

Who's On the Line? Indian Call Center Agents Pose as Americans for U.S.-Outsourced Firms

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This paper explores the globalization of service work through an analysis of customer service call centers in India for U.S. firms. It reveals a new kind of managerial strategy, “national identity management,” in which employees are asked to subsume different national identities as part of the job. Through interviews with over eighty Indian call center personnel and case studies of three call centers, this paper analyzes how and why ethnicity and citizenship have become crucial elements of the labor process. It builds upon and elaborates seminal theories of managerial control in interactive service work, including Hochschild’s theory of emotion management and Leidner’s theory of scripting. It argues that globalization fundamentally alters the relationship of the actors, the purpose and practice of managerial control, and the outcomes for those involved. In addition, it reflects on theories of advancing information and communication technology (ICT), and global identity. Some scholars argue that the development of ICTs will lead to a homogenization (especially an “Americanization”) of identities, while others see increasing global disjuncture and renegotiation of identities. Instead, this analysis reveals a continuum of responses by workers to the process of national identity management, and the forging of multiple, internally differentiated ethnic identities. It concludes by arguing that customer service work will continue to be globalized, and as a result, issues of “nation” will increasingly surface within interactive service work.

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INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS, Vol. 46, No. 2 (April 2007). © 2007 Regents of the University of California
Published by Blackwell Publishing, Inc., 350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148, USA, and 9600 Garsington
Road, Oxford, OX4 2DQ, UK.

AS A CALL CENTER AGENT IN INDIA ANSWERING CALLS FOR CUSTOMERS from U.S. firms, Anil has a job that involves posing as an American. For eight hours a day, he talks, thinks, and positions his body as an American while he is on the phone with U.S. customers. His supervisor tells him he must also do so during his breaks and when talking to his own colleagues. At home, he has become unaccustomed to hearing Hindi from his parents and siblings, and has asked them to speak English.

Acting American has four components in Anil's job. One is the "voice and accent." He has learned American diction, voice modulation, rhythm (including number of beats per second), and grammar training. He knows Americans speak much slower than Indians, and emphasize their "r"s. Facial expressions are part of this posing. Even though the customers cannot actually see him, Anil's shopfloor manager paces up and down the aisles shouting "smile and dial!"

Second, Anil needs an "alias" to announce his American identity to the customers. The U.S. client gave him the name "Arnold." He must use this name with his own colleagues, and speak to them in English. Third, he practices American conversational skills. Anil is expected to use small talk to suggest indirectly that he is in the U.S. He has learned the local lingo, and knows that Americans shop at Walgreens, eat at McDonalds, and drive Ford Fiestas. Everyday when he enters the call center, he reads current events, sports, and weather for the zone he's calling. He knows the Bulls lost last night. He also glances at the many clocks on the wall to see what the time is in Tulsa. In order to get a sense of how to put the whole package of American-ness together, he has been watching *Friends* and *Baywatch* in his training sessions.

Finally, Anil has practiced a script, to be used for the looming question from customers: "Where are you calling from?" From experience, he knows he will be asked this question many times during his shift. He has been given a carefully prepared set of responses by his supervisor. Last week he was on a campaign that required him to say he was in the Miami office of the client firm. This week, he needs to be more circuitous: "First, we say we are calling from an 'outbound call center.' If they ask again, then we say we are 'in Asia.' If they ask again, then we change the subject." Under the worst scenario, if the customer becomes hostile very early in the call, then he has a fallback strategy: to say he is an Indian immigrant living in the United States. As his human resources (HR) trainer summarized, "It's a marketing strategy—if you cannot convince, confuse."

Anil is a composite of fifty call center workers whom I studied in 2002 and 2003 in the northern region of India, along with input from thirty managers, experts, and activists. He represents a new trend in interactive

service work that I call “national identity management.” This is a labor strategy in which ethnicity and citizenship are considered malleable and subject to managerial control.

This trend raises a number of questions: Why do U.S. firms want to erase literally the identities of the workers—even to the point of asking their employees to lie outright? Do they want to prevent customers from knowing who is helping them on the phone? What role do the U.S. customers play in this process, and why do they care about the nationality of the agent, rather than whether or not their service is being met? How do Indian workers react to this process—do they find it fun like playing a virtual reality game, or is it an affront to their self-identity and dignity? How do the managers react, given the fact that they are Indians themselves, and are in a position of suppressing the Indian-ness of their employees?

Theoretically, this study contributes to literatures on interactive service work, the labor process, and ethnic identities by exploring the implications of globalization. It argues that theories of emotion management (Hochschild 2003) and scripting (Leidner 1993) warrant elaboration to account for transnational shifts in the service industry. This is especially true now that: (1) the key participants have changed from a triangular relation of managers, workers, and customers to a quadrilateral relation with clients who subcontract the services, and (2) the relations now extend beyond national borders. Ultimately, I argue that the American consumer public has the least to gain by this process, and the Indian workers have most to lose, in terms of the range of costs to their bodies, family lives, psychological state, and sense of ethnic identity.

This paper also addresses competing explanations of the impact of information and communication technology (ICT) on global identity. Some scholars argue that the development of ICTs will lead to a homogenization of identities (especially an “Americanization”), while others see global disjuncture and renegotiation of identities. Instead, I find a continuum of reactions by the Indian call center workers, in which these two positions represent the poles. Some assimilate to American identity they enact for their jobs, however most (87 percent) respond with increasing degrees of opposition: from reluctant accommodation, to ethical or political objection, to active resistance.

Background and Literature

Call centers are organizations that provide customer service agents for a wide variety of organizations (from book sellers, to credit card companies,

to hospitals, government offices, etc.). The work involves answering phone calls from, or making calls to, customers. The United States accounts for 59 percent of the world's spending on these back office functions (NASSCOM 2003). Given recent developments in satellite and computer technology, it has become economically feasible to move these jobs abroad. European countries originally received the largest share of the international contracts for this work—especially Ireland and the UK. However, Asian countries (especially India and the Philippines) now have the most rapidly expanding number of call centers. So, while Europe exceeds Asia in spending on IT-related services like call centers (22 percent versus 15 percent, respectively), the growth rates are higher in Asia than Europe (15 percent versus 12 percent), and even more so than the United States (10 percent) (NASSCOM 2003).

The attraction of India for U.S. firms is the large English-speaking, highly skilled, and inexpensive workforce. Moreover, the Indian state and IT industrial associations have taken many steps to facilitate this further. Through the National IT Action Plan of 1998, the government set up software technology parks in five regions around the country, including Delhi, Bangalore, and Hyderabad, and offered 100 percent tax exemptions for export-oriented services (National Informatics Center 1998; NASSCOM 2001). Industry associations lobbied for exemptions in state labor legislation so that call center workers can work at night. Now, there are roughly five hundred IT centers in India, employing at least three hundred fifty thousand call center workers (NASSCOM 2006). By 2008, the number of information technology enabled jobs in India is projected to rise to one million, with an industry revenue of \$17 billion (NASSCOM 2001). Most of this work is done for companies in the United States and the UK. General Electric, Dell Computers, and American Express are examples, hiring up to twelve thousand workers in their call centers.

There is a growing scholarship on call centers, which assesses the dynamics and importance of this new workforce (Korczynski et al. 2000; Lankshear et al. 2001; Taylor and Bain 2001; Batt, Hunter, and Wilk 2003; Glucksmann 2004; Korczynski 2004). So far, the data are drawn primarily from the United States, Europe, UK, and Japan. This literature is limited theoretically, therefore, to call center dynamics *within* the Global North.¹ Focusing on call centers in the Global South—especially India (Mirchandani 2004a, b)—raises

¹ I use the terms “Global North” and “Global South” to draw attention to socioeconomic inequalities among countries (i.e., U.S., Europe, Japan versus South America, Africa, South/Southeast Asia, etc.). These terms reflect current geopolitical hierarchies in a more accurate and less normative manner than previous concepts, like east/west, first/third world, etc. However, they also overlook important nuances within the North and South, such as the marginalized nations in the North, and the powerful nations in the South. See Rai (2002) for an informative discussion.

important questions for our understanding of labor, service industries, and technology under globalization.

