 1993: 88). The actors' 'stances', approaches or *attitudes* to the work must be brought into some degree of 'alignment' through some combination of cooperation, negotiation or domination. At least, a certain 'common definition of the situation' must be reached about the nature of the work to be done, its meaning, the standards by which it is to be evaluated, resources allocated to it and so on (Strauss, 1993: 91). This may require the 'management of meaning'. Here, 'emotional labour' helps to reconcile the often contradictory 'stances' of entrepreneur and customer.

Strauss argued that people inhabit numerous 'social worlds' or 'groups with shared commitments' who combine resources to achieve their goals and who build 'shared ideologies' (1993: 211). In life, these social worlds 'intersect', and their diverse sections of society ('social worlds' and 'subworlds') are 'knitted together' in cooperative 'lines of action' (if sometimes reluctantly or temporarily) (p. 213). Their fluid 'peripheries' are continually being negotiated. 'Articulation' is thus a necessary feature of any *social* action and not just work *qua* paid employment. Just as the boundaries between social worlds are fluid and negotiable, so are the boundaries between work and non-work (Strauss, 1993: 52, 95). 'Work' does not mean only 'hard labour' ('ponos'), since work can sometimes become 'play'. Equally, a diversity of forms of action like play, games, casual conversation, expressive action, emotional action and symbolic action (like the devotional, the sacrificial, the sacred) is, at times, at least partially constituted by 'work'. Within the world of 'work' (as for other forms of action), 'articulation' has a special position. 'Articulation *work*' facilitates the intersection between social worlds, specifically, actors' meanings (beliefs, attitudes, perspectives, emotions), tasks, responsibilities, obligations, commitments, conceptual structures, time (diverse 'temporalities') and space (Fjuk *et al.*, 1997).

Articulation work in the literature

Strauss' expansive discussion has the result that some of the articulation work literature utilises varied and sometimes incompatible concepts of articulation work, and the next few paragraphs map these alternative meanings onto the four-cell matrix below. The concept of articulation work subsumes *both* routinised labour *and/or* unplanned response to unanticipated contingencies, as well as visible and 'invisible' variants of each. Although the concept is broad, the variant that is of most interest to us is cell four—that is, invisible, non-routine articulation work, since this is the most useful to understand interactive customer service work.

Cell one: visible, 'classical management' work

First, cell one identifies the overt and visible articulation work of planning, organising, coordinating, controlling, staffing, budgeting and so on. The actions and the work flow are rational, standardised, expected and predictable (Schmidt, 1994: 43). This is essentially a rendition of the classical view of management, as applied to 'rational' work with clear goals, predictable inputs and 'component tasks that are articulated in an unambiguous manner' (Strauss, 1993: 83). This is 'explicit', 'upper level' articulation work (Eschenfelder, 2002).

Cell two: visible, non-routine articulation work

Cell two registers forms of articulation work involving responses to contingency. Strauss notes that 'routines are always in danger of breaking down in the face of actual situations . . . [this leads to] . . . new and often unexpected conditions . . . [that] call for

Table 1: Articulation work

	Routine	Non-routine
Visible	<p>Cell one</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 'Classical' management work ● Repair of broken technology following standard operating procedures (rationalist) ● Scripted response to standard customer inquiry 	<p>Cell two</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 'Post-bureaucratic' management ● E.g. Customer's demands lead outside script; skill required to 'articulate' customer needs, technological systems and organisational capabilities ● 'Computer-supported cooperative work'
Invisible	<p>Cell three</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Regular procedure necessary for work and routinely executed but not registered in either canonical accounts or the employment/customer relationship ● E.g. customer navigation to appropriate work area by telephone keypad 	<p>Cell four</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Repair of technology outside standard operating procedures ● Customer's demands lead outside script, skill required to 'articulate' customer needs, technological systems and organisational capabilities ● E.g. customer lapses into display of anger (emotional labour to manage), whilst negotiating technology ● Intersection of 'social worlds' of work and home, e.g. reconciling 'flexible' employment conditions and domestic responsibilities

adaptation, adjustment, or change of some routines and require new actions' (Strauss, 1993: 86). The 'post bureaucratic' conceptions of management work apply here (e.g. Luthans *et al.*, 1988). In this conception, work is rapid paced, responding to sometimes contradictory pressures and unanticipated contingencies within tight time frames.

