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# Calling Social Work

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## **ABSTRACT**

New Labour has promoted the use of information and communication technology. Call centres are a key development in this strategy and are now in use for accessing social services. In official policy the use of call centres is presented as an aspect of attempts to change the relationship between service users and the purchasers and providers of services. In contrast, we suggest that the use of call centres in social care does little to shift the balance of power. Call centres bring together four dimensions of New Labour discourse: learning from the private sector, cutting costs, technology and consumerism. Three issues emerge from their development: the undermining of social work's sense of place; the circumscribing of service user participation; the rationalisation of social workers. The call centre serves as a signifier of what, it is claimed, the combination of New Labour's consumerism and technology can achieve. This signification disguises call centres' properties of efficiency, calculability, predictability and control. Contrary to the rhetoric that accompanies them, call centres may be curtailing service user participation, as well as delimiting the social work role. Accordingly, their use has important, but as yet largely unresearched, implications for service users and social workers.

## Introduction

By 2004, 435,000 staff were employed in British call centres and this number was expected to increase to almost 500,000 by 2008, with the number of call centres expected to rise from 5,980 to 7,320 over the same period and the ‘public and health care sectors’ expected to record the highest growth (Management Issues, 2004). This rate and pattern of growth is supported by evidence from the National Audit Office (2002), which showed that the number of central government call centres rose from 13 in 1989 to 113 in 2002. These centres saw a 42% rise in call numbers between 1999 and 2002 and by 2002 they were dealing with 65 million calls p.a. (National Audit Office, 2002, p.1). The use of call centres in local government has been a more recent phenomenon, pioneered by Liverpool City Council in 2000 in partnership with British Telecom (British Telecom, 2003). Call centres are now firmly established in social services, as elsewhere in the public sector (Collin-Jacques, 2004; Fisher, 2004; Collin-Jacques and Smith, 2005).

Given the ubiquity of call centres in the private sector and their increasing deployment and diversification of function in the public sector, for many people they have become a taken-for-granted part of everyday experience. This is seen as a desirable state of affairs by the New Labour government and the use of ‘customer contact centres’<sup>1</sup> has been identified as an area in need of ‘particular attention’ (Cabinet Office, 2005, p.12), as a component of the government’s modernisation agenda. Local authorities have been urged to utilise call centre technology to deliver

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<sup>1</sup> The term ‘contact centre’ tends to be employed in the public sector rather than ‘call centre’ and has been used in local government since 1996 (Employers’ Organisation and Improvement Development Agency, 2001). This seems to be an attempt to disassociate public sector call centres from the unfavourable experiences people have of private sector call centres. For the sake of consistency, we have retained the term ‘call centre’ throughout.

social services since the late 1990s (Social Services Inspectorate, 1999), as part of the continuing managerialist changes in social work practice and the increased incorporation of technological mediation (Postle, 2002; Harlow, 2003; Webb, 2003). Castells was prescient in recognising the significance of this phenomenon in relation to risk assessment strategies in the United States and France, noting the departure from the traditions of social work because ‘the essential component of intervention no longer takes the form of the face-to-face relationship between the carer and the cared, the helper and the helped, the professional and the client’ (Castells 1991, quoted in Webb, 2003, p.233).

We now turn to our main concerns: exploring the development of call centres in social services and placing their development within the wider central and local government contexts from which they have emerged. We do so by locating the development of call centres within New Labour’s overarching modernisation agenda, before moving on to draw out how they embody four key dimensions of that agenda.

### **New Labour, modernisation and call centres**

When New Labour came to power in 1997, the preceding Conservative governments had already sought to turn public service users into customers and public sector organisations into quasi-businesses (Harris, 2003, chs 3, 4 and 7). New Labour grafted its modernisation agenda on to this political inheritance, appropriating managerialism in the pursuit of its ‘Third Way’ political project (Newman, 2000; Harris, 2003, ch.5): ‘Modern managerialism was presented as a set of tools and techniques that could be

captured to help achieve [New Labour's] policy outcomes' (Newman 2003, p.79).

New Labour has represented this modernising approach to policy and organisational change as a set of functional and pragmatic managerialist responses to the new challenges and opportunities thrown up by changes in society. It is a futurist agenda, presented as needing to be continuously moved forward in order to keep pace with social change (Moss and O'Loughlin, 2005).

As part of its modernisation agenda, the government has promoted the use of Information and Communication Technology. ICT has been used to facilitate 'electronic government', which provides access to both central and local government services via computer and telephone. As a consequence, call centres have been portrayed as one of the principal routes towards increasing the accessibility and efficiency of public services (Cabinet Office, 1999; Asgarkhani, 2005; Cabinet Office, 2005). A central claim is that call centres are a key aspect of 'joined-up' working and this is seen as a vastly superior alternative to the 'old' systems of central and local government organisation (Cabinet Office, 1999), characterised as departmental 'silo cultures'. The overall promotion of call centres has encompassed their specific development as a means of accessing social services. As with other public sector call centres, their use in social services brings together four dimensions of New Labour's modernisation discourse: learning from the private sector, cutting costs (always referred to as 'efficiency gains'), technology and consumerism. Each of these dimensions is considered in turn and, in the process, another facet of New Labour emerges: its contribution to the constitution of the conditions to which it claims to be merely responding (Moss and O'Loughlin, 2005, p.179).