Discipline and Control in Interactive Service Work. Indian call centers recast the basic nature of interactive service work in terms of who is doing what work, for whom, and why. Most notably, services that used to be *for* locals *by* locals are now done by workers in the Global South for consumers in the Global North. Nationality is therefore an integral part of the interaction, and this has many implications for classic theories of discipline and control.

For instance, globalization reconfigures theories of “scripting” in interactive service work (Leidner 1993, 1996, 1998). Scripts are sets of rules about speech and talk that employers use to routinize tasks for workers. The script may tell workers the ordering of what to say, it may assign particular words to use, or it may outline the manner in which to use them (e.g., how to say them, to whom to say them, etc.). For instance, workers at McDonalds are told to say: “May I help you, ma’am?” instead of “Can I help someone?” (The script may also regulate other features of workers’ bodies and identities as well, as I’ll discuss below. Therefore, in this paper I’ll be using the term broadly to reflect managerial control beyond just the words themselves).

While this labor strategy emerged out of a Taylorist managerial paradigm, which removes all possible thinking from factory work, scripts have additional purposes for employers in the service industry because it involves customers. As Leidner demonstrates so brilliantly in the case of McDonalds, the window-cashier script: (1) enables the firm to control workers, both in eliminating the need for decision making, and in ensuring the proper display of pleasant emotions; and (2) enables the worker to maximize authority over the customers by reducing the deviations in their requests. In this way, scripting allows managers to regulate the behaviors of multiple actors in the service relationship simultaneously.

Within the call center industry, this “triangular pattern of relations” has now expanded to a four-way dynamic (a “quadrilateral pattern of relations”), and moreover, it has become transnational. The groups now include: the U.S. client firms, which contract the services of the call centers; the U.S. customers who phone into the call centers, or who receive calls from them; the Indian managers who run the call centers; and the Indian agents who conduct the calls. What are the implications for control, authority, and agency among each of these actors, in this context which is now far more complicated than service work in local settings?

Furthermore, Indian call centers pose questions for tension and solidarity among the actors in interactive service work. Leidner explains the importance

for this, as she shows how the relations among the participants in McDonalds defy the standard predictions of labor theory (1996:39):

In interactive service work, we find not a stable pattern of workers and managers acting on interests that are directly opposed to each other, but a complex dynamic in which each of the three groups of participants has interests that bring them sometimes into alliance, sometimes into opposition with each of the other two . . . Workers might have reason either to resent routinization or to appreciate it. In some cases, customers and workers share an interest in avoiding the constraints of the employer-designated routine, but in others one party tries to enforce it on the other.

What will happen to these cross-cutting ties and fractures in transnational service industries? For instance, what happens when there are two sets of bosses, in the U.S. and in India, who may have competing interests about labor control?

Globalization also reconfigures the nature of “emotion management” in interactive service work (Hochschild 2003). Hochschild’s groundbreaking analysis reveals how nontangible elements of workers become the focal point of labor control in service industries—emotions, feelings, our identities, and even notions of self. With her study of airline flight attendants, she illustrates how employees are required to suppress feelings such as anger, and display emotions of niceness and gratitude on the job. Because the central concern for the employers is the quality of the service interaction, managerial strategy rests heavily on the presentation of self (i.e., the way workers look, talk, and displays feeling).

However, these rules extend beyond notions of being polite in Indian call centers. Globalization transforms from management of emotions to management of citizenship. What are the dynamics and implications of changing one’s national identity for the job? Furthermore, while many scholars have considered the gendered dynamics of emotion management (Leidner 1991; Botlon and Boyd 2003), what does it mean when ethnicities and racial identities are part of emotion management as well?

The case of Indian call centers raises broader questions of power and discipline (Foucault 1979) as interactive service industries go global. Foucault’s account of power in modern institutions is informative in this case for two reasons. First, he shows us how the exercise of authority can be hidden. Modern disciplinary power is normalizing: it involves an internal dynamic so that individuals become the conduits of power for elites by disciplining themselves. Such practices submerge rather than reveal power relations and agendas. Second, Foucault shows how the range of power can extend beyond just the ostensible targets.

Accordingly, in the case of Indian call centers, might corporations be considering additional targets of control? Is it possible that the goal of scripting and requirements for altering national identity might extend beyond the workers? Are they attempting to hide power from groups like the U.S. consumers as well?

Debates on Globalization, ICTs, and Identity. Technology is a key player in these dynamics. For the first time, satellite communication technology is allowing direct interactions between caller and customer across long distances and across national borders. However, because of the particular intermediary stage of this technology—between audio and video communications—the interaction is limited. The two parties can hear but not see each other. In this context, national identity is mutable. Just as people are using the Internet to change their gender, sexuality, age, etc. (Turkle 1995), call center employers are taking advantage of these particular circumstances in ICTs to manage the national identities of their labor force. The question is why, how, and to what consequence for the people involved.

In the popular and academic communities, there is an emerging debate over social impacts of technology when it is globalized. While it is commonly accepted that communication-based forms of IT like the Internet and satellite phone connections are bringing people into contact in an unprecedented way, there is disagreement about the ultimate outcome of these trends on the identities of people who use them. One approach says that information technology is creating a unified global culture. For instance, some say that global capitalism is hegemonically spreading U.S. identity through its cultural and technological invasions of entertainment media, consumer items, and fast food chains, i.e., “The MacDonaldisation of Society” (Ritzer 2000). Historical scholars point how this process also occurred under colonialism (albeit more coercively), which had a central aim to transform Third-World peoples into Europeans (Stoler 1991). In India, British colonists imposed legal and social regulations for several centuries to “civilize,” “Westernize,” and create “Christians” out of the locals.

A more harmonious account of unified global identity comes from the modernization theory. Trends of industrialization and technological innovation are converging identities, as “underdeveloped” nations move toward and eventually merge with the norms and cultures of the “advanced” nations. Multinational corporations are symbols of this process in that they embody modern elements of advanced nations within the setting of developing countries. Indeed, jobs in these firms are often highly sought after, and accrue much more prestige than local jobs (Lim 1985). In turn, employees may see the adoption of foreign identities at work as a means of status

enhancement, and therefore welcome it. This view is presented in recent *New York Times* best seller *The World is Flat* (Friedman 2005). Friedman argues that call center workers in India are enjoying and embracing the American identity they act out for the job. In short, whether through acceptance and emulation, or imposition and coercion, the process of individual assimilation into a unified culture is the end result of this process.

The other side of the debate says that technology is creating “relations of disjuncture” in global identities (Appadurai 1996, 2001):

This is a world of flows. But to say that globalization is about a world of things in motion somewhat understates the point. The various flows we see—of objects, persons, images, and discourses—are not coeval, convergent, isomorphic, or spatially consistent. They are . . . relations of disjuncture. By this I mean that the paths or vectors taken by these kinds of things had different speeds, axes, points of origin and termination, and varied relationships to institutional structures in different regions, nations, or societies. Further, these disjunctures themselves precipitate various kinds of problems and frictions in different local situations.

Critical scholars like Appadurai critique the homogenization paradigm on several grounds. For instance, there is “friction” in the globalization process given that “local” cultures often resist assimilation pressures brought on by technology and globalization. In India such resistance has many sources, like in individuals and in communities, but also in the state. Hindu Right nationalists were elected as the governing party in the late 1990s through the early 2000s, and they promoted a distinctly anti-Western/American agenda (Sundaram 2000). Through their political and media rhetoric, they have generated considerable social pressure on the public to display “pure Indian” behaviors. This may contribute to employee resistance against acting American on the job.

The critical approach raises another challenge to the assimilation thesis by arguing that the process of identity formation under globalization is not uniform. Identity does not emerge from a single source, or involve single sets of actors. Rather, individuals are embedded in complex social settings that involve multiple—and often competing—messages about identity. In this way, critical scholars reconceptualize the main dynamic of global culture. Instead of domination and resistance between global and local forces, the relationship is one of mutual contest. Through the process of technological advancement, identities are differentiated and overlapped into many forms, rather than fused into one.

Which of these two competing approaches describes the experiences of workers in Indian call centers more accurately? Or, is it possible that there is a third position in this debate, in which global actors express a range of reactions to these dynamics?