By definition 'unanticipated production contingencies' do not appear in 'canonical' and 'rationalised' accounts of work, and unless someone watches or self-reports, the work is not registered (e.g. Brown and DuGuid, 1991). Moreover, dominant forms of the work reorganisations of the 1980s, especially those driven by images of 'lean production', sought to induce non-routine work by increasing stress, removing resources in order to drive innovation and 'organisational learning' (Adler and Cole, 1993; Parker and Slaughter, 1988). This process could be reconceived as causing the smooth flow of production to 'disarticulate' by removing 'buffers' and other resources—especially *time*—thus causing the need for 'articulation work' to reconstitute the disrupted portion of the workflow (see Hampson, 1999). Once rearticulated, as accounts of lean production stress, the solutions become established as routine (by recapturing the changed processes in standard operating procedure charts). This may entail a move from cell four to the left side of the matrix, especially to cell one. From this point of view, 'lean production' reminds us that *as the availability of time decreases, the importance of this kind of articulation work increases*. The need for articulation work, thus, has an important relationship to time.

Thus far, the concepts of visible, routine and non-routine articulation work amount simply to redescription and as such, add little. However, the advantage of the articulation work framework is that it registers forms of work that are in danger of remaining invisible. Our argument distinguishes three 'forms' of invisible work. The first includes work that takes place but is not registered in what Brown and DuGuid (1991)

refer to as 'canonical' or 'rationalist' accounts of work like repair manuals, training materials, job descriptions and so on. The second form includes work that is externalised from the enterprise and/or from the employment relation but is essential to its smooth functioning. For example, customers donate their own time to an organisation whenever they use an automatic teller, navigate themselves to the relevant part of an organisation using a telephonic keypad or pay bills by computer. The work and cost of articulation in these cases is externalised from the enterprise to the customer and thus rendered invisible. A third form of invisibility includes the 'tacit' skills that underpin many work processes, including those of interactive customer service and even intellectual work. Sometimes, these skills are 'autonomised' as a result of compilation during practice. Sometimes, they appear 'natural'. The invisible forms of articulation work and the skills necessary to its functioning are the most interesting aspects of the conceptual framework.

Cell three: invisible, routine work

Cell three registers invisible routine articulation work—that is, routine work that is necessary for the work to proceed but is not registered as occurring within the employment relationship or within the organisation. Suchman (1996) describes the articulation work necessary for traffic controllers to ensure the orderly arrival and departure of planes at an airport. She observes how the 'handover' of responsibility for a plane varied from the standard operating procedures, which mandate that a plane becomes the responsibility of the control tower when it moves off the parking ramp and onto the taxiway. However, in one case, the physical placement of buildings prevented the plane from being viewed from the tower when it was officially under its control. Communications strategies outside of standard procedures—but which became routine to the operators—were necessary to manage the plane's movements. In this case, the articulation work was relatively easy to uncover 'however much its detail may be glossed over by standard job descriptions' (p. 412).

Cell four: invisible, non-routine articulation work

Cell four registers the most relevant (for our purposes) of all forms of articulation work. Some writers, for example Star, restrict the term to this cell. First, articulation work 'modifies action to accommodate unexpected contingencies' (Star, 1991: 275). And, second, articulation work is 'invisible', even 'deleted', a perennial characteristic of women's work (pp. 265–267). For Eschenfelder (2002: 3), the articulation approach explores 'the unplanned or non-rational aspects of work left out of rational work models', and '... [it is] involved with the coordination of tasks, beliefs, goals or standards of different actors involved with the work, [and is] undertaken in support of a high level end goal.' The author's work describes several instances where the 'rules' of content management (in government web sites) actually impeded the attainment of the overall goals of the organisation (which were to produce 'good' content on web sites). Therefore, workers engaged in articulation work—'augmenting' or taking on extra work and 'working around' existing rules that obstructed good work practice.

Similarly, Suchman (1996) describes the use of image-processing technology for the document management systems of a large law firm. The definitions of skill and work were gendered. Most lawyers in the firm were males, but the support staff were not, and the latter's work, although vitally necessary, was devalued. The process, called 'litigation support', entailed the creation of a database index that guided access to a very large number of documents. Orderly access to and structured retrieval from files was vital to assembling arguments for cases. The males described the document coding as 'mindless' labour, potentially a target for automation or offshore placement. In fact, document coding was a highly knowledge-intensive activity, involving considerable discretion and independent judgment, so that documents that were separated from each other were cross-referenced and 'linked' (articulated) for later structured retrieval (Suchman, 1996: 415–417). This articulation work, a form of knowledge work, had been rendered invisible by the gendered definitions of skill employed by the males who dominated the workplace.

The concept of articulation work applies well to currently popular accounts of knowledge management, learning and innovation in communities of practice. Brown and DuGuid (1991) draw on and amplify Orr's (1990) ethnographic studies of photocopier repair work. Here, a number of themes central to our account of articulation work appear. First is the *variability* of repair work. The need to respond to unanticipated contingency is in the nature of computer technology itself. Complex machines are subject, in Perrow's (1988) memorable phrase, to 'normal accidents' in which 'unanticipated contingencies' or machine breakdowns are 'normal'. Complex technologies often do not work as expected. The rationalist approach to repair work, as described by Orr, seeks to anticipate all possible breakdowns and to allocate them an error code and a repair procedure. Brown and DuGuid point out how this effectively seeks to deskill repair work and, as Orr found out, technicians themselves were sensitive to the undervaluation of their skills, which was implicit in the standardised repair procedures.