## **Learning from the private sector**

The Conservatives' concern with turning public sector organisations into quasi-businesses, noted earlier, was underpinned by a belief that the private sector knows best, does things better and should serve as the guide for how to do things in the public sector. This belief in the private sector, as the public sector's mentor, has been sustained by New Labour on the basis that modern day society differs substantially from that in which many public services were created or recreated, as part of the post-war welfare state. In New Labour's policy documents, public services are castigated as being built on the principle of 'one size fits all', although this is seen as understandable, given that their origins were in the context of post-war austerity. In contrast, there are frequent references to what is seen as the nub of recent societal change, namely 'consumer culture', and to what are presented as responsive knock-on effects in the ways in which goods and services are provided by private sector businesses. These developments in business, in response to consumerism, are contrasted favourably with the models of service provision that have existed in the public sector. Public service provision has been portrayed as bureaucratic, inherently inefficient, wasteful and unwilling to embrace change (Clarke et al., 2000a; Pollitt, 2003), with slow and cumbersome bureaucratic structures: 'like a dinosaur, too big, too slow-moving, too insensitive, insufficiently adaptable, and seriously underpowered as far as brains are concerned' (Pollitt, 2003, p.32). Like the Conservative administrations before them, the New Labour governments have argued that by learning lessons from the private sector, the public sector will produce better and more desirable services, more in tune with what the users of those services want (Farnsworth 2006). Incorporating the discipline of the market, managerialist beliefs and business practices from the private sector into the public sector have been



presented as the keys to success, particularly in local government (Cabinet Office, 1999).

A distinctive characteristic of New Labour's approach to incorporating private sector expertise in the public sector has been its emphasis on partnerships and strategic alliances, for example, through the Private Finance Initiative. Such collaborations are seen as a means of delivering social outcomes: 'The concepts of stakeholding, relational contracts, trust, risk-sharing and collaborative advantage offer an image of leading edge business practice' (Newman, 2000, p.47). As Newman goes on to argue, such innovation is the key to New Labour's politics of restructuring the public sector, with past failures contrasted with the future's possibilities, if only the traditional moulds of service provision can be broken (and see, Langan, 2000, pp.157-158; Jones, 2001, p.555). Successful public service organisations are considered to be those that challenge outdated assumptions and change the pattern of who should deliver services and how they should be provided. Such innovation, based on learning from the private sector, is seen as a universal good - the key to introducing a business dynamic into the public sector - and has been crucial in shaping and facilitating the call centre agenda (Bloomfield and Hayes, 2004, pp.3-5). For example, banking and many other areas of business depend on information flow, facilitated by communication technology as used in call centres. Public sector organisations also handle information and are seen as needing to learn from the private sector how to become beneficiaries of the same technology. In addition to their perceived advantages in terms of efficiency of information handling, their originating business context means that call centres have an image and require a set of behaviours that can

be used to teach users and workers to alter their perceptions and change their behaviour in the context of public services. One of the most prominent examples of this kind of innovative learning from the private sector, through collaboration under the Private Finance Initiative, is provided by Liverpool City Council.

An enthusiastic account of the Liverpool experience sets out the central thrust of the enterprise:

For Henshaw<sup>2</sup> the transformational potential of harnessing new technologies in order to create a Liverpool dynamic was clearly a strategic plan in his reform agenda... The approach taken by Henshaw to move the council forward in its aims to re-engineer services through harnessing all appropriate technological channels was to adopt the joint venture approach, which is often deployed in large-scale commercial sector activities. Liverpool Direct Limited (LDL) was thus formed... with the UK telecoms giant, BT, as the strategic partner.

(Milner and Joyce, 2005, p.136)

80.1% of LDL is owned by BT and 19.9% by Liverpool City Council, with 800 workers seconded to LDL from the Council and BT (British Telecom, 2003). There is a ten-year contract covering all of Liverpool City Council's information and communication technology requirements. In addition to starting up and running a call centre, LDL has taken over responsibility for three other 'service portfolios': human resources, payroll and benefit services. However, it is the call centre that is seen as 'the focal point of LDL's programme', replacing the traditional local authority