Methodology

The analysis is based on ethnographic field work in Indian call centers from late 2002 to early 2004. Field work was done in the northern region of India, in the cities of Noida and Gurgaon, which are outskirts of New Delhi. This is where the call center industry began, and still has the largest concentration of organizations. Three call centers were the focus of the fieldwork. They were selected through several informants—one through personal connections, another recommended by an industry association, and the third recommended by a government official. The firms represent variations in size within this industry (Table 1): BigCo, as a multinational firm, with about three thousand employees; MediumCo, as a joint venture firm with a U.S. company, and about two hundred employees; and SmallCo as an Indian-owned firm, with forty employees. Client firms in the United States that contract services from these call centers represent many industries: cell phone companies, utilities companies, computer firms, mortgage agencies, cable television firms, etc.² Call center work involves handling two types of calls. “Inbound” calls come from the customer to the agent, when they are seeking assistance with a product or service (like technical support). Outbound calls are made by the agent to the customer when, for instance, they are selling a product (i.e., telemarketing) or asking for payment on bills (i.e., collections). Agents handle 30 to 300 calls in a night depending on the process.

My entry into these firms was fairly smooth once I had my connections and references. I met first with the directors or CEOs, stating my purpose as exploring the social impacts of call center work for Indian employees, and for U.S.–Indian relations. The CEOs were very welcoming and

TABLE 1
CHARACTERISTICS OF THE THREE INDIAN CALL CENTERS AND THEIR EMPLOYEES

| | BigCo | MiddleCo | SmallCo |
|-------------------------------|---|---------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Firm characteristics | | | |
| Relationship to U.S. clients | Transnational firm (100% U.S.-owned) | Joint venture (Co-ownership) | Subcontractor (100% Indian-owned) |
| Number of employees | 3000 | 200 | 40 |
| Employee characteristics | | | |
| Average monthly salary | \$587 | \$423 | \$378 |
| Predominant educational level | Post-college graduate | College graduate | High school graduate |
| Predominant age range | 22–30 | 20–24 | 18–20 |

² The firms in this study were also subcontracting for clients in other countries aside from the United States—especially Britain, Australia, and Canada. This presents another complication in the experience of national identity management, which I address in other papers (Poster 2005, forthcoming).

expressed little suspicion. While they did express concern about the privacy of information garnered from the clients, they were relatively candid about their labor practices, which they considered to be fair, if not above standard. Their openness may also be related to their eagerness for exposure. All three firms entertain outside visitors regularly, including local and foreign journalists, political officials, and their client firms. BigCo has designated staff just for the purpose of giving tours. A U.S. TV crew had been there the week before.

My methods involved interviews and observations. At these three firms, I conducted fifty formal (semi-structured) interviews with calling agents. They were conducted in English and lasted about an hour. Sample selection was based on employee lists provided by the human resource department. Respondents were chosen randomly, although samples were balanced according to gender and occupational level. (In the quotations below, the bracketed codes indicate interview numbers.) Most of the population is young, highly educated, and urban. My sample was also mostly male, at about 60–70 percent. There are many reasons for this, including laws in some areas that prohibit women from working at night.

I talked to other types of informants as well through more informal, unstructured interviews. This included twenty interviews with HR managers, quality control personnel, recruiters, trainers, nurses, etc. I also conducted another fifteen interviews outside these firms with experts and professionals from the community, such as representatives of industry associations, government officials, and nongovernmental associations that organize or support employees in information and communication technology jobs.

Finally, I used ethnographic methods of observation to get a feel for the experience of call center work. I observed the “production floor,” attended training seminars, joined agents for dinner in the cafeteria, etc. I also listened in on the calls (referred to as “barging in”) by plugging a second headset into the phone. I did this both at the “quality control” station, where I could hear the calls and see the worker’s computer screen, and at the worker’s station, where I could see his/her facial reactions. This allowed me some exposure to the customers.

The particular form of “American identity” that workers display is a key element of the managerial strategy in Indian call centers.³ Very often, these firms rely upon consumer-driven images of citizenship in the United States that they draw from the dominant entertainment industry and popular media. Such images, in turn, typically reflect white, middle class, heterosexual,

³ I use the term “American” in this analysis to reflect discourses within the call centers. Implicitly, however, staff who use this term are referring to the United States rather than South America or Canada.

Christian communities, more so than those of people of color, immigrants, working-class communities, etc. Moreover, they often gloss over the contested and plural identities of U.S. citizenship. There are many reasons why call center managers may use such images—whether a deliberate choice, an unintended consequence of the materials (e.g., *Baywatch* TV shows), or something more benign. Indeed, the process by which managers and trainers construct American identity is a rich and complex story in itself, which deserves a separate discussion, see Poster (2005). Rather, this paper is an exploration of why national identity management comes about, who the actors involved are, what they stand to gain and lose, and whether their participation represents consensual or contested integration in the globalization project.

The analysis below proceeds in three sections to explore the dynamics of national identity management: first, a discussion of why and how the four groups participate in the process; second, what tensions they have with it and how they resist; and third, what they gain and lose by participating.

Agents of National Identity Management: What Each Group Contributes

Many actors play a role in the national identity management process, whether directly or indirectly. Their actions represent various forms of agency in the process—by setting the rules, innovating the strategies, and carrying it out.

U.S. corporations are the primary source. Their specific requirements are variable, however. For instance, they do not always make the demand for explicit deception—that is, the script of outright lying when customers ask where they are (described in Anil's scenario above). At MediumCo, the CEO reported that the number of requests for this was small—only among 10 percent of his clients. This may be related to the fast-paced and fluid nature of call centers. The clients themselves change frequently, and multiple U.S. clients are being served simultaneously in the same call center. Still, given that employees rotate through different client services (e.g., credit card processing, mortgage sales, etc.), most of my informants had experience in direct deception at some point in their careers.

Even if U.S. clients do not demand the script, they require and/or participate in the deception in other ways. At MiddleCo, for instance, clients provide lists of American aliases for the agents to use. They also make demands about which staff should use the aliases, and under what conditions. Some clients require *all* employees to use American names, including the quality control workers—who have no contact with customers—but have regular

contact with their own U.S. offices. In addition, client firms participate in the Americanization through the training sessions, with varying levels of intervention. Many send representatives to India to train the trainers, the pilot batch of agents, and/or all the workers. Sometimes they send teaching materials, like titles of American movies for the agents to watch. Sometimes they participate “virtually.” During one of the training sessions I observed at MiddleCo, agents were undergoing a live, mock call with an HR officer at the U.S. firm. Other times, they bring Indian agents to their offices in the U.S. In all these ways, clients have direct input on the Americanization process, even across borders.

Firms in the Global North also enforce national identity requirements as they monitor the workers. All calls are recorded, so clients have the option to listen post-hoc. They can also view the computerized text records of the calls (referred to as “dispositions”). Furthermore, clients have full access to each individual agent ten thousand miles away. They can view computer screens of each agent in real time, or ask the quality control department in the Indian call center to patch them through to a particular agent and listen in on the current call. Other times they feed their own phone numbers into the “dialer” machine, which automatically connects agents to customers; unknowingly, the agent’s next call goes to the client.

As an added level of monitoring, the U.S. client firms also hire third-party firms in the United States to gather and analyze satisfaction ratings of their customers. In one call center I visited, the results of these analyses were posted at the entrance of the shopfloor, so that each team of agents could see and compare their scores. This becomes a means of tracking the degree and effectiveness of how American the workers are sounding.

U.S. customers participate in the process of national identity management as well. It happens much in the same way as in Hochschild’s study—through their hostility. Just as aggression by airline passengers is integral to the chain of events leading to emotion work by flight attendants, aggression by U.S. consumers triggers national identity management among call center workers. In this scenario, the customers are not passive bystanders. They have agency in causing “trouble,” to which the firm must respond and intervene.