In a second continuity between our account of articulation work and Brown and DuGuid's account of 'organisational learning', Brown and DuGuid stress the difference between what they call 'canonical' accounts of work—what we have referred to above as rationalist accounts—and what actually goes on in the repair of photocopiers. The formal descriptions 'omit the details'. But to really apprehend the work process requires fine-grained observation and 'thick' accounts, which also register the difference between the work process as it appears after it has been done and the work process as it appears during execution. This difference is not always apparent even to those who perform the tasks, due in part to the invisibility of 'tacit' skills even to those who 'own' them and to those who sometimes describe their work retrospectively in rationalistically reconstructed terms. It is often lost on managers and writers of work flow charts, repair manuals and instructional materials. Brown and DuGuid write that 'many organisations are willing to assume that complex tasks can be successfully mapped onto a set of simple, tayloristic, canonical steps that can be followed without need of significant understanding or insight.' (1991: 42). Not only do these accounts fail to register the complexity of work as it is actually performed, they may actually impede the process of performing the work.

In cases documented by Orr (1990), standardised repair procedures were actually obstacles to repair. Designed as decision trees for diagnosis and repair, they assumed 'both predictable machines and an unproblematic process of making diagnoses and repairs through blindly following diagnostic instructions' (Brown and DuGuid, 1991: 42). But when decision trees assumed the nature of corporate directives that repair technicians had to follow, they actually made the repair technicians' work more difficult. Rather than being 'maps' of possible contingencies and possible repair routines, they were more like 'a predetermined route with no alternatives' (*ibid*). And when the breakdowns had not been anticipated by the writers of repair manuals (or in the technician's training), as is in the way of complex technology, the need to 'work around' (Eschenfelder, 2002) the established procedures became apparent.

Understanding interactive customer service work

Customer service work differs from manufacturing in the direct presence of the customer. The addition of the latter to the employer-employee dyad provides an added and competing locus of control on the customer service worker (Sturdy *et al.*, 2001: 5). Interactive customer service work has its boosters and its critics. Members of the 'New Service Management School' (e.g. Schlesinger and Heskett, 1991; Schneider and Brown, 1995; Stanback, 1990) argue that quality service can only be delivered through an 'empowerment' approach. Front-line staff need to be committed, highly skilled and supported by appropriately 'soft' HRM strategies—including high-quality training. They claim that the 'customer's perceptions of the quality of service is significantly correlated with the service workers' perception of the climate of the firm' (Korczynski, 2002: 3, ch. 2). This is the so-called 'satisfaction mirror', in which front-line customer service workers find job satisfaction through 'delighted' customers. As Korczynski (ch.

2) argues, this is a unitarist concept, in which there is an assumed confluence of interests between customers, workers and management. We agree with Korczynski that it is less an empirical account of interactive service work than a normative statement of what the authors believe such work should be like and as such, is immune from empirical critique.

Against the uncritical 'boosterist' view, there is a ranged strong critique of customer service work. George Ritzer's widely read book, *The McDonaldisation of Society* (1996), paints an Orwellian picture of service work as 'variously fake, invasive, emotionally draining, demeaning, highly routinised and alienating' (Korczynski, 2002: 3). McDonaldisation involves the dimensions of efficiency, calculability, predictability and control. McDonaldisation leads to the creation of 'Mcjobs' at the lower end of the service sector, 'most of them requiring little or no skill' (Korczynski, 2002: 43). This routinisation of service sector work has dire consequences. Ritzer and Stillman (2001: 102 ff) identify a trend from person-to system-oriented service, in which routinised and scripted interactions between customer and worker are liable to replacement by interactions between customers and technological systems. Critics like Ritzer argue that even the emotional aspects of customer interaction are scripted, undermining the personal autonomy of the customer service worker who suffers alienation and loss of self. Further critical perspectives derive from those 'gendered job' theorists who characterise front-line service work as involving definitions of 'quality' customer service based on deference, submissiveness, pleasing appearance and even titillation, lately rendered as 'aesthetic labour skills' (Filby, 1992; Leidner, 1991; Warhurst and Nickson, 2001). An alternative feminist critique, based on a less passive and objectified perspective, emphasises the exploitation of a gendered capacity to manage interactions tacitly from a subordinate position (Belt *et al.*, 2002; Junor, 1998; Mulholland, 2002).