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<sup>2</sup> Sir David Henshaw, Chief Executive

switchboard with a 300-seater 'customer service hub' (rising to 450 seats, making it the largest of its kind in the UK), which was soon handling 200,000 calls a month (British Telecom 2003): 'As has been the case in other beacon sites of local government change, such as Brisbane City Council in Australia, a key driver for change was the move to integrate call centre approaches into the service design' (Milner and Joyce, 2005, p. 138). The call centre 'is the first point of contact and aims to offer the resolution to all enquiries from members of the public. Their aim is front-end resolution, so that every call is satisfied at the first point of contact and the customer does not have to call back' (*ibid.*). 90% of calls were being resolved at the first point of contact after three years in operation. The call centre is open every day or, as the promotional literature puts it, '24x7x365'. Savings of many millions of pounds were predicted in the first five years, with the Council's cost base predicted to fall by £100m. Presumably a significant contribution to this fall was made by the reduction in the Council's 'headcount' from 19,000 to 13,000 staff (British Telecom 2003). In addition to the lessons in cost-cutting learned from BT, the Council claims to have gained much more from its private sector mentor:

We're getting the benefit of BT's expertise in communications technologies as well as huge amounts of support for the process of business transformation. I think that's a pretty compelling offer. BT has been a massive addition to our weaponry in the recovery of Liverpool and the transformation of the City Council.

(Henshaw, quoted in British Telecom, 2003)

Of course, the private sector has not offered its expertise to the public sector on the basis of altruism. The major ICT suppliers have been vying for lucrative contracts with local and central government and, in cases like Liverpool's, have entered into strategic partnerships. Under the Liverpool contract, BT is guaranteed an annual payment of £30m, plus a share in what are referred to as the 'profits' for any targets exceeded (Milner and Joyce, 2005, p.137). The advantages for BT in being the major partner in LDL are

around building a reputation in a market segment, which they saw as being potentially attractive to them over the medium and longer term, as well as having the opportunity to interact with a public service at a more strategic level than would normally be the case in an outsourcing relationship. Critically LDL offered BT the opportunity to learn more about the realities of public services working, cultures and behaviours; factors which they felt would help them to position themselves strongly in an expanding market.

(Milner and Joyce 2005, p.137)

### **Cutting costs**

In the Liverpool example, and more generally, cutting costs emerges as one of the key lessons that can be learned from the private sector. This is an aspect of New Labour thinking that is bound up intimately with the introduction of call centres in social services. A recent review of the Charter Mark Scheme and proposals for measuring customer satisfaction emphasises that: 'Driving up standards of public service while improving efficiency remains a key Government priority' (Herdan,

2006, 3). This priority had already been consolidated by the Gershon Report (Gershon, 2004). The report identified the opportunity to make £21.5bn of 'efficiency gains' across the public sector by 2007/8. Of this total, at least £6.45bn was to be achieved at the local level in England; equivalent to 7.5% of 2004/5 baseline expenditure. This figure was adopted as the official target to be met by activities undertaken by: local councils (comprising nearly half of the £6.45bn target), schools (comprising nearly 40% of the target) and Police and Fire authorities (comprising about 15% of the target). Following the Gershon Report, a minister explained the government's position:

Looking for efficiency gains must become the 'norm' for organisations in the public sector - as indeed it is for the private sector already. I know many local authorities are now looking at this Gershon agenda already in this way and making it a cultural change within the management of their organisations. We must remember that this is not a 'one-off', this is a cultural change in the day-to-day management and the strategic planning within the public service. Even with no Gershon and no Spending Review, this is something all local authorities should be doing anyway...Overall local government is responding very positively to the challenge and are taking a good look at where and how they could make efficiencies. The first set of annual efficiency statements show just how expert local authorities can be in identifying the parts of their business that could be run more efficiently...Now local authorities need to start 'thinking big'...This means councils must think about projects that will transform the way they do business and deliver services - transformations that will lead them to achieving further efficiencies year after year.

(Woolas, 2005)

In speeches by ministers and in government press releases, frequent references have been made to this being a 'win:win for local authorities' because, it is emphasised, the efficiency gains can either be invested in front-line services or used to reduce council tax (for example, Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, 2005; Fitzpatrick, 2006).

Unusually in Woolas' speech, he made clear that central government's position is that only half of the money saved 'should be cashable' by local authorities (Woolas 2005), although no speech by a minister or press release has referred to the exchequer recouping the other half as a 'win:win for central government'. In the event, local authorities have exceeded expectations, producing £760 million of savings in 2004/5, £1.1 billion in 2005/6 and an anticipated £1.3 billion in 2006/7, which, if achieved, will mean that their £3 billion Gershon target for cutting costs will have been reached a year early (Department for Communities and Local Government 2006).