Hostility does not characterize the majority of the interactions. In my observations of these calls, about half of the customers are emotionally neutral or positive (discussed more below). Of the other half, the animosity takes several different forms, from sarcastic tones to explicit cursing and abuse. What differentiates the hostility in Indian call centers versus other interactive service settings is the comments that are explicitly racial ethnic in character. Some U.S. customers see through American posing, identify the foreignness of the agent, and express forms of aggression explicitly

against Indians. Workers told me repeatedly that “people only like to be helped or served by their own kind.” They reported many incidences of customers who refused to be served by an Indian, and demanded to talk to a “real” American agent. It was quite a sobering experience for me to listen to as an American—that is, the steadfast composure and professionalism of Indian employees as American consumers said things like, “How do I spell my name? F-U-C-K-Y-O-U!” Employees reported that this happens in about 1 in 30 calls. In my observations, it happened at least once an hour.

There are many reasons and sources for this aggressive behavior. First, even if their delivery leaves something to be desired, customers may be expressing a warranted protest toward U.S. firms. Many are rightfully upset about the declining attention by corporations to quality service, and their increasing evasion of accountability to consumers. At BigCo, workers lamented often that the worst thing about their jobs was an inability to help the customers in things they need most—extensions of warranties on their computers, and authorizations for replacements of broken parts. Second, consumers have legitimate grievances about the broader process of outsourcing. Only a handful of my informants reported hearing complaints from customers in these words explicitly, but it is possible that some of the consumer animosity on the phone has to do with an underlying resentment about U.S. jobs going overseas.

Third, aggressive behavior by consumers may be prompted by elements of the U.S. media, political rhetoric, and popular culture. Several television shows in the past year—from news (*60 Minutes*) to drama (*The West Wing*)—have devoted segments to Indian call centers, and bred fear about Indians stealing American jobs. John Kerry spotlighted this issue in his 2004 presidential campaign, using colorful rhetoric to condemn firms that outsource jobs as “Benedict Arnolds.” Workers protesting in the streets at this time held signs saying things like “Don’t Outsource My Job” and “Keep American Jobs in America” (Porter 2004). Turning outsourcing into a symbol of nationalism helps politicians obscure and evade larger issues like de-industrialization, the withering of state supports for workers, skyrocketing health costs, and declining real wages. Media portrayals of the issue that are much more disturbing come from sources like shock-jock morning radio programs (India Times News Network 2005). In January of this year, two radio DJs on a Clear Channel station in Philadelphia phoned into an Indian call center while on the air, and said to a woman agent:

This call has been outsourced to India? . . . Listen, bitch! Don’t get slick with the mouth! Don’t you get slick with me, bitch! . . . Listen to me, you dirty rat eater: I’ll come out there and choke the “F” out of you. (Laughter) . . . You’re

a filthy rat eater. I'm calling about my American six year old white girl. How dare you outsource my call. Get off the line. (Laughter).

Some of my agents reported similar experiences.

Most often, consumer hostility in my sample resembles the Bush administration's state rhetoric of "war on terror." A SmallCo agent remarked how "After the WTC [World Trade Center] attack, some people will ask, 'Are you a terrorist?' So we have to say 'No sir, we are not terrorists. We do belong to Asia, but every person living in Asia is not a terrorist'" [SF5]. At MediumCo, Rekha says [MF15]:

Some of them are really furious or angry: "You're calling from South Asia, that's the place with Bin Laden. You're calling from South Asia so you must be some terrorist." I hear that. They look at India as if they're terrorists. They think every South Asian's like that, and they're here to explode. I try to explain to them that exactly what we are, and sometimes there are no words. What usually happens they say blah blah things and hang up, so you cannot explain to them. You cannot say much.

Workers report the abusive calls have increased since the last presidential election: "Earlier, people would get abusive if we didn't answer their questions satisfactorily. Now, I get calls—on some days up to five in a shift—from people who are calling only to abuse" says an agent in the city of Malad (Shrinivasan 2005).

In sum, consumers have agency in contributing to national identity management, even if it is not intentional or conscious. One could argue that if they did not act in this aggressive way, there would be no need for the cover-up. Recent events in India illustrate the impact of customer dissatisfaction on managerial strategy. At the end of 2003, one of the largest computer outsourcers to India closed a call center because of their U.S. customers' "dissatisfaction" with the service. The repercussions were felt even at BigCo. Managers laid off their agents who were not performing the identity requirements properly, and then retrained all of the remaining staff for extra practice on American voice and accent, customer empathy, and telephone handling [BI-6].

Indian managers of the call centers have agency in the process as well. Some say the American posing was their idea to begin with. For instance, at SmallCo, managers stated that they had no such requirement from the U.S. clients, and the decision was theirs alone. Even when this is not the case though, managers have other crucial roles in carrying out the national identity management process. One is in the training stage. Even though the client firms participate in the overall direction, Indian managers typically

have responsibility for hiring the teachers and deciding the day-to-day content. For such tasks, they use their own ingenuity in finding the right people to teach American identity. They also determine the length of the time that employees spend in training. Managers at BigCo, for instance, keep workers in training for up to three months, even though it takes only a week or two to learn the “hard skills” for technical aspects of the service. They said the added months are needed for “soft skills” of American voice, accent, geography, lifestyle, government, education, business, culture, and politics.

Indian managers also participate by Americanizing the physical space and relational environment of the workplace. They provide the cues in the office to help workers act the part. For instance, digital boards on the walls show details of weather and news in the U.S. for the day, so workers can make appropriate comments on how sunny or dreary it is [SF-3]. Rows of clocks represent various time zones around the world, so employees can answer questions about the time in the caller's area. The office space is also decorated with many reminders and guides of American culture, such as maps of U.S. states, and grammar school-type collages (which workers have made themselves) presenting facts and information about particular regions. At BigCo, a poster says: “Know Texas” and lists the state bird, dance, flag, etc. At MediumCo, a poster says: “English Earns Me Money.” While the clients do send some of these materials from the U.S., most of it is constructed locally. Furthermore, Indian managers develop and institute rules for the shopfloor that encourage Americanization. An example is language usage. Even when employees are not on the phone and are talking to their colleagues, supervisors require “English only” so that agents “live” the part.

Finally, Indian managers contribute to the process of national identity management by setting the penalties for employee disobedience. The quality control department monitors calls continually and reports the deviations. As Shuba at MediumCo explains, managers have created a set of disciplinary labels for mistakes in scripting and posing, categorized in hierarchical order of severity:

Telephone etiquette is very important. You have to be very careful with the customer, the only thing you can say is: “I am sorry sir, this is professional.” You can never get hyper on the call. That will definitely harm your profile. If you go out of the rules and regulations of the campaign, and if you say something that shouldn't be said, that is a *complaint*. If it is not major, it is *low-risk*. and if you say something you really shouldn't say, you are marked as *medium-risk* or *high-risk*. In the long run it affects your career, because if you are a good caller and have no *defects* in your profile, it will help you grow professionally.

To get a promotion, you have to set an example that you have been a good caller—with no *defects*—compared to a person under you. [MF-6, emphasis added]

Bypassing Americanization and pleasant dialogue with customers through “defective” and “risky” talk, according to call center staff, has structural consequences for their promotions and rewards. Local managers are the ones implementing these penalties, if not designing them as well.

While Indian employees participate because they are required to do so, they also contribute to the process in two keys ways. They use their own creativity to carry it out, and they use their own initiative to expand the boundaries of the characterization.

Creating the identity is many ways in the hands of the employees. In fact, their work involves considerable dramatic improvisation on the spot. Acting is used to help make the sale, to convince the customer (and themselves) of the need for the product. It requires some ingenuity on the part of the employee, as Rajiv explains [MF-5]:

Creativity is the only thing we have. If you [as a consumer] receive thirty phone calls a day from telemarketing, everyone will have something to sell. So with creativity, I am making a difference in what I am trying to say. To be a good caller, *you* are the person who creates the need, so that is where the creativity comes. Everyone has their own way.

Acting American helps this process, as another employee at MiddleCo explains: “You have to sound similar to them [the customer] so that they disclose personal information. We do it for the demands of the profession—saying ‘I am an American.’ Our main motive is selling the product at any cost” [MF-10]. Many processes require eliciting sensitive personal data like social security numbers and credit card numbers from customers. For this reason, agents feel the identity posing can make their job easier, even if they do not agree with the method.

