



TUIJA KOIVUNEN

## Gender in Call Centre Work



ACADEMIC DISSERTATION

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Tuija Koivunen

## Abstract

This study examines gender-related practices in call centre organizations in Finland. It aims to find out, first, what kinds of workplaces the call centres are from the gender perspective. In doing so, the focus is on the contextual matters at large, such as the regional characteristics in terms of local labour force and labour use, the local understanding of work in relation to gender, and gender-related practices on various levels and instances of the call centres. Second, the study identifies the ways in which gender is practised in customer service work in the call centres by focusing on the interaction between the employees and the customers. This interaction is loaded with implicitly or explicitly expressed expectations of gender-related practices. Third, the study is interested in the ways in which gender is practised among the workers, between the management and the workers, and among the managers in the call centres. The focus is then on the interaction among and between different personnel groups. This interaction may be related to work or be informal by nature but it occurs among colleagues.

The theoretical framework of this study is twofold. On the one hand, the study is embedded in the existing call centre literature, with its diverse research interests. Yet, the majority of the call centre studies do not adopt a gender-sensitive perspective. On the other hand, the theoretical framework is drawn from discussions on gender-related conceptualizations, such as the idea of the gender system which holds that gender follows the principles of difference and hierarchy in society. In addition, the set of gender processes in work organizations are taken into use in analysing gender in call centres. Further, the dual concept of practising gender and gender practices is adopted in order to take a closer look at gender-related practices. Finally, the practices of displaying emotional labour, aesthetic labour and heterosexualized labour, and practising masculinity through homosociality are taken as apt illustrations of the ways in which gender organizes different work-related expectations and preferences.

The empirical analysis is based on ethnographic research material with interviews, observations, digital photos, and documents produced in three Finnish

subcontractor call centres during 2004–2006. The analysis of the ethnographic research material utilized resources of both ethnographic and feminist analyses which together enable a better understanding of the gender-related practices.

The research findings of the study show that the flat organizational hierarchy did not indicate small power differences or better opportunities for women to enter managerial positions in the call centres. On the contrary, women had access to managerial positions among other managers, but if there were only a few managerial positions in the work organizations, they were not open for women. This does not mean that in work organizations with steep hierarchical relations the managerial positions were open for women without a struggle. In the work organizations where women were in the top management, the horizontal gender segregation was still steep. Consequently, the decrease in the hierarchical gender segregation did not indicate a decrease in the horizontal gender segregation in any way. Furthermore, in these call centres men in general were highly valued, appreciated and welcomed as employees. The appreciation of male employees indicates that hierarchization was clearly emerging in practice in the call centres.

The gendered interaction patterns framed the ways in which gender was practised between the call centre workers and their customers. For one thing, some of the employees found that gender made no difference in customer service work. What is more, this study illustrates the numerous ways in which gender was used to explain various, even contradictory, ways of thinking. In many cases, but not always, these contradictory explanations were related to the characteristics of women and men in interaction. The explanations could be considered to reflect gender practices but also to include notable inconsistencies, particularly in regard to women's alleged characteristics. Also, two contradictory interaction patterns were identified, according to which gender was practised in interaction between the workers and the customers. On the one hand, the pattern of homosocial interaction indicates how the workers described the same-gender interaction as more effective and easier for both female and male workers than cross-gender interaction. On the other hand, the pattern of cross-gender interaction between women and men was also described as most efficient in interaction with the customers. Both of these patterns occurred simultaneously in the same work organizations and were stated as being useful in making rapport and profit.

This study indicates that gender had become commodifiable and profitable to sell, and in call centre work it was also embedded in the products and services. This is a process in which gender becomes part of the commodity that is marketed, sold and purchased. In other words, gender becomes an increasingly abstract feature that organizes business activities. However, while commodification of gender enhanced selling products, it also directed the ways in which the workers practised gender. The study also points out that heterosexuality, broadly understood, is present in such a commodity process of gender. The symbolic space of heterosexuality is utilized in modifying the relationship between a customer and an employee.

The study discusses the homosociality of male managers. The mutual relationships of the all-male management formed a site for practising masculinity and homosocial bonding. Homosociality was constructed on male managers' similar social backgrounds and related work histories, differentiating them from women employees.

Finally, emotional labour, aesthetic labour and heterosexualized labour did not play a central role in the work of the call centre employees but stayed more in the background. The employees were expected to display emotional labour and at least occasionally also aesthetic labour with customers. These expectations were somewhat rarely expressed, and, to a certain degree, the employees had emotional autonomy. There were also some instances in which the employees displayed heterosexualized labour with customers. However, this appeared as more employee-driven than organizationally driven behaviour. The research results indicate that no forms of employee control, including those of emotional, aesthetic and heterosexualized labour, are very extensively used in the Finnish call centres.

Keywords: Gender-related practices, women's work, male managers, work organizations, call centres, customer service work, Finland

## Tiivistelmä

### Sukupuoli yhteyskeskustyössä

Tutkimuksessa tarkastellaan sukupuoleen liittyviä käytäntöjä kolmessa suomalaisessa yhteyskeskusorganisaatiossa. Tutkimus keskittyy ensinnäkin siihen, millaisia työpaikkoja yhteyskeskukset ovat sukupuolen näkökulmasta. Tällöin kiinnostuksen kohteena ovat alueelliset ominaisuudet, kuten paikallinen työvoiman saanti ja tarjonta, paikallinen ymmärrys työn ja sukupuolen välisestä suhteesta, sekä sukupuoleen liittyvät käytännöt yhteyskeskusten eri hierarkkisilla tasoilla ja erilaisissa arjen tilanteissa. Toiseksi, tutkimuksessa jäljitetään tapoja, joilla sukupuolta harjoitetaan yhteyskeskusten asiakaspalvelutyössä, työntekijöiden ja asiakkaiden välisessä vuorovaikutuksessa. Vuorovaikutus sisältää usein ääneen lausuttuja tai lausumattomia odotuksia sukupuoleen liittyvistä käytännöistä. Kolmanneksi, tutkimus on kiinnostunut tavoista, joilla sukupuolta harjoitetaan yhteyskeskuksissa työntekijöiden kesken, johdon ja työntekijöiden välillä, sekä johdon kesken. Tällöin keskitytään eri henkilöstöryhmien väliseen ja keskinäiseen vuorovaikutukseen, joka voi liittyä työhön tai olla luonteeltaan työstä riippumatonta.

Tutkimuksen teoreettinen viitekehys muodostuu yhtäältä yhteyskeskuksia käsittelevästä aiemmasta tutkimuksesta. Näiden tutkimusten näkökulmat ja kiinnostuksen kohteet ovat olleet moninaisia, mutta suuri osa niistä ei käsittele sukupuolta. Toisaalta teoreettinen viitekehys muodostuu erilaisista sukupuolen käsitteellistyksistä. Tällaisia ovat sukupuolijärjestelmän idea, jonka mukaan sukupuoli järjestää yhteiskuntaa eron ja hierarkian periaatteiden mukaan. Lisäksi tutkimuksessa on otettu käyttöön käsitteellistys sukupuolistuneista prosesseista työorganisaatioissa. Edeleen, tutkimuksessa hyödynnetään sukupuolen harjoittamisen ja sukupuolistuneiden käytäntöjen kaksoiskäsitettä, mikä mahdollistaa sukupuoleen liittyvien käytäntöjen lähemmän tarkastelun. Myös emotionaalisen työn, esteettisen työn ja heteroseksualisoidun työn tekemisen käsitteet on otettu käyttöön osuvina esimerkkeinä tavoista, joilla sukupuoli järjestää erilaisia työhön liittyviä oletuksia ja odotuksia, kuten myös maskuliinisuuden harjoittaminen homososiaalisuuden kautta.

Tutkimuksen empiirinen analyysi pohjautuu etnografisiin menetelmin tuotettuun aineistoon, joka koostuu haastatteluista, havainnoinneista, digitaalisista kuvista ja erilaisista dokumenteista. Aineisto on tuotettu vuosina 2004–2006 kolmessa suomalaisessa yhteyskeskuksessa, joihin toiset yritykset ja organisaatiot ovat ulkoistaneet erilaisia puhelinpalvelutoimintojaan. Etnografisen aineiston analyysi käyttää hyväkseen sekä feministisen tutkimuksen että etnografisen tutkimuksen resursseja, mikä mahdollistaa syvän ymmärryksen tuottamisen sukupuoleen liittyvistä käytännöistä.