The general context of cost-cutting, and specific exhortations to local authorities to start 'thinking big' in how they go about it, are conducive to the introduction of call centres as a way of producing the level of savings demanded by central government. In addition, the government's wider policy and regulation regimes combine to favour local authorities moving in the direction of call centres as a key response in meeting central government's modernisation agenda, through the emphasis placed on their 'cutting edge' desirability in performance reviews, grants for modernising services and strategies for e-government (Regan, 2003, p.92). Local authority spokespersons mirror central government's enthusiasm for cost-cutting. Their identification of the perceived benefits of call centres includes the achievement of efficiency gains (*ibid.* p.93). These general trends and pressures are reinforced in particular areas of the

public sector by specific central government initiatives. For example the Care Services Efficiency Delivery Programme was set up to support the implementation of the recommendations of the Gershon Report in adult social care services and to seek 'real efficiency gains' (Department of Health, 2006). Having visited 31 local authorities, the CSED Programme includes as one of its six key foci the establishment of centralised contact points. It countenances the possibility that these might not be call centres in every local authority (*ibid.*) but the pressures from the wider context, combined with the CSED's calls for centralisation, are likely to exert further pressure in that direction. In any case, adult social care services topped the forward-looking cost-cutting league table for 2006/7<sup>3</sup>, with anticipated 'efficiency gains' of £213.5 million (Department for Communities and Local Government 2006).

## **Technology**

As we have seen, the introduction of ICT, as representing best practice from the private sector, is interwoven with the cost-cutting agenda and is presented as the primary means for local authorities to 'think big' and realise efficiency gains on the scale demanded by central government. In one of the early contributions to the literature on managerialism, Pollitt commented that 'productivity increases will mainly come from the application of ever-more-sophisticated technologies' (Pollitt, 1993, 2). More recently, Regan has suggested that we have witnessed a version of technological determinism being propounded in the belief that there is 'a linear relationship between technology, management of information and the desired outcomes' for the customer (Regan, 2003, p.85). Many years ago, Lukács criticised

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<sup>3</sup> Schools, police and fire services are excluded from the figures released.

technological determinism and insisted that rather than depicting technology as leading to other changes in society, such developments have to be located in society as a totality and in a historical context (Lukács, 1971, *orig. 1923*). Instead of seeing ICT as driving the development of call centres in social services, their emergence can be located within the contemporary political and social forces encapsulated in New Labour. However, New Labour represents technology as a self-determining force that impacts on society and requires government to respond with new programmes, which are sensitive to what are presented as social and technological inevitabilities, as part of its modernisation agenda for public services (Moss and O'Loughlin, 2005, p.170). It propounds a view of the omnipresence of ICT in Castellan terms.

According to Castells, the 'information technology revolution' has affected all areas of life and amounts to a new epoch, an 'interval characterised by the transformation of our "material culture" by the works of a new technological paradigm organised around information technologies' (Castells, 1996, p.28). The interaction between this technological paradigm and 'a new organisational logic' is, according to Castells, what 'constitutes the historical foundation of the information economy' (*ibid.* p.152). He sees such an economy as opening up 'an extraordinary potential for solving our problems' (Castells, 1997, p.140). The information economy has impacted on users of social services but, in this context, the potential for positive outcomes and enhanced opportunities via ICT is not a universally held view (Harlow and Webb, 2003). For some, the omnipresence of ICT offers the prospect of increased electronic surveillance, managerial control and uniformity (Harris, 1998; Ritzer, 2000) and



Castells himself recognised the potential for exclusion of what he called the ‘uneducated and switched off populations’ (Castells, 1997, p.142).

Regardless of the stance taken towards information technologies, when it comes to their introduction, public services are dependent on the technological expertise of the private sector to underpin new organisational forms and processes, as we saw earlier in the example of Liverpool. Although the discourse surrounding the use of technology is heavily imbued with private sector notions of innovation, they can be less innovative than they appear. Technologies are not separate from the contexts in which they emerge and existing discourses are embedded in them (Regan, 2003, p.86). For example, if an area of social work is already proceduralised and existing services are commodified, ICT will reproduce proceduralised and commodified practices (Regan, 2003, p.87). The same claims made for the introduction of quasi-markets in the reform of community care in the early 1990s, namely that they would produce quality services and consumer choice, are currently being attached to the introduction of ICT (Regan 2003, p.89). In this context, call centre technology is seen as a more business-like arrangement for accessing services, which extends the alleged benefits that accrue from locating social work in quasi-markets and quasi-business organisations.

Against these claims of the positive benefits to be gained from the introduction of technology, Ritzer (2000, p.14) argues that the central preoccupation that underpins its adoption is control - over those accessing non-human technology-based systems and the workers within them, who are trained to do a limited number of things in

precisely the ways they are told to do them: 'The great source of uncertainty, unpredictability and inefficiency in any rationalizing system is people - either those who work within it or those served by it. Hence, efforts to increase control are usually aimed at both employees and customers' (Ritzer, 2000, p.104). Ritzer asserts that amongst the attractions of such technological control is increased productivity and lower costs (Ritzer, 2000, p.105) but, he suggests, technology tends to produce 'flattened featureless products' (*ibid.* p.189). In social services, ICT has moved beyond the status of a 'tool' to the embedding of call centres in the day-to-day operation of social work, offering, as elsewhere, a form of 'technical control' (Callaghan and Thompson, 2001) of the kind described by Ritzer. Automatic call distribution equipment and the access to and sequencing of screens within databases or referral systems can be seen as examples of technological solutions to the problem of how to increase managerial control.