Sometimes employees go well beyond the call of duty to perform the American identity. They invent entire fictitious identities that go along with their name, including addresses, names of pets, and colleges attended (Kalita 2001). This means the decision about “how” to act American, or even “how much,” is made by the employee him/herself. Furthermore, while worker participation in this process is clearly a reflection of internalizing the corporate agenda of completing the transaction, employees also have their own reasons and motivations for doing so, which will be discussed below. The point is that employees have independent agency that contributes to the American identity display.

Tensions of National Identity Management: How the Groups Resist

In their own ways, each of these actors also challenges national identity management. Some groups do this more than others.

Some U.S. firms deliberately avoid it, at least in their rhetoric. When I presented these findings at a scholarly conference, an HR representative from an established U.S. firm affirmed quite resolutely: “I have observed my company’s call center overseas, with two thousand employees. My company would never engage in activities like this. We respect individual rights, inclusiveness, and diversity.” Indeed, this comment points to a large and growing trend by U.S. firms regarding corporate social responsibility, especially for diverse workforces (Kelly and Dobbin 1998; Edelman, Fuller, and Mara-Drita 2001; Poster 2007).⁴ Moreover, “national origin” is now an integral element of corporate employee agendas and philosophies, along with other traditional categories of race, sex, religion, and disability. This HR movement has considerable institutional power (in conjunction with lawyers, activists, etc.), and may pose a counter-force to national identity management in the future. Whether this corporate rhetoric reflects a genuine concern for Indian employees, or alternatively, an attempt to distract attention in the United States from labor practices overseas (like national identity management) is an important topic for further study.

U.S. customers challenge the premise of the national identity management rules through their transnational solidarities with the Indian agents. This happens both interpersonally during the calls, and politically through labor organizing.

Many of the employees explained how cultural sharing, rather than abuse, was an equally prevalent response of U.S. customers who found out their “true” identity. Indeed, as mentioned early, about half the interactions I observed myself were neutral, if not explicitly positive. For instance, Sonali at MiddleCo reported [MF-10]:

Customers are really curious. They ask, “Which place are you in India? Why are you calling the U.S.?” When you tell them you are in an international call center, they want to tell you all they know about India. One time a daughter picked up the phone, and asked, ‘Are you calling from India? My friend is from India—from Punjab.’ She tried really hard to speak some Hindi words, so I helped her and told her some.”

The same kind of cooperative sentiment was expressed by the agents on the Indian side of the line. Workers told me that many stories of customers they encountered who were in desperate circumstances—from the disabled,

⁴ Poster, Winifred R. 2007. “Filtering ‘Diversity’: A Global Corporation Struggles with Race, Class, and Gender in Employment Policy.” Unpublished Manuscript, Washington University.

to the institutionalized and dying, to single mothers whose husbands have left them penniless. In response, one SmallCo agent developed personal relationships with his customers, calling them back regularly to counsel them on their problems [SF-15]. A BigCo agent worked on the day of 9/11, and spent considerable time on the phone with New Yorkers, reuniting families and arranging medical help when the other local services and phone lines were unavailable [BF-9]. In short, many U.S. consumers are open-minded to global differences. They may object to national identity posing, and even see it as “a barrier” to the interaction or the service.

Some consumers in the United States practice solidarity actively through transnational labor movements. In 2005, U.S. labor organizations collaborated with those from India to bridge the common interests of workers across borders in achieving quality jobs for both countries (Jobs With Justice 2005).⁵ Organizers from U.S. “Jobs with Justice” partnered with Indian “New Trade Union Initiative” (which represents employees in India, such as those working for General Electric). They conducted a ten-city tour to discuss mutual concerns over organizing rights, outsourcing, immigration, etc. Their future goals include international campaigns, bringing U.S. workers to India, and forging ties with Indians in the United States. This kind of organizing represents the most visible and active attempt by U.S. consumers to expose the secretive practices of U.S. firms abroad, including policies like national identity management, which are detrimental to communities (consumers, workers, etc.) in both countries.

The most direct resistance to national identity management in my study came from the groups in India, however. The Indian managers challenged the practice in several important ways—despite their class-based interests in sustaining the process.

One thing they do—at all three firms—is to use symbolic practices that disrupt the Americanization and assert Indian-ness in the work environment. They display Indian flags during key cricket matches, they adorn the shopfloor with Hindu decorations celebrating the holiday of Diwali, and keep them up long after it is over. At SmallCo, the managers invited a Hindu priest to the shopfloor while I was there. MediumCo has a special prayer area in the administration office, where managers keep a statue of Hindu figure Ganesh. At BigCo, the HR manager organizes an annual costume party, where employees come dressed as figures in Hindu mythology. Workers then display “Indian-ness” on their bodies as they act “American” on the phone through their voices. Some managers encourage workers to use Hindi instead of English when talking to each other on the shopfloor.

⁵ Thanks to Steve Rutledge for providing this citation.

Moreover, there were managers who challenged the demands of their client firms to enforce national identity management. One worker from another call center firm told me his manager did *not* want agents to try to sound American, for fear that the agents will only “mess it up” [OF-2]. Other managers resisted more discretely. At SmallCo, the manager explained to me how he knew his workers were resisting the identity requirements behind his back. He hoped it would continue, but if he caught them, he would have to fire them.

Indian workers in my study also resist this process. Their reactions are presented in Table 2, in descending order of support for the national identity requirements. Representing the pole of *assimilation*, the group at the top of the table agrees outright. They comprise a little over a tenth of my sample, and they believe the requirements are generally a good idea, for the firm and for themselves. (Their accounts were discussed above on how workers contribute to the process). The second group down—the *accommodators*—disagrees with the requirements in principle, but complies for various pragmatic reasons involving getting the job done. They also find many personal and political disadvantages of national identity requirements (which will be discussed in the following section below). They represent the largest group in my sample—43 percent of the employees.

The third position is one of *objection*. These employees express an explicit and strong sentiment *not* to be American (33 percent), although they may or may not act upon those viewpoints or impulses. At the other extreme, finally, is *resistance*. Eleven percent of the workers report refusing to do it. They actively oppose the national identity requirements, both individually and collectively, providing evidence of acute disjuncture with cultures of the Global North.

For instance, a BigCo agent explains how he abstains from the deceptive small talk, which implies they are in the United States: “We are supposed to discuss the weather and sports, but I don’t bother. The customers are not bothered either, as long you’re fixing their problem” [BF-8]. Others defy the rules about hiding their location when customers ask. One SmallCo worker reported a case in which she was so frustrated with the repeated questions from customers about her identity, that she paused the recording of the call

TABLE 2

CONTINUUM OF REACTIONS TO NATIONAL IDENTITY MANAGEMENT BY CALL CENTER AGENTS

| Type of response | Percentage of sample ($N = 50$) |
|---|-----------------------------------|
| Assimilation (Agreeing, seeing potential personal benefit in it) | 13 |
| Accommodation (Disagreeing, but complying for pragmatic reasons) | 43 |
| Objection (Articulating a political objection to the requirement) | 33 |
| Resistance (Refusing to comply with the requirement) | 11 |

on the computer so she could talk honestly [SF-1]. For some, this resistance grows with time on the job. A SmallCo agent says acting American is novel as a junior agent but loses its appeal in the senior years [SF-2]: “Agents act American for the possibility of going to the U.S. client for training after two months of service. So mostly, the freshers do it to get abroad. But for seniors, we’ve become too Americanized. We want to be Indian.”

Other employees refuse to use the identity deception to take advantage of vulnerable groups of customers. Instead of acting American to gain the customer’s confidence and exploit them, they drop the deception altogether and even take steps to minimize the potential harm to the customer by the U.S. client. These agents caution customers from divulging their personal information like social security numbers over the phone; check customers’ financial circumstances before signing them up for expensive items; and spend extra time to assess customer finances so they do not put their credit reports at risk.