Korczynski's (2002) concept of the 'customer oriented bureaucracy' shows why such a capacity may be needed, by unpacking the dual but contradictory imperatives driving customer service work. On the one hand and in the aggregate, in a competitive environment, firms have to respond to customer demands. The customer is, first, the rational utilitarian, seeking the best price in the market and second, the irrational potential hedonist, seeking 'customer delight' as well as the satisfaction of needs. Thus, individual customer demands may be capricious and shifting, not to say 'irrational'. 'Delight' comes from, among other areas, the consumption of signs and 'identity value' and the experience of 'enchantment'—in particular, through the 'myth' of consumer sovereignty. The latter is a 'myth' because, whilst at the macro level, firms do respond to customer requirements, at the individual level, they determine much of their customers' behaviour in the course of the customer service interaction (Korczynski, 2002: 60–63). Because firms are in a competitive situation and are driven by requirements of efficiency ('bureaucracy'), they need to structure customer service accordingly. Firms compete with each other by raising customer expectations of service, but competition requires those interactions to be structured according to requirements of efficiency. This leads to contradictory pressures on the front-line customer service person. Whilst being expected to 'respond' to customer expectations of pleasing interaction and, above all, deference, the customer service representative must, at the same time, take control of the interaction. This is, in effect, a requirement to be in control without appearing to be so. To this might be added the tension felt when a customer service officer knows fully well that the organisation's product is defective or inferior in some way and that advocating the employer's product in preference to the competition's is deceitful. This conflict between divided loyalties may be intensified or ameliorated by workplace surveillance. The result is a 'fragile social order' 'with tensions latent, rather than dissipated' (p. 66). The order is often disrupted when customer expectations are disappointed, when it is realised that, in fact, customers are not in charge. At this point, customers may become abusive. 'Enchantment may easily turn to disillusionment in the moments when the individual customer's lack of sovereignty becomes starkly apparent' (p. 63).

As Korczynski (2002) argues, these conflicting pressures result in the contradictory requirements that front-line workers be both efficient and effective. Performance

appraisals seek a 'balance' between rewarding customer responsiveness (which may take too long) and efficient service (which may be curt and hasty). Training is in techniques of conversational control, for example, or stress management and emotional self-defense against the inevitable breakdowns of the 'fragile social order'. Counseling and similar techniques tend to assume that any breakdown is the fault of the individual worker. 'Obtaining the desired behaviour' is difficult, because the inherent variability of the work process makes desired behaviour difficult to specify in advance (p. 123), and the 'irrational' nature of the customer means that front-line workers may have to reject predesigned procedures (p. 72). So, rather than standard operating procedures, control is often sought through the propagation of 'customer oriented norms' and selection procedures that emphasise 'customer-oriented values'.

Controlling the behaviour of front-line customer service officers is inherently difficult because of three problems of the labour process: its variability, the difficulties of observing it without disturbing what you are observing the measurement of its output. One response to the intangibility of front-line work is to seek ever more information, e.g. through monitoring and deployment of 'mystery shoppers', but these are likely to disrupt the trust and commitment on which normative control depends (Korczynski, 2002: 123 ff). The image of customer service work described by Korczynski has the strength that it registers that such work is often contradictory, as opposed to one that is dimensionally 'good' or 'bad'. While workers who were surveyed often reported high stress and frustration, many also reported satisfaction, deriving from 'helping people'. However, the language that they used points to their conception of customers as 'people', i.e. as 'socially embedded customers' (pp. 78, 129). Moreover, it is possible to enlist the rhetoric of customer service in defence of these spaces: a chat can be justified as 'keeping the customer loyal'.

We argue that the process of customer service can be conceived of as an intersection of 'social worlds', the resulting social order being 'fragile' because of the incompatibility of key foundational assumptions of these worlds, which have to be made to appear compatible. Part of the fragility of the social order derives from the fact that the basic clashes of interests in the situation are required to be kept hidden—this is an important condition for the success of the intersection. In particular, the illusion that firms are there to serve the customer, rather than realise surplus value through them, must be sustained. Strauss refers to the need to 'articulate' diverse meanings, beliefs, attitudes and perspectives when social worlds 'intersect'. This is what is happening during interactive customer service. The interactive customer service takes place at the intersection of the worlds of the organisation (and management), the customer and the customer service operator.

Although initially deployed to analyse the implementation and the shaping of technology, the model of articulation work developed in the previous section is particularly well suited to analyzing customer service work. First, the model is sensitive to 'invisible' non-routine work, which characterises much customer service work. At the same time, the broadness of the model laid out in Table 1 encompasses both routine and non-routine forms of service work and the movement from non-routine to routine to 'system' (Ritzer and Stillman, 2001). Second, the model is sensitive to the socially embedded nature of work and, as regards customer service, to the way in which the customer, the employee and the employer, inhabit different 'social worlds', which intersect during customer service. This approach is useful, because it can register the subtle processes by which the (interactive customer service) work process is 'embedded' in a social milieu (cf Granovetter, 1985; Korczynski, 2002: 143, 89; Polanyi, 1944) and the importance of 'articulation' across the home/work interface (Junor, 1998). Third, the model is sensitive to the slippages between 'work' and 'non-work' evident in both the contradictory experience of customer service work and in the way that formally internal 'work' processes become externalised beyond the enterprise. In addition, two points require reiteration. First, articulation work becomes more important as the time allocated to complete a work process is compressed or as new tasks are added to an existing work process. And second, the tendency of the firm to organise production in such a way as to externalise costs to the surrounding community, is