Tutkimuksen tulokset osoittavat, että matala hierarkia organisaatiossa ei tarkoita pienempiä valtaeroja ta naisille parempia mahdollisuuksia päästä johtotehtäviin yhteyskeskuksissa. Päinvastoin, naisilla on pääsy johtoasemiin johtajiksi muiden johtajien joukkoon, mutta jos johtoasemia on työorganisaatiossa tarjolla vain vähän, ne eivät välttämättä ole auki naisille. Horisontaalinen sukupuolen mukainen segregatio on jyrkkää vaikka työorganisaation ylimmässä johdossa on naisia. Niinpä hierarkkisen sukupuolen mukaisen segregatian väheneminen ei välttämättä tarkoita horisontaalisen segregatian vähenemistä. Tarkastelluissa yhteyskeskuksissa miehiä arvostetaan, ja heidät toivotetaan tervetulleiksi työntekijöinä ja kollegoina. Miestyöntekijöiden arvostus viittaa siihen, että hierarkisointi on yksi yhteyskeskuksen sukupuoleen liittyvä käytäntö.

Sukupuolistuneet vuorovaikutuksen tyyliä kuvaavat niitä tapoja, joilla sukupuolta harjoitetaan työntekijöiden ja asiakkaiden välisessä vuorovaikutuksessa. Ensinnäkin, joidenkin työntekijöiden näkemyksen mukaan sukupuolella ei ole merkitystä asiakaspalvelutyössä. Tämän lisäksi tutkimus kuvaa niitä tapoja, joilla sukupuolta käytetään selittämään erilaisia, jopa toisilleen vastakkaisia ajattelutapoja asiakaspalvelutyössä. Usein, mutta ei aina, nämä ristiriitaiset selitykset liittyivät naisten ja miesten erilaisiin ominaispiirteisiin jotka tulevat esiin vuorovaikutustilanteissa. Tällaiset selitykset kuvastavat sukupuolistuneita käytäntöjä ja sisältävän huomattavia epäjohdonmukaisuuksia, erityisesti naisten oletettujen ominaispiirteiden suhteen. Tutkimuksessa nimetään kaksi toisilleen vastakkaista vuorovaikutuksen tapaa, joiden mukaan sukupuolta harjoitetaan työntekijän ja asiakkaan välisessä vuorovaikutuksessa. Yhtäältä homososiaalinen vuorovaikutusmalli osoittaa, kuinka työntekijät kuvaavat samaa sukupuolta olevien henkilöiden välisen vuorovaikutuksen olevan tehokkaampaa ja helpompaa sekä nais- että miestyöntekijöille kuin vuorovaikutus eri sukupuolta olevien henkilöiden



välillä. Toisaalta naisen ja miehen välinen heteroseksuaalinen vuorovaikutusmalli kuvataan myös kaikkein tuottoisimmaksi vuorovaikutuksen tavaksi asiakkassuhteissa. Nämä molemmat vuorovaikutuksen mallit esiintyvät samanaikaisesti samoilla työpaikoilla, ja niiden sanotaan olevan hyödynnettävissä kun halutaan luoda yhteisymmärrys asiakkaan kanssa.

Tutkimuksessa osoitetaan, että sukupuolta tavaraluoteistetaan ja myydään tuottoisasti, kun se yhteyskeskustuksessa upotetaan tuotteiden ja palveluiden sisään. Toisin sanoen sukupuolesta tulee yhä abstraktimpi ominaisuus, joka järjestää liiketoimintaa. Mikäli sukupuolen tavaraluonteistaminen kasvattaa tuotteiden myyntiä, se ohjaa myös niitä tapoja, joilla työntekijät harjoittavat sukupuolta. Laajassa mielessä ymmärretty heteroseksuaalisuus on osa sukupuolen tavaraluonteistamisen prosessia. Tällöin heteroseksuaalisuuden symbolista tilaa hyödynnetään antamalla sen määrittää työntekijän ja asiakkaan välistä suhdetta.

Tutkimuksessa tulee esiin miesjohtajien keskinäinen homososiaalisuus keinona harjoittaa maskuliinisuutta. Homososiaalisuus rakentuu miesjohtajien samankaltaisille sosiaalisille taustoille sekä työhistorioille, ja se erottaa miesjohtajat paitsi muista miehistä, myös naisista.

Lopuksi, emotionaalinen työ, esteettinen työ ja heteroseksualisoitu työ eivät ole merkittävässä roolissa yhteyskeskusten työntekijöiden arjessa. Työntekijöiden kyllä odotetaan tekevän emotionaalista työtä, ja ajoittain myös esteettistä työtä asiakkaiden parissa. Tällaiset odotukset ovat melko harvoin ääneen lausuttuja, ja siten työntekijöillä on ainakin jonkinasteinen emotionaalinen itsenäisyys. Joissakin tilanteissa työntekijät tekevät myös heteroseksualisoitua työtä asiakkaiden kanssa, mikä on lähtöisin pikemminkin työntekijöistä itsestään kuin organisaation toiveista. Tutkimuksen tulokset osoittavat myös, että muutkaan työntekijöiden kontrollin muodot kuin emotionaalinen, esteettinen ja heteroseksualisoitu työ suomalaisissa yhteyskeskuksissa eivät ole erityisen laajamittaisesti käytettyjä.

Avainsanat: Sukupuoleen liittyvät käytännöt, naisten työ, miesjohtajat, työorganisaatiot, yhteyskeskukset, asiakaspalvelutyö

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# 1. Introduction

*Calls began at 10:31 p.m. Numbers started flashing on our common switchboard as we picked up calls one after the other.*

*'Good afternoon, Western Appliances, Victor speaking, how may I help you?' Vroom said. (...)*

*'Yes Ms Paulson, of course we remember you. Happy Thanksgiving, I hope you're roasting a big turkey in our WA100 model oven' Vroom said, reading from a script that reminded us about the American festival of the day.*

*I couldn't hear the customer's side of the conversation, but Ms Paulson was obviously explaining her problem with the oven.*

*'No Ms Paulson, you shouldn't have unscrewed the cover', Vroom said, as politely as possible.*

*'No, really madam. An electric appliance like the WA100 should only be serviced by trained professionals,' Vroom said, reading verbatim from the WA100 service manual.*

*Ms Paulson spoke for another minute. Our strategic bay hardly had a reputation for efficiency, but long calls like these could screw up Vroom's response times.*

*'You see madam, you need to explain to me why you opened the top cover. Then perhaps we'll understand why you got an electric shock...so tell me...yes...oh...really? Vroom continued, taking deep breaths. Patience – the key to becoming a star agent – did not come naturally to him.*

Bhagat, Chetan (2005, 49–50) One Night at the Call Centre

The passage above is from a novel about a young Indian man working in an international call centre. He and other employees work at a helpdesk at nights and receive phone calls from North American consumers who have bought a domestic appliance. Although the story is fictional and full of irony, it insightfully portrays

several significant elements of call centre work. One such element is the location of the call centre in a different country and even on a different continent from its customers, which is part of the globalization of work enabled by sophisticated telephone technology. In other words, information and communication technology makes it possible for call centres to operate wherever the appropriate workforce is available, regardless of how far from the customers they are. Consequently, call centres are part of the global transformation of the international labour markets and the growing outsourcing and offshoring of service jobs.

The passage reveals several ongoing gender-related practices in the interaction between the call centre agent – as the customer service workers in call centres are commonly called – and the customer. Merely the ways in which the agent Vroom addresses himself and the customer already give away certain carefully considered gender-related practices. For example, he introduces himself with a fictitious first name, Victor, and calls the female customer madam or Ms Paulson. Presumably this very small everyday practice based on gender directs the interaction between the two of them. Another practice that can be interpreted as relating to gender is the agent Vroom's assumption that Ms Paulson is roasting a turkey for an American Thanksgiving dinner, which in many households is done by women.

Furthermore, the passage gives a glimpse of how the Indian workers are trained to hide their origin by introducing themselves with non-Indian first names. What the passage does not reveal, however, is that the Indian call centre agents speak perfect American English with the customers as a result of accent training that is part of their preparation for customer service work. As a tool for communication, the telephone allows them to hide their inaudible embodied differences through the use of pseudonyms and an appropriate speaking tone and accent. The delicate task of quickly and efficiently building voice-to-voice interaction and rapport between the customer service agent and the customer, despite their potential differences in terms of nationality, culture, ethnicity, age, and gender, is thus an important element of call centre work.