Workers also resist through collective strategies. One agent at BigCo formed a club in the firm to develop a “social consciousness” among the employees, and to contribute something to Indian society like volunteering with the aged and homeless. Some workers also express explicit tensions with the global politics of the call centers. At BigCo, an employee objects to the way these firms are pulling resources out of the country: call centers breed a “lack of need for social awareness, especially for others who are not so privileged. These firms are massive platforms that come to India, without giving something back to Indian society” [BF-2]. Labor unions are in formation as well. The Information Technology Professional Forum (ITPF) is attempting to organize call center workers, especially in the cities of Bangalore and Mumbai (Hirschfield 2003; IT Professionals Forum 2006).

For most employees in my sample then—87 percent—their responses represent various forms of conflict with the national identity requirements. Despite the consequences for their careers described earlier, many employees challenge it in some fashion.

Consequences of National Identity Management: Gains and Costs for the Participants

Given that each of the four groups contributes to the process of identity management, the question is who has the most to gain from it and who has the most to lose.

U.S. firms clearly benefit the most; however, some of their gains are more readily apparent than others. Among the more conspicuous advantages are the profits, which are substantial and growing. Between 1997 and 2002,

revenues from the IT services industries in India (both export and domestic markets) rose from \$5 billion to \$14 billion (NASSCOM 2003). By moving this work to India, U.S. firms save on many operating costs, especially labor. Paying workers is the major expense for call centers, and employees in India earn merely one-tenth of those in the United States (WashTech 2000). U.S. firms also save considerable expenses on infrastructure, which is a rising cost in U.S. urban centers. Property rental for call centers in India, for instance, is just 33 percent of that in the United States (NASSCOM 2003).

U.S. firms gain in other ways as well. National identity management (presumably) enables client firms to minimize tensions at the point of the service interaction. It “smoothes” relations between customers and agents, and helps maintain the status quo of company operations (Edelman, Fuller, and Mara-Drita 2001). Furthermore, these firms believe national identity management will improve their customer satisfaction ratings. These data are published in their annual reports, and high ratings would help them gain favor among shareholders.

The more discrete advantages of national identity management for the U.S. firms, however, are the hegemonic benefits. It helps them form a compliant consumer base in the United States, and one that acquiesces to the broader process of outsourcing. By masking the real identity of the call center workers, these firms are able to hide how their products are actually produced, by whom, under what conditions, where, etc. In a broad sense, it enables them to conceal the neo-liberal project of exploiting workers in the Global South, which certainly has drawn protest from anti-globalization activist groups. Although it is unlikely that most American consumers would engage in such activities if so informed (e.g., even with the increasing publicity and media attention on the issue, Americans still remain relatively passive about it), it is true that public backlash to outsourcing has fueled a rash of legislative bills (over eighty) submitted in over thirty states to limit outsourcing in government contracts for back office work. In a Foucauldian sense then, national identity management allows these firms to hide the exercise of the power on the consuming public. Ultimately, they are managing the consumers’ reality as much as that of the workers.⁶

Indian managers experience a more complicated set of outcomes from call centers. They benefit from call centers in many concrete ways—most notably, in the form of job opportunities, which is a considerable achievement in a place with such high unemployment. Furthermore, the call center industry has opened avenues for entrepreneurship that were unavailable

⁶ Much appreciation goes to one of the anonymous reviewers for offering this phrase and helpful advice about the concept.

earlier. It takes merely \$5000–\$10,000 to set up a call center in India, according to the CEO at SmallCo. As a result, the majority of the call centers in India are start-ups like SmallCo, even though they account for only 10 percent of the revenues. People who never thought of entering the ICT industry, much less call centers, are doing so. For instance, the financial backers whom I met at SmallCo were from the garment industry. Opportunities afforded by call centers for small business then are quite significant.

The gains for Indian managers and CEOs are not merely financial though. They also value what they can do for Indian society. The director at SmallCo explains his future goals when the firm grows [I-05]:

My vision is to create a few thousands job opportunities, especially in the backward areas, so that at least we can raise the standard of living of those few thousand people, with even better quality of life. That's a very big feeling of satisfaction that I will be contributing to society upliftment. Because the money that goes into this kind of charity is derived from the business you run. We want that every employee should be a partner in success and they share this success in terms of better monetary gains, better incentives, and a better environment to work.

In addition, he wants to use the profits to subsidize the higher education of his workers, and improve the “social fabric” of the firm. Thus, managers like him see the gains from call centers not only for their own personal advancement, but for the society at large and especially for the underprivileged. Ironically then, while call centers may be a breeding ground for American identities, the local profits are being used to promote Indian national development.

What the Indian managers lose is control over their own workplaces. They are left with little authority over general labor strategy for the call center, as well as their ability to defend and represent the well-being of their workers. At SmallCo, the CEO laments the hegemony of American management principles in the Indian call center industry:

It takes time for Indian workers to adapt to the American system of living in the call center. If you go to a big call center, they have the individualistic kind of approach: “you're garbage, you're unfit, you have to achieve this, etc.” I want individual performances to be different, where people are helping each other out. That's something that comes naturally to an Indian. Once he is satisfied he has achieved his target, or even if he hasn't achieved his target, they will help their friend.

Personally, he feels that the call center industry is “ruining India's youth.” When I asked if he believes he is perpetuating the very system he objects to,

he replied, "Yes, but I have to earn money." Thus, even if Indian managers have ambivalent feelings about national identity management, they have little ability to act on it. Of all the groups here then, Indian managers experience the most evenly divided outcomes (relative to the other groups), with personal economic rewards as well as a loss of control over their own workplaces.

Indian workers have dual experiences of call center work as well, but with greater costs. Materially, they gain employment opportunities, upgraded pay, and comfortable working conditions. Salaries for calling agents average monthly \$378 at SmallCo, \$423 at MiddleCo, and \$587 at BigCo (Table 1). This is much higher than many other working and middle jobs in India, including factory work, secretarial work, teaching, etc. Furthermore, my sample even includes many highly educated professionals, including former architects and hotel managers. As an executive director of an industrial association noted, many call center workers are earning more than their parents.

These employees also benefit from the working conditions, which are better than those of call center firms in United States. At all three firms, workers get transportation to and from work. At MiddleCo, they also get meals. At BigCo, they also get access to an on-site gym, travel desk, game room, and medical facility. In addition, these workers gain secondary benefits, like the status of working for a multinational firm, and direct access to the United States if they are sent to the client firms for training.

Most notably, workers benefit from acting American in their personal lives. Some agents carry the American posturing to their homes. They encourage their families to speak English instead of Hindi, and ask their friends and family to address them by their American names. One agent met his wife in a call center, and they now refer to each other by their aliases instead of their real names [MF-2]. Workers also use American posturing in their social lives outside the home. An employee at BigCo used it to get into an exclusive New Delhi night club, after finding that his American accent—which made him look like an "NRI" or nonresident Indian living in the U.S.—was more effective with the door staff than acting like a local [BF-1]. Other workers mentioned getting discounts from local shops and restaurants in the city of Gurgaon, from retailers who favor Americanized call center workers.

Many agents also believe that acting American will help them after they leave the job, in their future careers. A MiddleCo worker says: "Every call is a new person, and a new chance to learn about American culture. Plus, they [the customers] are also acting as a mirror for you to improve your accent, etc." [MF-3]. Through their experiences in the calls, they can perfect

American habits, gestures, and mannerisms, which can then be translated into social capital for study and/or jobs in the United States. In this way, national identity posing for these workers is neither entirely voluntary (i.e., because they see American culture as superior) nor entirely imposed (i.e., because they are being duped into it). Rather, it is a strategic move these workers make in the context of a global hierarchy. They recognize that opportunities are more accessible to people from the Global North—and by extension, people associated with it. In turn, they make conscious decisions to use the national identity posing as a way to succeed within that framework.

The drawbacks of this job are considerable, however. Some of the downsides are common to call center work more generally, even in other parts of the world: the heavy surveillance, the monotony of sitting for eight hours or more at a computer, the routinization and lack of authority, etc. Still, there are unique stresses of doing this job in India. One is that the work is done at night (in varying shifts) to accommodate daytime in the United States, which is twelve hours behind (Poster forthcoming). Because of this, workers sacrifice everyday routines with their families and the rest of the public. They also face serious health issues. While European call center workers typically report symptoms like fatigue, stiff neck, sore eyes, back/headaches, impaired vision, numbness in fingers (Taylor et al. 2003), Indians report much more. Common ailments are fever, asthma, sore throats, nausea, dizziness, rashes, kidney stones, and ulcers. At BigCo, the resident nurse reported that an average of fifty employees come to see her in a typical day (in a building of several hundred). At the time I interviewed her, seventeen had already come to the clinic, and two more arrived. Her assessment, in line with that of the workers, is that this arises from the disturbance of biorhythms (although future research could help to verify this).