evident in much customer service work, especially call centres. The same principles of regularising workflow, (consequent on unpredictable consumer demand) by imposing the costs of queuing on customers, apply. The resulting social order becomes more 'fragile' (as customers become testy), and the articulation work and emotional labour necessary to support the 'intersection' of the social worlds assumes greater importance.

'Articulation work' and emotional labour in interactive customer service

The management and the presentation of emotion are defined as key aspects of much customer service work (Taylor, 1998: 84). While emotional labour is an important ingredient of interactive service work, the present focus on it tends to obscure the articulation work skills that are also deployed. Moreover, whilst the need for emotional labour is often presented in terms of management's need to control the emotional expression of employees (e.g. Taylor, 1998), the need for emotional labour is also explicable in terms of the need for articulation work to manage the 'intersection' of diverse social worlds.

Emotional labour has been defined as the 'effort, planning and control needed to express organisationally desired emotions during interpersonal transactions' (Morris and Feldman, 1996: 987). The concept originated with Hochschild's (1983) study of flight attendants, in which that part of flight attendants' work that consisted of sensing customer emotions and managing them by various types of acting was established. This acting involves a mobilisation of the psychological processes necessary to display the emotions that will have the organisationally required impact on customers. Whilst 'surface' acting or deceiving another about what one really feels may be enough to bring customers into compliance with organisational expectations, 'deep' acting may be required. This means 'deceiving oneself as well as deceiving others' (Hochschild, 1983: 33) and can be either 'passive' (the automatic, routine and largely unconscious adoption of a role) or 'active' (working on one's own thoughts and feelings in order to produce the required emotion and emotional impact).

Some writers differentiate 'emotion work' from emotional labour (e.g. Bolton, 2004; Zapf, 2002: 238–239). This distinction registers that, whilst much 'emotional labour' is forced, some is voluntary and pleasurable. Thompson and McHugh (2002: 288) point out that it may actually contribute positively to employees' identity and is likely to be experienced as pleasurable 'non-work', particularly when the displayed and felt emotions coincide with managerial expectations. On the other hand, emotional harmony gives way to emotional deviance or 'organisational misbehaviour' (Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999) when the displayed and felt emotions coincide but differ from the organisationally required emotion: in this situation, similarly, 'real' emotional 'labour' is not performed. 'Real' emotional 'labour' is characterised by emotional *dissonance*—a tension between felt emotion and that which is required and displayed (Mann, 1999: 68–69, quoted in Thompson and McHugh, 2002: 288). Zapf (2002: 244–246) defines emotional dissonance as a stressor arising when the job context requires the faking of emotion. Intra-psychic stress may result when the feeling of sympathy with the viewpoint of the customer and the expression of the viewpoint of management/employer diverge. Representing the employer then requires 'real' emotional *labour*. The risk of burnout (exhaustion, depersonalisation, reduced accomplishment) increases with the intensity and duration of emotional effort involved (Zapf, 2002: 256). Emotional effort is inherent in the customer service workers' role as 'shock absorber' between customers and management (Barnes, 2004). Wallace *et al.* (2000) have noted how this leads some management to adopt a 'sacrificial' HR strategy—in which management accepts that tensions between efficiency and service will cause burnout in customer service workers but accepts the resulting high rates of employee turnover.

The concept of articulation work can assist in analyzing the skills of managing oneself and others in situations of tension between the requirements of customer and management. Where the customer service worker sympathises with the customer, the

customer service worker has three choices, of which none is attractive. The first choice is that the worker can adopt the stance of management but at the cost of personal integrity and tension with the customer and, possibly, community. In the following case,² a bank teller made a decision in the interests of management. The teller had detected a petty attempt to withdraw money using stolen documents and had to follow the 'fraud' routine of ringing the police whilst keeping the customer talking until they arrived.

This poor fellow, I felt like saying, 'run, just run', because he was simple, he was simple . . . and I'm saying, 'Ooh and whereabouts is such-and-such?' And he's saying, 'Up north', and I knew it wasn't . . . I typed on the screen to the guy I was working with 'This is a fraud. The cops are on their way', sort of thing, and he went, 'Ohh, shit' . . . So I just kept this poor man talking, the cops walked in behind him, and they said, 'Is that him?' and I said 'Yes' . . . I felt so sorry for him, because he was obviously pretty destitute . . . (Suburban bank teller).