However, the portrayal of call centres as achieving 'perfect' technological managerial control through panoptical surveillance, envisaged *inter alia* by Fernie and Metcalf (1998), has been criticised by some writers (Taylor and Bain, 1999; Kinnie et al., 2000) as being overly deterministic and as denying the possibility of employee resistance. Mason et al. (2001) suggest that some of the space for resistance towards technological control is created by the fallibility, rather than the usually depicted sophistication, of the technology and the shortfalls between its claims and its actual performance:

Contrary to popular portrayals of technology as omnipotent, infallible and superhuman, in many (if not the majority of) instances technologies fell short

of their design expectations...In this respect we found that considerable collective energy was expended in actually making the technology work, rather than in circumnavigating its supposed negative effects.

(cited in McPhail, 2004, p.13).

## **Consumerism**

The technologies of contemporary managerialism embody 'consumerist claims' (Clarke and Newman, 1997, p.116). Clarke and Newman's consideration of technologies refers to managerial tools like strategic planning, marketing techniques, surveys and focus groups. However, in New Labour's contemporary vision, as we have seen, 'technology' almost invariably equates to ICT and its embodiment of New Labour's conception of consumerism. Like the previous Conservative governments, New Labour characterises users of social services as rational customers who have choices (Harris, 2003, ch.7). A conception of citizenship has been developed that draws on this imagery of consumer choice and its capacity to deliver changes in public services. As part of a general trend, social work has been engaged in an extensive reform programme, with changes in policy, organisational design and systems of regulation, based on seeing people as consumers who require individualised, customised and personalised services. These customers are depicted as the motor for the modernisation agenda because the 'active' consumer envisaged by New Labour 'requires modern public services to be adaptive, responsive, flexible and diverse' (Clarke et al., 2000b, p.261). Furthermore, managers are represented as the agents for delivering the wishes or aspirations of users, with organisations designed around the concept of their efficiency of use (Newman, 2003, p.87). These notions are embraced through the introduction of call centres to the public sector, given that

their development in the private sector was ostensibly geared to increasing responsiveness, accessibility and flexibility for customers. Public sector call centres chime in with New Labour's emphasis on the state providing services as an aid to life politics in times of what Giddens depicts as 'reflexive modernisation' (Moss and O'Loughlin, 2005, p.169). In such times, citizenship becomes a consumerist achievement, rather than being a status: 'There is an ideal notion of an active, reflexive and responsible citizen who is technologically literate and skilled' (Moss and O'Loughlin, 2005, p.178). New Labour's image of the citizen is as an active and discerning agent exerting choice in the market place of public services (Newman, 2005, p.49).

Representations of such consumer-citizens (Aberbach and Christensen, 2005) have produced an increasing rhetorical emphasis on the notion of 'customer care', with public sector organisations seeking to promote 'the enchanting myth of customer sovereignty' (Korczynski, 2002; Bolton and Houlihan, 2005; Korczynski and Ott, 2006). This rhetoric is increasingly associated with the use of ICT and 'Customer Resource Management' via call centres. The use of call centres for local government services has been represented as a response to rational consumer-led demands for services that are more flexible and diverse (Cabinet Office, 1999; Asgarkhani, 2005; Cabinet Office, 2005). The depiction of social services 'customers' as being no different to other consumers sees them being targeted by the same rhetoric and as being equally amenable to the ostensible benefits that call centres bring. Whilst there are elements of continuity with the Conservatives's aspirations - the emphasis on markets and consumerism, attacks on producer dominance or capture and concern

with sharpening accountability to users - in New Labour's modernisation agenda there is also a drive to update services to match the alleged expectations of modern customers and to meet the business requirements of the modern world (Newman 2000; Garrett 2005: 534). Thus, call centres are the 'modern' way to do business with customers. They enable social services to get rid of 'old-fashioned' practices like walk-in receptions in local offices.

Call centres in social services bring together the four dimensions of New Labour's modernisation agenda that have been discussed: learning from the private sector, cutting costs, technology and consumerism. Such centres are viewed as a visible manifestation of a commitment to embracing the technology of a new epoch, as a means of consolidating access to services on the basis of consumer-citizenship, as one aspect of continuing to modernise organisational forms and processes according to private sector principles and practices and as evidence of local authorities embracing 'leading edge' systems of delivery for their social services, which enable costs to be cut through 'efficiency gains'. Whilst the introduction of quasi-markets under the Conservatives was seen as the key to reform of public services, New Labour links this to the transformative capacities of technology by tightly coupling 'the rhetoric of reform to prescriptive models of organization and practice. The establishment of centralized customer service sites, like the purchaser/provider organizational arrangements, have become uniform, visible and measurable indicators of progress' (Regan, 2003, p.84). Whether or not social services are accessed through a call centre has become a litmus test of whether a local authority is up to speed with New Labour's modernisation agenda for social work, as well as signalling more generally

whether it is 'fit for purpose' in the modern world, judged by whether or not it has embraced ICT with enthusiasm.