Another limitation of this work is the lack of upward mobility. Phone agents can best hope for becoming the supervisor on the shopfloor. Initially, workers are attracted to the job for the perks (listed earlier), and some even forego their educations. However, they do not last long in the work. There is extremely high job turnover: employees stay in their jobs on average six months to a year and a half. By the third year, most have moved on to other careers.

Needless to say, there are emotional and psychological drawbacks as well. Ethically, workers protest the unwanted complicity in deception. At MiddleCo, an agent objects the fact that “You have to play tricks. You have to play with words, and you have to be very cautious about what you are saying” to make the sale [MF-6]. Similarly, a SmallCo agent lists “having to lie” about his identity as the part of his job he likes the least [SF-15].

Most importantly, Indian workers lose control over their own sense of citizenship and identity. A typical example is this quote from BigCo: “Why the hell should I use a different name? I have an identity with my name. People ask my full, real name—why shouldn’t I give it to them? We’ve been raised so many years in this society. India is inculcated in us, and cannot come out.” Furthermore, the American identity they adopt is a fallacious one. Even if an “authentic” American identity exists, it is unlikely to be represented by the consumerized, pop-culture version presented in the training sessions. Few Americans would identify with the actors in *Baywatch* or *Friends*, much less behave like them or watch them at all. For South Asians in the United States, the disjuncture between media image and reality is even wider. Imagine if these Indian-posing-as-American agents were to go to the United States. Most likely, their “American” experience would be very different—marked by diversities and hybridities, perhaps inequalities and discriminations. These contradictions of the American identity itself (i.e., even before enacted interactively with customers) may generate psychic injuries for the Indian workers.

Finally, if Hochschild’s study reveals the psychological costs of interactive service work, in terms of emotional numbness and loss of touch with one’s true self, Indian call center work reveals the transnational implications of this—dual personalities in a literal sense. More than one agent referred to the national identity management experience in terms of multiple personality disorder. A SmallCo agent describes [SF-3]: “I am two individuals—‘Jeff’ at work, and ‘Gaurav’ in my social life. Jeff is artificial. It is an artificial soul. It’s not me. In this room is Jeff now, but Gaurav is enjoying life outside.” In some ways, this psychic split serves as a coping mechanism (not unlike the experience of severe trauma victims). It provides a shield against hostile forces in the social world, as Gaurav continues: “The customers—when they get mad—they are not abusing me, they are only talking to Jeff Miller.” Still, the potential harm for a person’s mental stability is self-evident, and warrants future study on the long-term implications of working in this kind of job.

In short, employees have much to lose in this scenario of transnational call center work—with a greater range of effects than those of any of the other groups. Workers stand to compromise their bodies, their mental stability, their family lives, as well as career trajectories.

Finally, if Indians have the most to lose from the process, U.S. customers have least to gain. Customers may benefit from “smoother” communication under national identity management. If Indian agents can better understand American speech patterns and consumer habits, they may be better equipped to assist Americans over the phone. However, it is questionable

how much this secondary knowledge (of language, culture, etc.) improves the quality of the interaction compared to their primary knowledge of the product or service at hand. Furthermore, even when the communication is efficient, the interaction is still fundamentally based on deception. This is quite a serious “cost,” especially if it is true that U.S. firms are using the national identity management of Indian call center workers *deliberately* to mislead their own consuming public.

Discussion

Dynamics of Indian call centers have several implications for theoretical perspectives on globalization, the service industry, the labor process, and identity. To begin with globalization is changing the structure of the service industry, in terms of the actors and their relations. In contrast to the typical triangular relationship of local actors (Leidner 1996), this study points to an emerging quadrilateral relationship of actors who are moreover transnational. U.S. consumers remain the same, but the managerial ranks have split across borders, into client firms in the United States and call center managers in India. Also, the location of the employees has changed, shifting across borders to India. This fundamental change in the participants affects the patterns and consequences of their relations, as discussed next.

Second, globalization is changing the form of relations between the groups, such that the communication in service work is being infused with discourses of nation and citizenship. Scholars have revealed the crucial ways that gender is embedded in the relations of interactive service work (Leidner 1991; MacDonald and Sirianni 1996; Hochschild 2003). As an elaboration, this study points to the way that race becomes a critical element as well. Nation enters the service interaction in this study through consumer discourses that service is best rendered by workers of their own nationality, and through explicit racial and nationalized hostility. Consumers become the voice of this rhetoric, but the source is often much larger. The U.S. media, popular culture, and political arenas have provided U.S. consumers with a particular vocabulary for understanding and communicating with people from the Global South. Not all (or even most) of the customers in this study express this rhetoric, according to the employees and my own observations, but it happens often enough to cause strain for Indian workers, Indian managers, and U.S. firms.

A critic may argue that U.S. consumers (particularly whites) may already have familiarity with ethnic others, given their daily contact with service

workers in the United States who are people of color. Why should their interactions with Indians in call centers be any different?

One reason is that the type of communication between customers and employees in transnational industries may ironically be *more direct* than in local sites. U.S. consumers may not even see many of the workers who provide services for them, much less sustain long conversations, because these jobs are often structurally “invisible” (MacDonald and Sirianni 1996). This includes the cooks and dishwashers who work at the back of the restaurant while we sit in the front; the maids who clean our homes while we leave in the daytime, and the janitors who clean our offices after we leave in the night; the shelf stockers at Walmart who work when the store is closed; the office workers filing claims and processing bank records, whom we never see at all, etc. There may be a racial component to this invisibility as well: with increasing levels of “invisibility” in service work, the greater chance the worker is a person of color (MacDonald and Sirianni 1996; Benner 2002).

In contrast, the call center industry is putting U.S. citizens in direct voice contact with workers in the Global South, on a mass scale, and perhaps for the first time. It is possible that in this context, consumers are more likely to express a latent ethnocentrism they feel for “others,” both locally and transnationally. It is also possible that American consumers may view ethnic others abroad differently than they view those within their own countries. A vivid example comes from the anti-immigrant movement in the United States. Some political activists and groups oppose foreign workers from entering the country on the grounds of protecting the rights of native-born minorities, whose jobs (they say) are most at stake (Californians For Population Stabilization 2005).

A critical race reading of these dynamics would point to shifts in globalized race relations in the postcolonial era; how whiteness and empire are being re-articulated in new ways, rather than suppressed or dismantled (Bonilla-Silva 1999; Lopez 2005). While the blatant rhetoric and violence of white supremacy from the colonial era has become less common, racialized discourses about the Global South are in some ways more pervasive and powerful within the Global North, precisely because they are more subtle, as well as protected by an official discourse of fairness (Hall 1986; Winant 2001). Accordingly, the rhetoric of empire is apparent in Indian call centers—not through an explicit language of racial superiority—but through the mediating language of “terror,” and the denigration of South Asian, Middle Eastern, and Muslim identities. Globalized interactive service work is providing a new forum for everyday citizens to articulate this kind of nationalized rhetoric.

A third implication of globalization is that it has broadened the dynamics labor control in the service industry. If (local) firms traditionally require “emotion management” by their employees, i.e., selling positive feelings to customers as part of the service, globalization has introduced the requirement of “national identity management” to this scenario as well. Indian call center workers must display American-ness along with displaying politeness and pleasantness. This widens the range of one’s “identity” that is subject to managerial control—not just particular emotions, but a whole, unified sense of citizenship or nationality.