The concept of articulation work acknowledges the cognitive processes required by this combination of calm judgment, rapid decision-making, use of routines, non-routine use of technologies, acting and ethical balancing—but also, and above all, suppression of class loyalties and natural sympathies—an uncomfortable negotiation of conflicts between social or life worlds.

The second choice is that the worker can lean towards the point of view of the customer (taking seriously the rhetoric of 'meeting customer needs') but thereby placing herself in tension with management and possibly risking employment itself. Korczynski (2002: 77, ff) notes how some customer service workers experience satisfaction from 'helping' the customer *qua* (socially embedded) person. Such behaviour may be officially sanctioned whilst it is useful to the organisation. On the other hand, such empathy must be tightly regulated (Maconachie, 1992) and can, at any moment, be seen as stepping over the line into inappropriateness. Faced with the need to reconcile the demands of needy or difficult customers at the counter and the 'turmoil' of long queues, front-line bank staff must make fine calculations of the extent to which they can go in balancing tacit helping cultures and managerial requirements. Again, this negotiation of the demands of conflicting social or life worlds involves judgment and mediation skills as well as emotion work. Mediation involves the turning around of emotions to restore warmth, but it also involves concentration to interpret the problem and to assess the required response, follow up using abstract understanding of information flows, coordination work that links banking technology to individual customer information flows and the reconciliation of special treatment with the pressure of the queue waiting to be attended to (we will return to this point). This cognitive shifting of the ground to the cause of the emotional outburst may restore initiative to the front-line worker in a way that helps avert intrapsychic tension.

There are other, less labour-intensive ways in which front-line workers can go beyond acting as sacrificial emotional buffers. We agree with Wray-Bliss (2001) and Barnes (2003; 2004) that the self-regulation and routines of interactive service work do not necessarily imply a surrender of emotional autonomy. Wray-Bliss, in our view, correctly challenges the assumption that management can successfully 'govern the "soul" of the employee' through the 'cult of the customer' (Rose, 1990, cited in Wray-Bliss, 2001: 45). The author argues that the call centre clerks who were interviewed were mobilising the discourse of customer service on the basis of the emotional quality of the work, as a way of resisting management's attempt to define customer service in terms of the volume of calls answered. Barnes (2003; 2004) also provides evidence of customer service officers using both call volume statistics and service quality arguments to affirm their skill and to assert a degree of autonomy.

A third response to conflicts between management processes and customer requirements points to a new meaning in the routinisation identified in cell one of our matrix. It involves sheltering behind official scripts. Rather than the alienation and the deskilling assumed in much labour process literature, scripted routines may offer front-line workers a form of self-defence, because they require less self-engagement (Barnes, 2004). Zapf (2002: 242) draws on Schank and Abelson (1977) to define scripts

as 'cognitive schemata available in the long-term memory that comprise information to control routine behaviour'. Short interactions, which are more likely to be scripted, require less emotional effort, and there is some empirical evidence that they are less likely to result in burnout (Cordes and Dougherty, 1993, cited in Zapf, 2002: 242). Thus, even routinised emotional labour need not necessarily imply surrender of self but may reveal a 'strategic disengagement', a rational and pragmatic process of role and self-management, designed to make the work sustainable.

Thus, the concept of articulation work adds to an understanding of the skills of interactive service work. We would argue that the concept of articulation work helps to locate front-line work in two of Spenner's (1983; 1990; 1995) dimensions of substantive complexity—the level of skill involved in working with people and the skill demands of integrating the mental, technology-based and interpersonal aspects of the job. The concept of emotional labour may contribute to an understanding of the relatively high level people skills, such as diverting and negotiating, deployed by some front-line workers (Spenner, 1979: 974). But without exaggerating the scope or autonomy of interactive service work or its intellectual and technical level, we believe that it is important to recognise the complexity of its integrative role, underpinning the intersection of social worlds. The concept of articulation work allows us to do so, thereby avoiding a simple dichotomy between deskilled and knowledge-based work.

Between knowledge work and routinisation: interactive customer service as articulation work

We have noted that scholars who challenge the characterisation of service work as 'knowledge economy work' tend to posit only one alternative—the low level 'McDonaldised' job that is routine, repetitive, highly controlled, subject to speed-up and that calls for subservience and perhaps the titillation involved in some aesthetic labour. But we argue that the skills necessary to perform interactive customer service, particularly in the environments that we have discussed, go beyond emotional labour and are a subset of articulation work skills, involving a blend of emotional, cognitive, technical and time-management skills, performed often at speed and at varying levels of complexity and autonomy. Articulation work skills may be required in service work at a range of complexities between low-level routine work and managerial/professional/knowledge work. In addition, we point out the importance of articulation work in managing the intersection of the social worlds of home and work, paid and unpaid work.