As the passage demonstrates, the agent Vroom is managing his emotions – for example, displaying politeness and patience while suppressing other emotions such as astonishment – while talking to the customer. This is an important part of call centre agents' work and part of a process called feminization of work. In general, feminization of work refers to the increase in the number of service sector jobs and,

in particular, to the importance of doing these jobs in a smooth and stylized manner regardless of the gender of the worker. Yet in service situations emotion management is done as a matter of course because customers obviously do not want to deal with grumpy agents, although they themselves are not always agreeable when contacting the agents. However, one of the aims of agents' emotion management is to affect their customers' emotions so that towards the end of the phone call customers would feel good again, no matter how cranky they felt at the beginning of the call. Presumably the customer in the passage, Ms Paulson, was not very pleased when she called because her oven was too small for her turkey and because she had had an electric shock after opening the top cover. Yet the agent Vroom tried to stay calm and polite and to sort things out as well as he could during the call.

Call centre agents do emotion management under high time pressure and demands for efficiency, which also belong to the distinctive elements of call centre work. What enables them to deal quickly with customer needs is technology, through which they are able to retrieve customer account information on their computer screens while the call is being relayed to their headsets. Moreover, one part of the efficiency demands are what are called scripts that call centre agents use when they speak with customers. These scripts are written to include the approved words and expressions as well as the necessary information. In the passage, the agent Vroom mixes reading a script, reading a service manual and talking spontaneously. However, part of his work is to make the words, spontaneous or read from the script, sound genuine to every customer, as if he had never said them to anybody else before. These elements of call centre work portrayed in the passage are also salient to this study.

This study is an investigation into the ways in which gender organizes the actions, deeds and understandings of workers and managers in three call centres. As the passage about the agent Vroom and his customer Ms Paulson demonstrates, there are numerous gender-related practices and gender-based presumptions going on in the interaction between the worker and the customer. Moreover, such gendered practices and presumptions do not concern only the relationship between workers and customers, they can also be found in other instances in work organizations.

The background of this study lies in the growing transfer of customer services into both in-house call centres and independent call centre firms to which other firms outsource their activities. Empirically it deals with the latter type of Finnish call centres whose employees are mostly, but not only, women. The three call centres that form the empirical basis of the study differ from one another in terms of their size, location, labour use, technology use and the content of work. This allows studying the variations of call centre work on a broader basis than just between different types of phone calls and, consequently, the formal and informal sides of the call centres more generally.

### *Call Centres*

Call centres are a large phenomenon consisting of several types of businesses. It could be said that a call centre is any communications platform from which firms deliver or market services and products to customers via remote, real-time contact (Norling 2001, 155). This rather broad definition can be specified by taking into account the two distinct facets of corporate organizational change that can lead to the creation of call centres with the aim of reducing organizational costs. The first one is the process of decentralizing back-office or routine in-house corporate functions to sites away from the corporate core. The second one is the process of outsourcing or contracting out of non-core corporate functions to a third party outside the firm. (Bristow, Munday & Gripaos 2000, 521) To put it simply, a call centre is either an in-house site or an independent firm with outsourced assignments<sup>1</sup>. A call centre communicates with customers most typically with the aid of sophisticated telephone technology. Inbound call centres receive incoming calls from customers and prospective customers, with the goal of providing information, services or technical support. Outbound call centres include a variety of functions, the most common being survey research, fundraising, collections, and telemarketing. (Noronha & D’Cruz 2009, 3) In many call centres, however, there are both inbound and outbound assignments.

Today call centres are a global phenomenon because services in general are typically relocated from the developed countries to the developing low-cost

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<sup>1</sup> Sometimes these independent call centre firms are called shared service centres (Norling 2001, 156).



countries, for example from the US, the UK, Australia and Canada to India. Yet, the location of call centres varies widely in different parts of the world, reflecting diversities in technology and culture as well as the availability of labour force with required skills. Countries like Sweden and Finland rarely offshore call centres to other countries because their official languages are not widely spoken. Instead, in both countries, call centres are located mostly nationally, on the one hand, in the sparsely populated periphery because of its low labour costs, low property prices and favourable taxes. On the other hand, call centres are also concentrated in or near urban areas because they have access to workforce and possibly existing property and they need to stay within an easy reach. (Bristow, Munday & Gripaos 2000; Lorentzon 2004, 205–206; Noronha & D’Cruz 2009, 33)

It has been pointed out that call centres are not a ‘sector’ in their own right, nor are they an ‘industry’ in the commonly accepted sense. Instead, call centres are said to represent particular ways of delivering a range of services involving the use of telephone and computer technologies. However, it has been suggested that it makes sense to talk about call centres as an industry for at least three reasons. First, the call centre community often defines itself as an industry. Second, the labour force requirements of call centres are often the same across the sectors. This means that many, even though not all, call centres share a common labour pool. Last, the organizational templates and technologies used tend to be very similar regardless of the sector. (Belt, Richardson & Webster 2000, 382; Durbin 2007, 228; Taylor & Bain 1999, 2) In this study, several types of call centres are understood as forming a certain kind of business rather than an industry.

The call centre business is a relatively new phenomenon in Finland, although it has its roots in jobs performed by ‘Switchboard Sallies’, the operators who worked a switchboard in the telephone exchanges, by telemarketers of magazine subscriptions and later on by computer technical support. These roots go back a hundred years, to the 1880s when the switchboard operators started in their jobs. The 1970s witnessed the start of the telemarketing of magazine subscriptions, which are probably the oldest products marketed by telephone in Finland. The magazine publishing houses outsourced their subscriptions telemarketing to private persons who worked at their homes. This was preceded by an adequate distribution of private telephones and automated telephone traffic. Accordingly, in the 1970s, half of the Finnish households had a telephone and 90 per cent of the telephone traffic was automated.

The digitalization of the telephone exchanges started in late 1970s and was completed in 1996, which was a prerequisite for modern call centre operations. (Koivunen 2007; Roos 2003a; Roos 2003b; Saloniemi 1988; Willa & Uusitupa 1998, 28–30)

According to the interviews of managers and experts in the call centre business in Finland<sup>2</sup>, the first in-house call centres were established in the early 1980s, although similar tasks and assignments had existed even earlier. Banks and insurance companies set up in-house telesales and support units first locally and later on nationwide. The first independent call centres doing outsourced assignments are also from the early 1980s and the earliest helpdesks from the mid-1980s. At the time, however, call centres did not have the possibility to use computer and telephone-based technologies that today enable the distribution of incoming calls and allocation of outgoing calls. In fact, there are still call centres in Finland that do not apply such technology, although, in general, the automatic call distribution (ACD) systems were implemented in the call centres around the mid-1990s.

The relatively short history of the call centre business in Finland is illustrated by the fact that the first collective labour agreement of call centre employees was implemented as late as in 2001. Another fact is that there is no established term in Finnish denoting call centre or contact centre but several co-existing terms, such as ‘puhelinpalvelukeskus’, ‘palvelukeskus’ and ‘yhteyskeskus’. Some even use the English term ‘call centre’ when speaking in the Finnish language. What is more, due to the challenge of compiling statistics on the business, there is a lack of reliable statistics on the number of call centres in Finland and their employees. However, it has been estimated that in 2005, there were about 50,000–60,000 employees working in various tasks in call centres (TV News, TV1, 14 January 2005). Another estimate shows that in 2008 call centres had about 100,000 employees (Aamulehti 2008). In comparison, in 2004 there were about 19,000 employees working as post office and bank clerks in Finland (Työssäkäyntitilasto 2004). All in all, in the light of these estimates, it seems that the call centre business in Finland is quite large and notable in terms of its capacity to employ people.

In general, consumer customers deal with call centres when they contact a call centre themselves or because they are on the receiving end of the phone. The basic

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<sup>2</sup> I conducted eight expert interviews. For more details about the interviews and the ethnographic data, see the Appendix.

customer service tasks in a call centre consist, for example, of taking in telephone orders, helpdesk tasks, selling and processing advertisements, telemarketing, dealing with overdue payment reminders, conducting telephone surveys and interviews, and taking care of customer appointments, as well as answering and brokering services (TES 2003–2005). In Finland, however, the call centre business is rather unknown and invisible to customers, although this situation is slowly changing. Call centre work is literally invisible because customers usually do not visit call centre offices and cannot see customer service agents working there. Moreover, they do not necessarily realize that they are talking with call centre agents instead of the employees of the firm they do business with. This kind of ‘hiding’ of the call centre operation is usually done deliberately at the request of the corporate client when the assignment is outsourced to an external call centre. In other words, outsourced customer service is not seen as a selling point in Finland, although it may offer better quality service.