The role of “scripting” has changed in these interactions as well (Leidner 1998). While call center workers are expected to memorize dialogue and repeat standardized phrases for certain prompts or questions by customers (just as in Leidner’s case of McDonalds), the script is not enough for this job. Constructing and conveying clues about a national identity requires a substantial amount of improvising. It also demands much more creativity and active participation by workers. In some cases, call center workers are literally trained by, and trained into, actors. Even the purpose of scripting has changed. In highly routinized service work, the script is used to minimize uncertainty and smooth the immediate relations between workers and customers. However, Indian call centers may be using the script for an additional goal as well—to smooth relations between the U.S. client firms and their own consumers. In particular, it is possible that U.S. client firms and/or Indian managers have devised national identity management as a means of hiding from the American public the larger process of outsourcing.

From a Foucauldian perspective, this signifies a transformation in the practice of power. While the agents are certainly the direct recipients of power within the call center industry, many other groups in this scenario experience the hegemony of U.S. firms. The Indian managers, the Indian workers, and the U.S. consumers are all “managed” in some sense. Whether this is through individual identity transformation, interactional deception within communications, or managerial enforcement, they all participate in the larger project of obscuring the power of U.S. firms.

Fourth, globalization has complicated alliances and cleavages among actors in the service industry. If Leidner’s study debunks the classical binary of worker–manager opposition by inserting the role of customers, the case of Indian call centers problematizes this relation even further through transnational dynamics of solidarity and tension. What emerges in my study are unexpected alliances across global lines in support of national identity management. For instance, both U.S. clients and Indian managers have common interests in maintaining the Americanization, either for the purpose of regulating customer–agent interactions or for their own unique

economic gains. Indian workers may even have common interests (at least implicitly) with both Indian managers and U.S. firms, in protecting job outsourcing and covering it up, given that they all benefit from it to some degree.

Seemingly disparate groups also coalesce for the purpose of resisting national identity management. Indian managers periodically ally with Indian workers—even across class lines—in challenging the Americanization by the U.S. clients. Likewise, U.S. consumers and Indian workers cooperate across global lines, as they work together through the transnational labor movement to address issues of outsourcing and fair work practices. In this way, globalization of the service industry can divide managerial interests (and alternatively, unite workers) across national sites. Simultaneously though, globalization can also forge a powerful coalition of three groups against a fourth (as in U.S. clients, Indian managers, and U.S. consumers against Indian workers).

Finally, this study reveals the multiplicity of outcomes for global identities, as ICT becomes transnational, and brings together people from the Global South and Global North. Traditional theoretical models predict dichotomous outcomes—either homogenization into or else rejection of a standardized Northern identity. However, this study suggests that such a picture is too simplistic to account for the range of lived experiences among workers under national identity management. While elements of both homogenization and rejection do occur, neither presents the whole story. I find a continuum of reactions among the Indian call center workers in my sample, with the most common responses being accommodation, objection, and resistance. Thus, despite the strategies by both U.S. firms and Indian managers to enforce national identity requirements, the effect among employees is not a uniform assimilation into American identity. These findings challenge theoretical predictions of a homogenizing global culture through ICTs, whether voluntarily through the “flat world” Friedman sees, or coercively through the “McDonaldized” world that Ritzer (2003) sees. Instead, they suggest various degrees of global disjuncture, dissent, and renegotiation in identities, closer to what Appadurai theorizes.

Conclusion

By outlining the dynamics of “national identity management,” this analysis of Indian call centers has attempted to show how ethnicity and citizenship have become crucial elements of the labor process in globalized service industries. It builds upon and elaborates seminal theories of managerial

control in interactive service work, including Hochschild's theory of emotion management and Leidner's theory of scripting. I argue that globalization fundamentally alters the relationship of the actors, the purpose and practice of managerial control, and the outcomes for those involved. In addition, I reflect on theories of ICTs and global identity, revealing a continuum of responses by workers to the process of national identity management, and the forging of multiple, internally differentiated ethnic identities.

Why do firms seek to erase literally the identities of the workers, to the point of asking their employees to lie outright? An optimist would say that it is a makeshift solution (albeit an ill-informed one) for the conflicts within customer-agent relations. "Neutralizing" accents (Mirchandani 2004a) is a convenient strategy of smoothing relations in the face of transnational tensions in interactive service work. A pessimist might say it is a deliberate attempt to control American consumers, at the expense of workers in the Global South. It is a strategy to hide a bigger problem these firms have created—outsourcing and the removal of jobs from the Global North—and to suppress public opposition.

What Role do the Customers Play in this Process? While U.S. firms initiate the process, Indian managers design and enforce it, Indian workers innovate and improvise it, and U.S. consumers trigger it through their articulation of distaste and aggression towards Indians. Why do they sometimes care more about the nationality of the agent, rather than whether or not their service is being met? This reflects a number of trends in globalization: an articulation of sensationalized rhetoric about outsourcing from popular culture, the media, and politics; a transforming discourse of whiteness and empire in the postcolonial era; and the advancement of satellite and communication technologies, which perhaps unexpectedly creates a forum for expressing globalized grievances and tensions within transnational call centers.

How do the Indian Workers and Managers React to this Process? There are multiple reactions by participants to this process, even among and within the various groups discussed here. I find that some of the workers speak positively about the experience, as a means of cultural learning if not as a form of entertainment, like playing a role in a virtual reality game.⁷ However, most respond with more hesitance to national identity management: ranging from reluctant accommodation, to ethical or political objection, to active resistance. The Indian managers are in a particularly ambiguous

⁷ Lisa Nakamura (2002) has a fascinating discussion of this racialized process with her concept of "identity-tourism".

position. Most are internally conflicted, feeling that the American posturing (and call center life more broadly) is detrimental to Indian society, but also wanting to ensure job opportunities for their employees. While scholars have noted the “strategic agency” of these Indian managers (Mirchandani 2004b), I find in addition that they resist the national identity requirements in symbolic and practical ways.

Just as there are varying forms of agency and resistance, there are varying implications and outcomes for the groups involved. U.S. firms have most to gain, both financially and politically. Indian managers experience the most evenly divided outcomes, with personal economic rewards as well as a loss of authority over their own workplaces. Ultimately, the American consuming public has the least to gain by this process, but Indian workers have most to lose in terms of the range of costs to their bodies, family lives, psychological state, and sense of national identity.

This study has several limitations that hopefully can be addressed later on. For instance, a fuller account of this process calls for a survey of the customers and the clients in the United States to get first-hand reports of their motivations and perspectives. In addition, more detailed attention should be given to the way particular types of work in call centers mediate the form of national identity management. Customers may be more hostile when calling about banking or health care, where the information is more sensitive, but more pleasant when calling for help with their computer.

Future research should also explore the implications of national identity management in other sites, times, and places. To what extent is it infiltrating other domains of transnational service work beyond call centers? How will it endure now that the process is more open in the public eye? Will the cover-up strategies become futile, or alternatively, will publicity make the cover-up even more necessary, as customers become more informed and angry about outsourcing?

Moreover, will national identity management become more prevalent as additional Northern countries (aside from the United States and United Kingdom) join in on the trend of call center outsourcing, and as more Southern countries around the world become their destinations? Indeed, the concentration of international call centers is growing in countries like the Philippines, Malaysia, Mexico, China, Senegal, and South Africa (Engardio and Bernstein 2003; Ravichandran 2003; Associated Press 2004; Benner 2004⁸). Is national identity management more effective, or does it require

⁸ Benner, Chris. 2004. “South Africa On-Call: Information Technology and Labor Restructuring in South African Call Centers.” University of Pennsylvania, Department of Geography. Unpublished manuscript.

more “cultural training,” in some countries versus others? Some corporate officials report, for instance, that Canadians are too polite to sell products to Americans over the phone, and that Filipinos need more training on being terse and assertive, since they are such good conversationalists and take too long on the call.⁹ In short, there are many signs that the issue of “nation” in these jobs will endure and expand.

Finally, future research should consider the alternative forms of call center management. Studies show that firms using participatory strategies like self-run teams are more productive and have higher service quality ratings (Batt 1999; Batt and Moynihan 2002), and that worker cooperatives in service industries, which avoid scripts are more empowering for employees (Scharf 2003). Can the same be true for international call centers that shun national identity management procedures? This will be the challenge for employers and workers in the global service industry of call centers.

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⁹ The Canadian example was drawn from discussant remarks by Larry Hunter at the conference where this paper was presented. For the Filipino case, see Engardio and Bernstein, 2003.

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