If we step outside the closed-off, self-contained logic that characterises the modernisation agenda's approach to call centres in social services, there are at least three issues that need further consideration: what call centres mean for social work's sense of place, how they circumscribe user participation and their rationalisation of social workers.

### **Undermining social work's sense of place**

Call centres are much-vaunted because they overcome barriers of place and time so that these become meaningless as far as access to services is concerned (Moss and O'Loughlin, 2005, p.174). The flexibility and 'open all hours' aspects of call centres are seen as offering exactly these benefits. However, a sense of place and locality has other connotations in terms of service users' identities and where and how they want services to be provided. These kinds of concerns were, until recent years, seen as integral to the nature of social work, in, for example, the Seebohm Report's emphasis on 'one door on which to knock' (Seebohm 1968) and the Barclay Report's advocacy of community social work (Barclay 1982). In many progressive aspirations for social work, the notion of responsiveness to the 'patch' has had pride of place. In contrast to the traditional co-location of social workers in the communities they serve, the location of call centres has no significance. As van den Broek notes, an anonymous location might offer economic advantages but, in the example of the Australian social work call centre she studied, it served to impede social workers, who were unable to

build up helpful local knowledge (van den Broek, 2003, p.248). This ability to be aware of and utilise local networks and resources has traditionally been seen as important in social work practice. The dissolution of this previously central feature of social work can be identified as consistent with the prescriptive task-focused units of activity initiated by the introduction of the purchaser-provider split in the wake of the Griffiths Report (1988). Call centres take this shift into rationalised systems a notch further, with service users often no longer knowing where they are in virtual systems, but within which they are, nevertheless, portrayed as active participants.

### **Circumscribing user participation**

The customers of call centres have rarely been the subject of study, which is surprising, given their centrality in call centre processes and in justifications for those centres' introduction (Frenkel et al., 1998; Korczynski et al., 2000). An exception to this has been the work of Bolton and Houlihan who attribute different roles to customers, seeing them as 'many-faceted, complex and sophisticated social actors' (2005, p.685). Their framework depicts customers in differing guises as: 'mythical sovereigns [seeking to] exercise their perceived right to demand not just service but servitude from service providers'; as 'functional transactants want[ing] to carry out a transaction in the simplest manner possible'; or as 'moral agents [able to] 'fully engage with service providers' (*ibid.* p.686). We have seen that the introduction of call centres into social work is accompanied by no such appreciation of the complexity of their users' roles but rather by rhetoric about their being a response to the demand for greater participation by proactive customers, underpinned by an assumption that the customer experience should be as close as possible to that of

participating in the private sector: 'We are also determined that citizens should be empowered and have a voice and a choice in the services they receive. This is the new context in which local government and local partners must deliver improvement' (Woolas, 2006).

There are a number of difficulties with consumerist ideas, as applied to social work, which have been fully rehearsed elsewhere (Harris, 2003, ch.7) but can be summarised here: we do not know whether people who approach social work call centres see themselves as customers, whether they are equipped to act as customers or whether they see themselves as gaining anything (and, if so, what) from being seen in this way. Furthermore, the emphasis on customer-oriented approaches, based on the assumption of shared interests between the user and the social worker, disguises the reality of how many people come into contact with social work. The majority of people who approach social work would not choose to use its services, if they could avoid doing so. They are often distressed and are sometimes in dire straits. Many will approach social work as a desperate last resort. This scenario is very different from the customer-sales relationship in commercial call centres.

In any case, even if all of these difficulties and anomalies could be removed from social services call centres, the conception of what 'user participation' means in this context is tightly circumscribed by the private sector model from which it stems. The active customers are envisaged as participating in managerialist forms of consumerism in an individualised way, with limited feedback on the quality of their



experience of the transaction through market research-type mechanisms or complaints procedures (Newman, 2000). Pollitt renders this approach to consumerism in more prosaic terms, as ‘people-processing’, with a narrow model of the customer of public services as a ‘bundle of preferences waiting to be satisfied’ (Pollitt, 1993, p.125). He emphasises that many types of transactions in public services are more complex than purchase decisions in price-driven markets, partly because citizens are never just customers. Further, he insists that in the social services: ‘These are developmental relationships in which the establishment of trust and an appreciation by the provider of the unique circumstances of the consumer are essential to the ultimate effectiveness of the service being provided’ (Pollitt, 1993, p.128). Similarly, Regan demonstrates how in many situations referral-taking is not a straightforward task (Regan, 2003, p.107). Given these considerations, the pressure exerted on staff in call centres to resolve as many of the calls as possible on first contact might be a laudable target for someone who has rung to complain that her dustbin has not been emptied but might represent abject failure in relation to someone making contact about a complex social problem that has been trivialised or not picked up at all under the imperative of first-contact resolution.