Even today call centre work is considered to be a new form of service work which leads the way to more general changes in work life. Moreover, call centres are an important and growing form of front-line service work: that is, jobs involving interaction between customer service agents and customers. Thus, call centre work could be approached as one vanguard of the constantly changing work life, indicating both stability and changeableness of gender-related practices at work.

### ***Call Centre Work in the Finnish Labour Market***

It could be said that the call centre business does not have an established position in the Finnish labour market in terms of labour use. Instead, call centres employ workers that have, for example, been downsized from their jobs in other fields of business. What is more, call centre employees usually drift to the business by accident, often because they cannot find a job to match their education or their previous work experience. Job seekers do not seek their way to call centres, first, because they may not even know that the whole business exists and employs a great number of people and, second, because call centre work and especially magazine subscription telemarketing are not among the most attractive jobs but usually among the last and least wanted options (Koivunen 2006).

High labour costs and difficulties in recruiting employees have resulted in the offshoring of mainly in-house call centres to Estonia, although not to a large extent. Many Estonians speak Finnish fluently but the service culture in Estonia is somewhat different from that in Finland and, as a result of negative customer feedback, some of the firms have drawn their call centres back to Finland. Further, immigrants in general are rarely considered to be potential call centre workers, although they form a large labour force potential. Call centres are not willing to employ immigrants speaking with a foreign accent because customer response to it is not necessarily good.

In Finland, as in many other countries, customer service jobs in general and the jobs in the call centres in particular are largely considered women's work (Korvajärvi 2004a, 297; Savola 2000, 21) because, in practice, call centre work is largely done by women and to a lesser extent by men. In general, women and men choose, or are selected into, jobs and occupations that are quantitatively dominant to their gender. It is rather seldom that employees change into occupations not quantitatively dominant to their gender or even into occupations with equal numbers of women and men. In other words, jobs and occupations are gender segregated, and what is characteristic of gender segregation is that it is simultaneously stable and changing. What is stable are the labour-market-level facts indicating that occupations can be divided into jobs and occupations in which women work and into jobs and occupations in which men work. What changes, then, is that within these apparently steady basic structures, the gender typing of individual jobs and occupations can become more female or male concentrated. In Finnish work life, it is culturally more acceptable for a woman to step into a male area than vice versa. (Kolehmainen 1999, 8–9; Napari 2005; Segregation and the gender wage gap 2008, 15–32) Therefore, it is significant that there are also male agents working in call centres. These men, although they are not so many, are working in jobs which are generally understood as women's work and mostly not highly valued.

In Finland, a large number of the female employees in call centres have full-time and permanent job contracts, and they also have vocational education. Despite this, some call centres rely more on short-term employees and, for example, recruit students. Accordingly, a job in a call centre is often seen as a chance, for instance, to get through student days or spells of unemployment. However, call centres at large are described as representing '*a new form of work in which women are employed*

*under a new set of conditions, including flatter organizational structures, broader spans of control which lead to limited career progression, and new forms of spatial and temporal flexibility*' (Durbin 2007, 228). In other words, call centre work is characterized as precarious, low-paid and unskilled work, mostly done by women (e.g. Belt 2002; Buchanan & Koch-Schulte 2000; Deery & Kinnie 2002, 4; Holtgrewe 2007). In the description above, it is mainly the notion of gender segregation of call centre work that applies to Finland. This is probably related to some of the special features of the Finnish labour market.

To present a frame for the call centre business and a national context for call centre operations, I briefly describe a few characteristics of the Finnish labour market. To begin with, Finnish society is built on both women's and men's equal moral obligation to work. High female labour market participation and full-time work are a norm also for women (Lehto & Sutela 2009, 9; Women and Men in Finland 2009, 39). Moreover, women and men work almost equally long hours, to the extent that even working overtime is as typical of women as it is of men. (Lehto & Sutela 2009; 94–95) In addition, part-time work is relatively rare in Finland by international comparison. Although part-time employment has constantly increased since the 1990s, women's part-time work is still comparatively rare. Finland also differs from the other EU countries in that women's part-time employment is not closely linked with taking care of children. Instead, part-time work is often linked with studying, or it follows from not having full-time work. (Lehto & Sutela 2009; 28; Savola 2000, 68; Women and Men in Finland 2009, 45–46) However, part-time work could also be seen as an opportunity to combine two jobs or studies with work but there are not that many jobs that allow working part time. Call centres typically offer an option to have either part-time or full-time work according to the employee's choice.

The Finnish labour market offers relatively well-educated labour force also for call centres. In international comparisons Finland is distinguished by its greater proportion of educated women than educated men. The standard of the education of male wage earners has risen strongly, but the rise in women's educational level has risen even a bit faster. Finland is one of the countries in which the proportion of those who have completed secondary education is greater among the women of working age than among the men of working age. Moreover, women are in general more educated than men in every age group. This could be explained with the

relatively long history of similar educational standards of Finnish women and men. (Lehto 1999a, 108, 114; Lehto & Sutela 2009, 14–16)

Despite the fact that Finnish female wage and salary earners are better educated than their male counterparts, there is still a 20 per cent difference in favour of men in the average pay. The inferiority of women's average pay compared to that of men is evident on all educational levels. However, women with good educational qualifications in well-remunerated occupations lag behind their male colleagues the most in terms of wages endowed with similar characteristics. (Lehto 1999b, 122; Vartiainen 2002; Women and Men in Finland 2009, 64) At the same time, Finnish women are more unionized than men. The unionization rate among women was 77 per cent in 2008 while the rate among men was about 69 per cent. (Lehto & Sutela 2009; 24–25)

It can be foreseen that in the near future the labour market will be in the threshold of major changes because of the age distribution of the population in Finland. It has been estimated that there will be a labour shortage within a few years, induced by the number of retiring employees. (Pehkonen 2009) Further, it has been said that the lack of suitable labour force has already for a long time been the main obstacle to the growth of the call centre business (Aamulehti 2008). However, these discussions about the labour shortage were suddenly replaced with concern about growing unemployment (Pehkonen 2009) and, in the late 2000s, the global economic recession occurred and downsizings began. In any case, the upcoming changes in the quantity of available labour force may probably redefine the position of the call centre business in the labour markets. Accordingly, call centres need new measures in order to secure the availability of sufficient number of employees.

### ***Structure of the Book***

This book is organized as follows. After Introduction, Chapter 2 examines in detail the points of departure of the study that are derived from previous empirical research and theoretical conceptualizations. The main theoretical approaches of the study are the gender system, gender-related practices in work organizations and the ways in which gender has been conceptualized for analysis. I rely on Yvonne Hirdman's conceptualization of the gender system, that is, the logic in which gender is put into use to organize society. In addition, I build this study on Joan Acker's

and Raewyn Connell's sets of gendered processes, which suggest to researchers the locations of sociological abstraction in which gender-based practices could be identified in work organizations. Furthermore, the focal conceptualizations of this study include gender practices and practising gender, as well as emotion management, aesthetic appearance and heterosexualization in the call centres. Finally, leaning on the preceding literature, I present the research questions of the study.

In Chapter 3, I discuss the process of conducting the fieldwork and the characteristics of the research material produced. The practicalities of the fieldwork and the quantity of the research material are described more thoroughly in the Appendix. This study relies on the traditions of the ethnographic approach and interviewing participants, which are also introduced and discussed. In the last part of the chapter, I address the ethical dilemmas and decisions that emerged during the course of the research process. Consequently, in Chapter 3, I lay the methodical and methodological foundations of the study.

In Chapter 4, I present the three case study organizations I have examined, each in turn in order to look at gender-related practices and the ways in which gender was utilized in these three call centres. Although there are certain similarities between the call centres and therefore common themes to discuss, the structure and content of the three empirical sections are somewhat different. The actual gender-related practices vary between each case study organization, although gender seems to organize these practices in rather unvarying ways. The empirical results of the study are summed up at the end of this chapter.

Finally, in Chapter 5, I discuss the empirical conclusions and contributions of the study. It also includes a summary and wider discussion of the gender-based practices of gender segregation, gendered interaction patterns, commodification of gender, male managers' homosociality, emotional labour, aesthetic labour and heterosexualized labour, which permeate the whole book. In addition, the theoretical and methodological contributions of the study are evaluated and reflected on. I also make some suggestions for future feminist research on the basis of the contributions of the study.