The original deskilling thesis underpinning labour process theory defined deskilling in terms of loss of autonomy and task narrowing (Braverman, 1974). Accounts of 'McDonaldised' jobs apply this analysis to interactive service work. There is a tendency to conflate 'low level' (low paid, low status) work and 'low skilled' work. Ritzer (1996) and Thompson *et al.* (2001) see most future service work as 'low level'. But low level and low skilled are not the same thing, as recent re-reading of established labour process texts reminds us (Littler, 1982, quoted in Bolton, 2004). There is no doubt that fast food and retail checkout jobs entail task narrowing, specialisation and repetition. Point of time transactions involve the speedy delivery of products accompanied by routine pleasantness. But this model does not apply to all interactive service work. Compared with work in supermarkets or fast food sales, the service may be delivered over a longer time frame, its care-work components may be more integral, and it may have a greater technical component: the work of flight attendants is an instance. Or the service may be more abstract and based more on information management: bank work and call centre work fit here. There is also no doubt that call centre work and some front-line bank jobs have been organised or reorganised on the basis of speed, although difficulties in the streamlining process have arisen from failures to take account of the elements of the work that extend beyond task content (Junor, 1998, chs. 4, 5 *passim*). The direct inputting, retrieval and communication of data from front-line terminals may be routine but also involves accuracy, intense concentration and responsible follow-up and must be accompanied by relaxed chatting with customers and an

ability to work at speed in order to keep queues manageable (Adler, 1988; Baran, 1987). We argue that the capacity to manage the tensions between speed, concentration and sociability is a key articulation work skill. Another is to do so whilst managing emotion at the same time. Thus, in a range of interactive service jobs, taxonomies of the less visible skills of interpersonal and articulation work and in some cases, knowledge work as well, still await development.

During the last quarter century, there has been a growth in both interactive service work and part-time employment—an employment mode often equated uncritically with peripheral low-skill work (Junor, 1998: 73–74, 112–113, 166–188). Whilst younger part-time workers have tended to be located in retail and hospitality, older part-time workers have clustered in call centres, financial institutions and other agencies providing customer service in the management of accounts. The use of ‘maturity’ as a de facto selection criterion for such jobs has tended to naturalise the tacit interpersonal skills involved. A high *and increasing* degree of articulation work skill may be required in managing the intersection between the social worlds of work and home and between home and community, with their clashing temporalities. The time frames and unpredictable rhythms of caring for young children and frail elderly people are likely to be incommensurable with those of chronometric work time, in ways glossed over by the work/family harmonisation discourse—a discourse which is used in some industries, including call centres, to justify shift work (Charlesworth, 1996; Davies, 1994; Pocock, 2003). The ‘time management’ skills required in negotiating the work/family link may be applied in the workplace as a ‘mature’ capacity to respond constantly and flexibly to a succession of competing demands for time and attention, for example in the simultaneous management of concepts, people and technology. Part-time rosters can be arranged to ensure that all hours are worked at high intensity. It then takes only a few time-consuming interactions with difficult customers to generate an increased waiting time for other customers whose abusiveness is not incidental but is an inbuilt condition of the job. The capacity to work under such stressful conditions to maintain information flows and to keep work routines functioning smoothly involves more than emotional labour: it requires articulation work skills.

This illustrates the inadequacy of a frame of reference that provides no middle ground between ‘knowledge work’ and ‘McDonaldised’ jobs. We argue that much service work comprises intellectual *and* emotional labour, largely tacit, to achieve a number of ‘articulations’. In general terms, within an organisation, employees are finding that they need to integrate themselves with the organisation’s objectives sufficiently to be its frontline public face. They must coordinate work teams and technology to produce a system for interpreting and ensuring the continuity of information flows. They must find ways of maintaining and extending the relationships between the organisation and the outside world, smoothing over dissatisfactions (sometimes spilling over into outright aggression) created by malfunctions in systems of governance, technology or management for which they are not responsible. They must negotiate boundaries within organisations and between work and family and must routinely manage contingencies. They must be on top of a mass of specific knowledge that needs to become ‘tacit’, including understanding of the principles and concepts underlying the work process, time management and the negotiating strategies involved in the management of interactions from a position of relative powerlessness (Junor, 1998: 114).