Having targets for rapid response and resolution are aspects of the use of call centres that attempt to tidy up the world into manageable categories. Rationalised systems are characterised by such ‘process streamlining’ (Ritzer 2000: 44), through which the messiness of problems is turned into requests for information. In order to make things manageable, call centres extend control over processes and outputs and, crucially, require compliant users. Indeed, in everyday life, the nub of many complaints about call centres is the lack of fit between the account given by the caller and the script

being used by the call centre worker and the pressure to submit to the rationalised system in which the caller is located. For policy makers, inspectors and managers, ‘centralized systems of referral-taking create an overarching illusion of order, control and efficiency’ (Regan, 2003, p.106) through their emphasis on uniformity, rationalization of technological and human resources and standardization (*ibid.* p.93). The linear logical thinking and standardisation of processes that result might be the very aspects of call centres that undermine their utility for users of social services. These aspects both overturn social work’s traditional aspirations to be non-linear, non-standardised and holistic and fly in the face of the declared aspirations of the government’s modernising agenda for service users. The preoccupation of call centres with producing predictable universal solutions to individual problems is apparent in the questions that Milner suggests should underpin any ‘citizen-facing reform agenda’, derived from the experience of Brisbane City Council in introducing a call centre:

‘What questions do customers ask?

What are the correct answers?

Where is this information held?

What is the totality of the information the customer needs to know?’

(Milner in Milner and Joyce 2005: 78)

In contrast to the narrowness of its implicit conception of the call centre user, New Labour does have a broader view of citizen participation in terms of ‘revivifying local democracy’ (Clarke et al., 2000a, pp.21-22; and see, Moss and O’Loughlin, 2005,

p.175). However, this emphasis on democratic involvement is divorced from social services and the service user movements that have arisen in recent years. There is 'tension between New Labour's preference for technicist managerial solutions to the problems of welfare governance and its apparent commitment to a variety of social goals, including democratic renewal' (Clarke et al., 2000a, p.22). In New Labour's representations of consumerism and consumerist society, the stress on organisational efficiency and business 'success' produces a limited and constrained view of the 'social' (Newman and McKee, 2005). Its consumerism has no place for the 'politics of the social' represented by, for example, service user movements and struggles by social workers to embed anti-oppressive perspectives in services. It also flies in the face of the strong connotation of collective action found in more traditional views of citizenship (Pollitt, 1993, p.129). New Labour's version of consumerism stresses innovation as a universally 'good thing', rather than collective action, but it is innovation couched in managerial terms. Professional and service users' ideas about innovation are either subordinated to managerial forms of innovation or co-opted by them. The initial association of call centres with innovation has rapidly turned into a central government prescription that their use is a reform that is necessary and inevitable. If service users and/or social workers in a particular locality covered by a call centre were to produce collective proposals for alternative ways of accessing services, in all probability these would be rejected. They would not be an option for material reasons (having to forego the savings generated by call centres) and because of their ideological unacceptability, as out-of-kilter with best business practice.

## **Rationalising social workers**

Call centres as rationalising systems mesh well with overall trends within social work. Adams' pessimistic conclusion is that social workers have been turned into 'technicians' as a result of the narrowing of ideas consistent with outcome-based activity, the focus on easily measurable aspects of people's performance and the concentration on techniques rather than critically reflective practice (Adams, 1998; and see Jones and Novak, 1993, p.204). An association between call centres and more technical rationalised forms of social work might be anticipated on the basis of research into private sector call centres. The predominant view of them has been as a form of production line (Batt and Moynihan, 2002). They have been described as 'electronic sweatshops' (Garson, 1998, cited in Deery and Kinnie, 2004, p.4) and 'assembly lines in the head' (Taylor and Bain, 1999, p.107). Deskilling of call centre workers has been a central theme: 'The integration of telephone and computer technologies which defines the call centre has led to new developments in the Taylorisation of white-collar work' (Taylor and Bain, 1999, p.115), with high levels of employee dissatisfaction identified (Bain et al., 2002, p.172). Callaghan and Thompson give an account of the direct control of employee tasks via the technology employed, such as automatic call distribution, but also highlight the subtler controls call centres can exert: '[Management]...are conscious of the power of the call queue in maximising production pace - the workers are almost seen as apart of the machine - of a technology which continuously "fires" calls at them' (2001, pp.20-21).