## 2. Previous Research and Theoretical Approaches

The purpose of this chapter is to present the theoretical starting points of the study. First, I review previous call centre research in general and from the gender perspective in particular. Second, I describe the ways in which gender has been studied in work organizations. I rely especially on Yvonne Hirdman's (1990) conceptualization of gender system, and Joan Acker's and Raewyn Connell's analyses of gender processes in work organizations. The conceptualizations of both Acker and Connell provide analytical tools for empirical research concerning gender, although they have not been previously utilized in research relating to call centres. Third, I present and discuss gender practices in work organizations at large and, more specifically, emotional labour, aesthetic labour and heterosexualized labour, which are conceptualizations that offer examples of gender-related practices in service work. Finally, at the end of the section, I outline the research questions that have guided this study from its inception to the present.

The discussions and conceptualizations derived from previous empirical research and presented in this chapter outline the theoretical frame of the study, which in turn lays the background for the research questions. In addition, the theoretical frame provides conceptualizations that are used as analytical tools. Furthermore, it positions this study in the fields of call centre research, work and organization research, and feminist research. These three lines of research intertwine in this study and will be discussed in detail below. Notably, in the majority of research concerning work, organizations and call centres, gender has not been taken under analysis. As a result, there are very few studies with which the gender-focused aspects of this study can be juxtaposed.



## 2.1 Call Centre Research

In this section, I briefly review earlier call centre research in general, and then take a closer look at call centre research that includes the gender perspective. From the late 1990s onwards, call centres have been gaining increasing academic attention in many countries. Despite that, and the fact that the call centre business is a rapidly expanding form of service sector employment, it has not been largely explored in sociology, organizational studies or gender studies in Finland. There exists, however, a considerable body of scientific literature on call centres as a working environment from many other countries, the UK in particular. In the UK, the call centre business is a significant employer, directly providing an estimate of as many as 800,000 jobs in the country (Peck & Cabras 2009, 176–178). Thus, the large attention the call centre business has gained in the UK is quite understandable.

### *Themes in Call Centre Research*

The literature on call centres could be arranged around the following four main themes suggested by Stephen Deery and Nicholas Kinnie (2002):

- the characteristics and organizational features of call centre work,
- the choices and strategies that are available to manage the work,
- the effects of this form of work on employees, and
- the responses and reactions of staff to their work experiences.

Although these themes do not include the gender perspective, they are adequate for the purposes of this study and thus form the basis for this section. In what follows, I shortly review these lines of research together with the methodological choices made in call centre research.

The first research theme that focuses on the characteristics and organizational features of call centre work is broad and heterogeneous. Such research has especially concentrated on the features of jobs in call centres, which could, on the one hand, be characterized as dead end jobs with low status, poor pay and few career prospects. On the other hand, call centres offer challenging and interesting jobs, as well as value and acknowledge their workers' skills. The difference between these research foci can be drawn from two simultaneous objectives of call centre operations, which are cost-efficiency and customer orientation. Both of these

objectives frame call centre workers' dealings with customers. The former highlights standardization of work procedures and the latter emphasizes the quality of customer interaction and customer needs.

A salient feature in call centre jobs is direct and real-time interaction with customers, called interactive service work (Leidner 1991, 155). What distinguishes call centre work from many other types of service work is that in call centres interaction between workers and customers is mediated by technology. The interactional nature of the work has been taken into consideration in research. Moreover, call centre customers are seen to be a third party in what is called a triangular relationship between employees, management and customers (Taylor & Bain 2005, 263). Customers' spontaneous, informal commentaries are included in research and analysed in order to consider the role of the customers in the employment relationship (Bolton & Houlihan 2005).

Another characteristic of call centre work is its mobility and, consequently, the global nature of the work. Therefore, a number of studies have concentrated on the location of the call centre companies. For example, offshoring call centre services from the UK to India is not unproblematic because of the cultural and linguistic differences between India and the UK and because of the neo-imperialistic and even racist practices that Indian workers are subjected to (Mirchandani 2008; Noronha & D'Cruz 2009, 33; Taylor & Bain 2005). However, the increase in offshoring to India has been said to provide the country with hitherto unknown opportunities for economic and social prosperity, security and freedom (Noronha & D'Cruz 2009, 33).

Relevant to call centre operations is also its location within the country, that is, in a particular region. It has been suggested that there are five overall factors that have an effect on the location of a call centre in a specific region (Moberg et al. 2004; Stoltz 2004, 38–39). To start with, *market existence and access* concern the existence and geographical location of a sales market in relation to a specific call centre establishment. To a certain extent, call centres operate independently of the local market, as their products and services can relatively easily and quickly be transported over distances at a low cost. In other words, a local sales market is not a prerequisite for call centres as it is for such service businesses as hairdressers, restaurants and repair shops. In fact, the distribution of call centres is more global

than local, as the example of offshoring call centres from the UK to India demonstrates (Noronha & D’Cruz 2009, Taylor & Bain 2005).

Other factors affecting the location of the call centre are the *considerations related to communications and organization*, which deal with possibilities of changing organizational structures by relocating or outsourcing business activities. This change in organizational structures can be implemented by developing communication infrastructure for both physical and information based transportation. For instance, relocating a call centre into a rural area requires working systems of computer and telecommunication technology, which all rural areas do not necessarily offer. In addition, *business environment and community related issues* in a region involve many different aspects, such as demographical matters which indicate whether or not a region has labour force to offer. What is more, aspects of industrial structure, local business climate and political support, tradition and predecessors, support services, and education and training programmes are vital to firms. Respectively, the living environment, such as childcare, reasonable commuting time and commuting expenses are necessary concerns for potential employees. Also, *resource availability*, such as the premises, equipment, financial resources and availability of competent workforce evidently have an impact on call centre location. Finally, *entrepreneurship* concerns individual initiatives taken by people who work in call centres, are on their way to start up call centre activities, or people from local authorities, those called social entrepreneurs. (Moberg et al. 2004; Stoltz 2004, 38–39) This outline provides an extensive picture of the factors in the background of call centre location and relocation even though it is not always possible to capture these factors empirically.

This line of research concerning the characteristics and organizational features of call centre work has usually emphasised implementing qualitative methods, or combining qualitative and quantitative methods. This has enabled researchers to consider the various elements of call centre work. Thus, a common methodological choice in call centre studies is to conduct qualitative case studies on one or several work organizations or on several countries (e.g. Korczynski et al. 2000; Korczynski 2003), which usually involves interviews and observations (e.g. Korvajärvi 1999; Mulholland 2004; Redman & Mathews 2002) that are sometimes supplemented with company documentation (e.g. Bain & Taylor 2000). Moreover, it has been argued that the ethnographic approach, which includes verifying the behaviour reported in

interviews through detailed non-participant observation, is the best available means to analyse practices occurring in the relationship between the worker and the customer (Taylor 1998, 97).

The second thematic line of research identified by Deery and Kinnie (2002) deals with the choices and strategies that are available to manage call centre work. Research that has adopted this approach focuses especially on two contrasting models of managing call centre work (also Frenkel et al. 1998). On the one hand, it emphasizes the constraining nature of the settings of call centre work (e.g. Fernie & Metcalf 1998; Kinnie, Hutchinson & Purcell 2000; Taylor & Bain 2001) and associates the forms of control used, such as measuring, monitoring and surveillance of workers and their performance, with repetitive, routinized and Taylorized work (Taylor & Bain 2001). On the other hand, it also provides a more positive picture of call centre work by emphasizing its empowering side (e.g. Belt, Richardson & Webster 2000; Frenkel et al. 1998; Korvajärvi 2004b). Although these two models are overlapping, it seems that earlier research has placed more emphasis on the first, more restricting image of call centre work.

In research exploring the constraining nature of call centre work, call centre management has been observed to use spatial options for the purpose of supervision, although computers have made electronic supervision possible and also invisible. Sue Fernie and David Metcalf (1998, 2), for instance, have argued that '*the tyranny of the assembly line*' in Ford's car factory in the 1930s was but a Sunday school picnic compared with the control that management can exercise over workforce by using integrated computer and telephone technology. They have referred to an advertising brochure produced for a popular call centre software package, entitled '*Total Control Made Easy.*' At the same time, call centres are workplaces whose existence is simply impossible without telephone technology, and they often rely on sophisticated technological applications which integrate telephone to computer technology. Accordingly, it is worthwhile to note, as have Peter Bain and Phil Taylor (2000), that it is technological determinism to believe that complete managerial control inevitably occurs only because the software claims to be able to perform miracles of monitoring. Neither surveillance nor control mechanisms are, then, ends in themselves but consequences of the process of perpetual benchmarking through which call centres assess their performance and ability to compete and make profit.