In an account of call centre work that has much in common with descriptions of articulation work, Wray-Bliss (2001: 40–42) documents the subtlety with which customer service operators may take control of calls, meeting their time targets by disguising the fact that they are wrapping up the details of previous calls and by steering customers to provide only essential information without appearing manipulative. The management of complex articulations between computer information systems, customer needs, adjacent ‘supplementary’ work processes and the clerk’s emotions are described in fine detail. Wray-Bliss notes that ‘clerks have to apply at least three techniques of micro-task/self management, namely, the management of the customers, the management of the computer and the management of time’ (p. 40). In similar vein,

Frenkel *et al.* (1999) highlight the importance of 'navigational competencies': keyboard skills, basic numeracy and the ability to move around a system (Gallaghan and Thompson, 2002: 239). The skills profile identified by Thompson *et al.* (2001: 934, *passim*) includes 'customer interaction skills', keyboard skills, knowledge of procedures, product services and legal regulations and (for the particular process) technical proficiency in programming languages and databases—exactly the sort of combination of general and 'situated' knowledge highlighted by the articulation work framework. Exclusive reliance on concepts such as 'emotional labour' is likely to render invisible not only the level of cognitive and technical skills that may be involved in providing, processing and coordinating information with high levels of speed and accuracy whilst managing people, environments and contingencies, but also the capacity that brings them together.

We accept the general risks of an inflationary spiral in naming skills and agree that '... the importance of IT skills can be overplayed' (Grugulis *et al.*, 2004: 11). We would not dispute the routinisation of bank telling. Nevertheless, bank transactions, unlike supermarket transactions, produce information for the customer, which flows through the system, and the counter staff are called upon to track this information from their point in the data flow. The instantaneous transmission of information, both for bank tellers and for call centre workers, means that they are often providing information to customers without having a chance to assimilate and to verify it. Where screens are slow to navigate for technological reasons, a flow of conversation must be maintained with the customer whilst integrating data. These examples are all instances of articulation work—developing abstract understanding of organisational networks and information flows; piecing together rapidly assimilated information; ensuring follow-through and follow-up; accepting responsibility for coordinating and for maintaining information flows and if necessary, tacitly helping to develop systems and procedures.

Such work may not be knowledge work, but the interactions and articulations among its cognitive elements, its technical computing skills, its expertise in the emotional management of self and others and its finely honed time management skills suggest that another 'dimension' of skill is in play. This is the skill of combining skills, including those at the 'lower' levels. To describe it, we return to Spenner's attempt to conceptualise work complexity as part of his effort to resolve the perennial debate over trends in skill levels within job content and in the changing composition of jobs across the US economy (1990; 1995). From meta-analyses of aggregate and case study research, Spenner abstracted two key dimensions of skill. The first is a job's degree of autonomy/control, and the second is its 'substantive complexity'. Spenner differentiated autonomy from formal authority but considered the available evidence to suggest a slight secular decline in such informal task discretion. Felstead *et al.* (2004) identify a similar trend in the UK. On the other hand, Spenner identified a possible slight overall rise in substantive job complexity, which he defined in terms not only of the level and scope of job performance but also in terms of requirements for the integration of mental, technical and interpersonal activities. For example, he saw middle managers' work of integrating lower-level activities as possibly involving greater complexity than the unidimensional high-level cognitive work of engineers (Spenner, 1995: 90). To Spenner's threefold categorisation of responsibilities and activities to be managed—those involving people, things and ideas—we would add a fourth, namely, time. The management of time includes the queuing of simultaneous demands: were this microlevel decision making considered fully, it is possible that the skills of discretion and autonomy might need to be re-evaluated.

Conclusion

The argument has been exploratory and speculative at times. The paper has argued that the conceptual framework of 'articulation work' is well suited to register the components of interactive customer service work. It also points toward a (as yet) weakly theorised and largely invisible skill set needed to perform such work. If the argument

of the paper is accepted, the current emphasis on emotional labour in the analysis of interactive customer service is excessive. Varying levels of cognitive and technology management skills may be involved (it is no accident that the strongest application of the concept of articulation work, thus far, has focused on the integration of technology into work life). In addition, another 'dimension' of skill is involved in bringing together the component skills—including emotional labour skills—underpinning interactive customer service work. As suggested, this skill set seems particularly sensitive to time—as time demands increase, so does the need to apply this 'higher order' skill. The conceptual framework of articulation work as developed in this paper implies that it is important to register a number of 'invisible' work processes and the skills required to perform them as a pressing issue of pay equity. This indicates a research agenda rather than a set of answers. Such an agenda would closely interrogate the notion of 'skill' and seek to restrict its current expansion into problematic notions like 'aesthetic skills' in Australia and into the current focus on 'employability skills'. Once the notion of skill is better defined, it can become the focal point for new efforts at (articulation work) skill recognition and formation through national training initiatives. The shape of these can only be guessed at.

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Notes

1. A less developed formulation of the articulation work thesis arose from a textual analysis of transcripts detailing the labour processes of 48 part-time bank tellers, travel industry telephone sales staff and casual vocational education and training teachers based on interviews conducted in 1991 and 1994 (Junor, 1998). In 1999 and 2003, a further 40 in-depth interviews, mainly in the education industry, helped in extending the analysis to professional forms of interactive service work.
2. This very old example, drawn from a 1991 interview, illustrates a point whose relevance is likely to outlive passbook technology.

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