In contrast, Batt and Moynihan have argued that there is variation in call centre forms. They identify three models of call centre organisation: the 'mass production' model;

the 'professional service' model and in between these the 'mass customisation' or 'hybrid' model. These models are distinguished along four dimensions: the use of technology, skill requirements, work organisation and the use of human resource incentives (Batt and Moynihan, 2002). The amount of discretion that they consider workers to have in these models equates with the level of professionalism or skills that they possess. They see the 'professional service model' as based on a perception of consumers accessing qualified and highly skilled individuals. However, in van den Broek's study of an Australian social work call centre, this distinction did not hold up. Despite their professional qualifications and a strong occupational and professional identity, 'discretion over workflows was shaped as much by call centre technology as by occupational status' (van den Broek, 2003, p.238) and 'the caseworkers were subjected to very similar pressures and call centre processes more often associated with "low skill" call centres' (van den Broek, 2003, p.236). The study is pessimistic about the use of call centres in this professional context. The call centre in van den Broek's research standardised 'the customer interface to optimise efficiency and output' (van den Broek, 2003, p.236), with the social workers complaining that 'it's all about quantity not quality' and that they were being deskilled. The deskilling was 'met with varying degrees of resignation and resistance [with the] most obvious and identifiable response [being] that of turnover and low morale' (2003, p.248). Van den Broek concluded that there 'was little to inspire confidence' amongst the staff concerning the possibility of a balance being struck between the call centre's management/business structures and professionalism (2003, p.251).

The embedding of call centres in social services is the epitome of technocratic managerialism. In this 'techno-habitat' (Garrett 2005), social workers, presumably, will increasingly feel that they are developing a techno-habitus, shaped by

technology, requiring new skills and new forms of knowledge, with competence in the use of ICT as the essential job requirement. However, there are at least two factors that conspire against the ready acquisition of a techno-habitus. First, the question of 'need' impacts upon how people approaching social workers are seen. Need is not the same as 'giving the customer what she wants'. Need is assessed by social workers. In some cases, social work has legal powers, sanctioning the need for compulsory intervention in people's lives. Such intervention is difficult to square with a view of people as customers requiring technical rationalised responses. This means that there is always the possibility of contending perspectives about the definition of need, from managers, social workers and services users, and suggests that these tensions will persist, regardless of the introduction of the techno-habitat of call centres with a customer orientation.

Secondly, the emergence of a techno-habitus is impeded by the perennial problem of limited resources. A crucial difference between commercial call centres and social services call centres is that the former are seeking to increase demand, whereas the latter are usually concerned with controlling demand. As a consequence, the social services call centre becomes the nodal point at which modernised customer-oriented approaches meet the longstanding issue of rationing in the form of individual needs assessments, collective priority setting at the local policy level (including charging policies) and the ranking of competing risks and needs at the practice level. Unlike many of its commercial counterparts, the social work call centre cannot avoid the questions of who should (and should not) get a service and what are the appropriate levels of service (quantity and quality) for those who are to be served?

## **Conclusion**

The development of specific call centres for social services or their incorporation in centralised local authority call centres has remained unexplored to date, notwithstanding their status as probably the most fundamental change to accessing social work that has ever taken place - without the equivalent of a Seebohm, Barclay or Griffiths Report. Much of the policy aspirations for what call centres are and can achieve in the public sector have an air of hyper-reality in which the real and imaginary become confused. In particular, the call centre serves as a signifier of what the combination of New Labour's conception of consumerism and technology can achieve and of how social services can be transformed by learning from and implementing business models. This hyper-real signification disguises call centres' rationalising, systemic, McDonaldised properties: efficiency, calculability, predictability and control by non-human technology (Ritzer, 2000). In this regard, New Labour's modernisation agenda's approach to call centres looks increasingly like the actions of a corporate headquarters requiring its franchisees to reproduce themselves in an identical mould, using the same technological solutions. This raises important questions about whether anything is being lost from social work by call centres undermining its sense of place, circumscribing service user participation and rationalising social workers. These three aspects of call centres' development are more powerful in shaping the nature of current social work than the claims made for the emergence of 'customer choice' and flexibility, which usually follow the enthusiastic embrace of call centre practices.

The widespread adoption of call centres stands in stark contrast to the lack of comment in the social work literature about their emergence. Given this neglect, there

is a pressing need to research the nature of call centre operation and the implications raised by call centres for the experience of service users and the practice of social work. For example, anecdotal evidence suggests that the proportion of social work and non-social work staff employed in particular call centres is variable, but skewed towards the latter: what training do those non-social work staff (usually the bulk of the call centre workforce) have to prepare them for the range, complexity and sensitivity of the contacts they have with service users? How are the interpretation and definition of needs affected by the introduction of call centres? Recognising that call centres exist in social services and locating them in the context from which they have arisen are the first steps towards pegging out the ground from which such research questions can be generated and explored.

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