It has been shown that call centre agents use different tactics with their productivity and quality statistics and how they produce themselves as subjects. Furthermore, call centre management convince workers to orient to statistics as an image of one's self; and to view how the self is portrayed in the data concerning their performance. (Winiecki 2007; also Winiecki & Wigman 2007) On the personal and social levels, the practices of resistance, such as misbehaviour or playing the system, reflect a channelling of stress caused by the constant pressure to achieve shifting targets (Houlihan 2000). Maeve Houlihan (2001) also argues that as supervisors of agents, middle managers in call centres are both managers and themselves managed.

The recruitment and hiring processes of new employees have also gained attention in the call centre literature. Some findings suggest that the recruitment process is less about securing a job-seeker who fits into a particular job than about legitimizing the selection of candidates who are more likely to fit into the existing organizational culture, or, even more specifically, the organizational sub-culture that constitutes the in-house call centre (Brannan & Hawkins 2007). Interestingly, George Callaghan and Paul Thompson (2002) have asked why call centres spend their resources on systematic selection and training of agents for routine jobs with modest pay and a flat promotion structure. Further, they wonder about the practice to spot and recruit '*personalities*' and '*naturals*', while the call centre appears to distrust their own processes or judgements about recruits in that the new agents are trained to act in a certain way, to follow scripts and techniques of conversational control.

Within research concentrating on managing call centre work, those research tools have been put into use that enable researchers to focus on the fluid processes that are going on in call centres. In other words, qualitative methods have helped researchers both to explore processes that are hidden in more quantitative analyses and to develop conceptualizations that can aid further research (e.g. Callaghan & Thompson 2002). Moreover, there are several studies which have used ethnographical ideas about doing research and employed either participant (e.g. Brannan 2005; Houlihan 2000; 2001) or non-participant (e.g. Mulholland 2002; 2004) ethnographic research techniques.

The third theme that can be identified in the call centre literature deals with the effects of this form of work on employees. Such research has taken into focus the

ways in which employees manage their emotions and express their feelings towards customers. This managing of one's own and others' feelings is called emotional labour (Hochschild 1983/2003). It has been said that emotions have developed into something of a sub-discipline in the study of work and organizations (Fineman 2000, 1), and, consequently, studying emotional labour is an extensive theme in call centre research. Moreover, the autonomy and scripting of customer interaction have been taken into consideration more broadly in research, as well as the requirement of social skills in call centre work.

A large number of studies concerning emotional labour in call centres have focused on managerial control of performing emotions (e.g. Callaghan & Thompson 2002; Taylor 1998; Taylor & Bain 1999) and on gendered managerial expectations about performing emotional labour (e.g. Belt, Richardson & Webster 2002; Taylor & Tyler 2000). Also, the development of the concept of emotional labour has emphasized the informal and collective side of coping with distress caused by irate and abusive customers in call centres (Korczynski 2003). In several studies, emotional labour is considered to be a gendered skill (Belt, Richardson & Webster 2000, 375; Korvajärvi 1999), which is embodied and includes conveying '*the smile and welcome*' over the telephone (Belt, Richardson & Webster 2002, 25; Koivunen 2006). Moreover, studies of emotional labour indicate that emotional labour as such is not the cause of stress or emotional exhaustion (e.g. Holman, Chissick & Totterdell 2002; Korvajärvi 1999; Lewig & Dollard, 2003). Although stress and emotional exhaustion are topics which go beyond the scope of this study, I will return to the general theme of emotional labour later in this chapter.

In studies of the effects of call centre work on employees, different research methods have been employed, depending on the general approach of the study. When the focus has been more on describing the phenomenon of emotional labour, various qualitative methods have been used (e.g. Belt, Richardson & Webster 2000; Korvajärvi 1999). In contrast, when the aim has been to examine the relationship between emotional labour and its potential consequences on workers, more quantitative methods of analysis have been put into use (e.g. Holman, Chissick & Totterdell 2002; Lewig & Dollard, 2003).

Finally, the responses and reactions of call centre employees to their work experiences have been studied extensively. Research concentrating on call centre employees' well-being, turnover and absenteeism, emotional exhaustion and other

stressors is frequent. In general, customer service agents do not have much control over their own jobs, and the jobs lack complexity and variety (Grebner et al. 2003). Yet it has been suggested that call centre jobs are no more stressful with regard to job stressors than other jobs in the service sector and human services, or manufacturing and administrative work (Zapf et al. 2003). It seems that performance monitoring of call centre employees has both positive and negative impact on their well-being. The intensity of monitoring strongly affects emotional exhaustion and anxiety, and the perceived intensity of monitoring accounts for its negative effects (Holman, Chissick & Totterdell 2002). In contrast, when workers achieve work-related goals important to themselves, they feel better, which increases their affective well-being (Harris, Daniels & Briner 2003).

The emotional demands of call centre work do not directly lead to emotional exhaustion but do so through their relationship with emotional dissonance. The length of service is positively correlated with emotional exhaustion. (Lewig & Dollard 2003) It has been argued that in order to reduce or prevent the exhaustion of call centre employees and the risk of repetitive strain injury and, consequently, absenteeism, specific job demands, such as work overload, emotional demands, changes in tasks, and computer problems should be reduced or optimized. In addition, in order to increase the involvement of employees and lower the employee turnover, the availability of such job resources as social support, supervisory coaching and help to solve problems, as well as opportunities to have breaks and performance feedback, should be considered. (Bakker, Demerouti & Schaufeli 2003) One should keep in mind, however, that for call centre employees the availability of such job resources is presumably somewhat different in Finland than for example in the UK, where the demands for efficiency are much higher.

The empirical research focusing on the responses and reactions of workers to their work experiences is mostly, but not only, based on quantitative data and analysis methods. A common method of gathering data is to conduct a survey which may or may not also include open-ended questions (e.g. Bakker, Demerouti & Schaufeli 2003; Grebner et al. 2003; Holman, Chissick & Totterdell 2002; Lewig & Dollard 2003), although the research designs are various.

This study follows Deery and Kinnie's (2002) first theme, namely the characteristics and organizational features of call centre work, but also has points of resemblance with their second and third themes. I emphasize here the positive sides

of managing call centre work, although I also take the constraining side of call centre work under scrutiny. In addition, I look at emotional labour in telemarketing and customer service work. All these themes are discussed from the perspective of gender, the most salient theme in the study.

When compared to the literature on call centres, one central organizational feature in this study is the outsourcing of work assignments. It is an aspect rarely discussed in call centre research which has focused more on in-house call centres than on subcontractor call centres. This could be caused, for example, by the fact that there are more in-house call centres in the UK (Bristow, Munday & Gripaios 2000, 522). In this respect, this study is an exception in the literature: it intentionally focuses on subcontractor call centres and includes corporate customers' demands and expectations in the analysis. Consequently, in earlier studies, most work assignments under scrutiny have been inbound calls, while in the study at hand outbound calls and telemarketing are clearly more common than inbound calls. It seems that firms in Finland outsource their outbound assignments to call centres more actively than their inbound activities.

What appears to be lacking in the call centre literature, are relations and linkages to other research on work life at large, and especially on service work. More to the point, call centre research has become such a specific area of research that it does not engage in discussions with other fields of research. Accordingly, it has been argued that *'it is now widely acknowledged that, despite similarities and continuities, the call centre can be distinguished from other forms of service and clerical work, and that the labour process is **the** feature which marks the call centre out as different'* (Taylor & Bain 2005, 263; emphasis original). Thus, numerous call centre researchers consider the labour process in call centres so specific that it forms its own field of research, although emotional labour, for example, connects call centre work to many other forms of service work. Very few discussions exist between call centre research and other research of service work and work organizations, and particularly call centre research taking gender into consideration. Hence, my objective here is to bring research on call centre work and research on other forms of service work closer to each other than earlier research has done.

In Finland, call centres have not aroused much interest among researchers. Nevertheless, there are a few researchers or research groups that have paid attention to them. For example, call centre agents have been studied as occupational voice



users in research concerning voice symptoms (Lehto et al. 2005). In addition, there is a group of Swedish and Finnish researchers who have written about call centre locations in rural regions of Sweden and Finland (Moberg et al. 2004). Another research group has studied Finnish call centres in the banking sector, aiming to examine the implementation of new technology, technical difficulties, and intensive use of information technology in the in-house call centres (Ristimäki, Leino & Huuhtanen 2003; Leino, Ristimäki & Huuhtanen 2003). Moreover, it has been suggested that the earlier findings according to which call centre work is highly controlled, Taylorized office work also apply to Finland (Mustosmäki & Anttila, forthcoming 2012). Finnish call centres have been examined most extensively by Päivi Korvajärvi, who has also included discussions of gender practices in her research concerning various aspects of call centre work (1998; 1999; 2002b; 2004a; 2004b; 2004c; 2009) and whose work this study follows in many respects.

### ***Gender in Call Centre Research***

In reviewing earlier research on call centre work that takes gender into consideration, it can be noted that the perspective of the research changes slightly. As a generalization, it could be said that gender has been understood especially as a characteristic pertaining to women, and emphasis has been placed on the difference between women and men or on women's particularities. Gender-sensitive research deals, for example, with gender segregation of jobs and work tasks, personality traits and skills required, occupational structure and women's career opportunities, normative heterosexuality at work, and female-majority work communities and relations with technology. These discussions concern women more often than men, which is, of course, due to the fact that more women than men work in call centres. Yet, this line of research suggests that, unlike women, men are understood as generic employees without gender.

Call centres could be regarded as female-majority work environments, although their employees are seldom exclusively women. There are women's tasks in both customer service and supervisory positions that are related to concrete work arrangements, communication skills, human resources, and the creation and maintenance of the social collective of work. Instead, men make up the bulk of the workforce in call centre jobs related to technical support and in high posts in the

hierarchy of work organizations. (Belt, Richardson & Webster 2002, 25–26; Korvajärvi 2002b, 111) Based on this, it could be said that gender segregation in call centres to a great extent follows the larger pattern of gender segregation.

It has been found that call centres in the UK offer career opportunities for women and that women are well represented in supervisory and managerial positions in them in comparison to other industries. However, it has been noted that career progression for most women halts at the supervisory level and argued that call centres represent little more than female job ‘ghettos.’ This is a very pessimistic image of women’s career progress in the UK call centres, and, accordingly, it seems that career opportunities are not the only downside of call centre work for both female and male employees. (Belt, Richardson & Webster 2000; Belt 2002)

Several studies have reported on the expectancy of displaying heterosexuality in call centre work. Heterosexuality is then – and throughout this study – understood in a broad sense, not as sex behaviour. It is understood as an institution in which heterosexuality includes nonsexual elements implicated in ordering wider gender relations and being ordered by them. In other words, people behave and are expected to behave in ways which bring heterosexuality up as a norm and treat other sexualities as marginal or nonexistent. (Jackson 2005) For example, in Matthew Brannan’s (2005) study, both male and female agents in one UK call centre were required to deploy their sexuality, as he calls it, in interaction with customers. However, Brannan points out that heterosexuality was always privileged in this sexuality that pervades interactions with customers. Quite similarly, in another study, some of the female employees interviewed were clearly aware of the fact that they sometimes deliberately enacted conventional gender stereotypes at work, consciously using their femininity to calm down angry customers, or even to persuade male customers to buy products (Belt, Richardson & Webster 2002). Accordingly, it has been noted that flirtation and flattery of customers are part of the skills repertoire required of both female and male agents in the course of answering calls (Mulholland 2002, 297).

The research results vary slightly depending on the country in which they are produced. Information about the gender breakdown of the labour force of a Canadian call centre was produced by Ruth Buchanan and Sarah Koch-Schulte (2000), who found that call centre employees are mostly women and young people who are already marginalized in the labour markets. Buchanan and Koch-Schulte

have also noted that occupational segregation in call centres was highly gendered, which consequently suggests that gender disparities in income exist in favour of men. Moreover, they found that gendered stereotypes and assumptions are embedded within and play a role in structuring the interaction between workers and customers. Especially female workers mentioned that heterosexualizing comments and flirtation were commonly heard in their line of work, whereas men were described as more authoritative or aggressive than women and therefore more effective employees. However, these findings cannot be directly linked to Finland, although parallel aspects have also been found here (e.g. Korvajärvi 2004a, 301).

It has been found that in Finnish white-collar organizations, there are several practices and processes that conceal gender at work. Thus, in many cases, gender is not expressed explicitly but implicitly, for example in a feeling of a pleasant social community of work where women support one another in their everyday call centre work (Korvajärvi 2002b). Correspondingly, in German call centres, gender does not seem to have relevance, especially in banks, which are the most strategically ambitious industry using call centres (Holtgrewe 2007).

What is more, Päivi Korvajärvi (2004b) shows that female employees experience enjoyment and feelings of pleasure when using information and communication technology. She has found that women's technological pleasure at the workplace is not directly connected to their position in the work organization. Instead, women enjoy their jobs even though they have low pay and low rank in organizational hierarchies. Technological pleasure does not require a good position or career prospects in the organizational hierarchy. Instead, the experiences of pleasure come from other sources: technology might provide a permanent job contract, guarantee future prospects, and offer a challenge of taking part in a new development. Furthermore, according to Korvajärvi, women are seen as users of technology but it is men who are called to help whenever technology malfunctions. Thus, in technological issues, men are considered experts in the field. (Korvajärvi 2002b, 10; Korvajärvi 2004b) I assume that, in addition to other sources of pleasure, such as relationships with co-workers, technological pleasure might strengthen women's commitment to work and give them a sense of accomplishment.

These findings sketch a frame of gender constituted in segregation, interaction, heterosexualization, and also in relation to technology, in call centre research. What has also attracted interest in earlier studies, although to a lesser extent, is the

comprehensive understanding of the mundane practices based on and organized by gender and of the common ways of thinking about gender in call centre organizations. As any work organization, call centres are not working environments that are gender-neutral, even though previous studies have not all paid attention to this aspect. Moreover, the emphasis on the UK (also on Australia and Canada) in these studies draws a somewhat unvarying picture of call centre companies and call centre work in general. Therefore, call centre research conducted in smaller countries such as Finland is needed in order to provide a more multifaceted picture of the business. Moreover, the analysis of gender needs to be more detailed in the sense that it should take into consideration the differences within women and men, instead of treating them each as a homogeneous group.

## 2.2 Theoretical Approaches to Gender in Work

In the following I present the theoretical considerations that facilitate understanding the aim of this study, which is to explore the ways in which gender organizes the employees' activity in call centres. At the same time, these theoretical considerations provide adequate conceptualizations for formulating the research questions on the basis of the general aim of the study. Since the most salient starting point of this study is to analyse gender, the theoretical tools are also drawn from the researchers whose work is sensitive to gender. First, Yvonne Hirdman's (1990) work offers a wide theoretical frame, according to which gender follows certain principles in society. Moreover, in order to focus on gender in particular settings, that is, in work organizations, I employ Joan Acker's (1990; 1992) and Raewyn Connell's (2005; 2006) sets of distinguishable dimensions of gender processes in work organizations. Finally, I present Patricia Yancey Martin's (2003; 2006) dual concept of gender practice and practising of gender with the example of homosociality.

One option to scrutinize the logic in which gender is organized and continues to organize society is to look at the gender system. The concept of gender system was elaborated by Yvonne Hirdman, who argues that the gender system *'should be understood as a dynamic structure (system), a designation of a 'network' of processes, phenomena, perceptions and expectations, whose interrelations give rise*

*to a kind of pattern effects and regularities.*' (Hirdman 1990, 8) The two main mechanisms in the gender system are segregation (or difference) and hierarchization. Segregation indicates separation between women and men, and between femininity and masculinity, based on the principle of difference. Difference means here that woman or feminine are kept clearly distinct from man and masculine, both ideally and in practice. Women usually have more freedom to enter male arenas and behave like men, while maintaining the difference from women is socially and psychologically more important to men. (Abrahamsson 2002, 553; Hirdman 1990; Rantalaiho et al. 1997, 7) The second mechanism, hierarchization, refers to gender-based order with men at the top. Thus, the principle of hierarchization is that in every instance men and masculine are rated higher than women and feminine, especially with reference to power and prestige. Further, the Man is the basic norm of abstract humanity and, compared with it, woman or feminine are incompetent or deviant. (Abrahamsson 2002, 553; Hirdman 1990; Rantalaiho et al. 1997, 7)

An additional mechanism to difference and hierarchization has been suggested, namely compulsory heterosexuality, a concept which originates in Adrienne Rich's (1980) work. This suggestion leads to a more fundamental question of the constricted view of seeing only two genders, women and men, and expecting only one kind of sexuality. (Rantalaiho et al. 1997, 8) Heterosexuality is called upon to justify many aspects of the gender order and vice versa at work, although employees' sexuality is often defined as private. Still, work organizations are often replete with displays of this 'private' and unspoken heterosexuality, such as wedding rings, pictures of spouses and heterosexual couples, together with a more general heterosexualizing aesthetics which frames bodily appearance and symbolic interaction. Hence, if heterosexuality is taken advantage of in the work organizations, as it sometimes is, it should also be analysed in detail. (Bruni 2006, 304; Gutek 1989; Hearn & Parkin 2001)

In work life, the mechanisms of difference and hierarchization are perceivable, for example, in the phenomena called horizontal and hierarchical (or vertical) gender segregation. Horizontal segregation in the workplace refers to the different distribution of women and men across different occupations, jobs and places of work. Hierarchical gender segregation applies to situations in which women and men share the same place of work but do different jobs on different levels of

organizational hierarchy. According to the principle of hierarchy, men occupy jobs that are in general valued more than jobs occupied by women, and men are more often employed in management positions than women. Respectively, lower-level jobs are filled predominantly by women. (Charles 2003, 268–271; McDowell 1989, 167–169; Padavic & Reskin 2002, 57) This seems to be the case in call centres, too, although women also occupy supervisory and managerial positions. Still, career progression for most women halts at the supervisory level, while men occupy the top positions. (Belt, Richardson & Webster 2000; Belt 2002) Thus, horizontal and hierarchical gender segregation can be perceived particularly in workplaces and work organizations, but also generally in work life.

Status and income inequality between women and men in society is partly created in organizational processes such as gender segregation, which decreases women's earnings in two ways. First, women tend to work in lower-paying jobs more often than men, who in turn work in higher-paying ones more often than women. Second, there are occupations considered predominantly female in which the pay of both female and male employees tends to be lower than the pay in occupations considered predominantly male. The wage gap between women and men is rather persistent. From the earliest records of paid work, which date back to the fourteenth century, employers have paid men more than women. (Julkunen 2009, 66–67; McDowell 1989, 168–169; Padavic & Reskin 2002, 58, 121) Furthermore, gender segregation is related to the way in which responsibilities at home are organized because different occupations, jobs and places of work assume employees have different kinds of home responsibilities (Acker 1990).

Joan Acker (1990; 1992) has done path-breaking work by investigating into gender in organizations and by stating that organizations are gendered. According to her (1990, 146), *'to say that an organization is gendered means that advantage and disadvantage, exploitation and control, action and emotion, meaning and identity, are patterned through and in terms of a distinction between male and female, masculine and feminine.'* Thus, the distinction between women and men and between femininity and masculinity refers, in Acker's words, to a deeply embedded subculture of gender difference. This gendered subculture of organization links the organizational gender arrangements with the gender relations in other parts of society. As a consequence, then, everyday activities of organizing and managing

organizations reproduce the gendered subculture within the organization itself and within wider society (Acker 1992, 259).

Acker's work has gained much attention from researchers who have wanted to study waged work and work organizations as one of the many sites of the reproduction of gender relations. They are, however, too many to mention here. Acker's work has also been criticized although I would not say that it has been questioned. Dana Britton (1997; 2000), for instance, has argued that the general approach that Acker has devised remains theoretically and empirically underdeveloped and unclear. Britton takes gender into consideration as a cause of oppression and criticizes Acker's approach for not being accurate enough to illustrate changes in oppression, that is, for being too rigid. Also Johanna Kantola (2008) agrees with Britton in that Acker's work implicitly suggests that organizations are essentially patriarchal and immutable. Yet, as Kantola (2008, 206; also Crawford 2008, 80) continues, this limitation does not prevent the use of Acker's conceptualizations as empirical tools even if one departs from her original theoretical idea. According to my understanding, then, Britton and Kantola do not criticize Acker's conceptualizations as empirical tools but rather her general approach to organizations as gendered.

My interpretation of Acker's work diverges from Britton's (2000) and Kantola's (2008) views in that I do not see her conceptualizations as being too unyielding. Instead, Acker (1992) considers gender processes<sup>3</sup> as concrete activities of what people do and say, and how they think about these activities, for thinking is also an activity. Moreover, later on, Acker (1997, ix) has written that '*complexly coordinated practices constitute the structures within which we live.*' In other words, Acker considers structures to be produced, and she is interested in processes that cause the production of these structures. Furthermore, she understands the emergence of the notion of gendered practices in paid work as part of the effort to understand how women's relative subordination is so often recreated even as it is changing (Acker 1997, ix). Accordingly, Korvajärvi's (2003, 56) reading of Acker's work is that the leading idea in her conceptualizations is the production of inequalities between women and men. This contradicts the critiques by both Britton and Kantola who claim Acker's work is essentially unalterable.

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<sup>3</sup> Acker's (1990; 1992) gender processes are actually also gender practices, but for the sake of convenience, they are here called gender processes.

As part of her approach, Acker (1992, 252–254) has presented four<sup>4</sup> sets of processes which could be used in describing and analysing gendered organizations. She refers to these processes as components of the same reality although, for purposes of description, the components can be seen as analytically distinct. The first set of processes is the *production of gender divisions*. For example, these gender divisions may be divisions of labour, locations of physical space, divisions of power, subordination, hierarchies and wages. It is obvious that these processes are often the most recognizable in comparison to the other three sets of processes. In call centres, men usually make up the bulk of the workforce in technical support jobs, while women are perceived to be more skilled at building rapport with customers over the telephone (Belt, Richardson & Webster 2002, 26). An example of this can be found in the passage presented in the introductory chapter in which the male agent Vroom is working in the helpdesk of domestic appliances. His work concerns electrical appliances and, more specifically, problematic situations with them, instead of the everyday use which is understood more as women's area.

The second type of process is the creation of *gendered symbols, images, and forms of consciousness*, which explicate, reinforce and justify, or sometimes oppose gender divisions. These processes have many sources and forms, for instance, in language, ideology, culture, dress, the press, and television. An example of this could be a gender-specific dress code in one call centre (Buchanan & Koch-Schulte 2000), where men were required to wear a collar and tie and women were required to wear smart trousers or skirts of conservative length. Likewise, in the introductory passage, the agent Vroom uses such gendered expressions as 'Ms' and 'madam' when he addresses the customer. The main function of such expressions is to recognize the difference between women and men.

The third set of processes include *interaction between individuals*: between women and men, women and women, or men and men. Interaction may occur between supervisors and subordinates, between co-workers, and between workers and customers, clients or other outsiders. For example, in one call centre, employees were expected to develop relationships with customers, and the required mode

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<sup>4</sup> In her earlier work, Acker (1990) identified five sets of processes, but the later division (Acker 1992) with only four sets is more widely referred to than the earlier version. The fifth set of processes is the *gendered organizational logic*. It is a larger theoretical rather than analytical point, and the four other dimensions contributed to this gendered organizational logic (Kantola 2008, 223).



assumed an overtly heterosexualized character (Brannan 2005, 431). In the passage about the agent Vroom and Ms Paulson, their mutual interaction is, to our knowledge, informal, yet polite, taking into account the gender differences and differences in their ages and positions.

Finally, the fourth dimension of gendering of organizations is the *internal mental work of individuals*, that is, the processes which help to produce gendered components of individual identity. In the call centre mentioned above (Brannan 2005, 432) where employees produced heterosexualized interaction with clients, a female employee's attempt to establish a distance between herself and the actions she had been required to carry out as a part of her job is an example of this dimension. In Vroom's behaviour, this dimension could refer to the adjustment of his behaviour to company rules concerning polite manners with customers, although what he really wanted to ask Ms Paulson was whether she was out of her mind when she opened the top cover of the oven.

According to Acker (1992, 252), sexuality, in its diverse forms and meanings, is implicated in each of the processes of her analysis. Moreover, Acker (1990, 142) stated in the 1990s that the current theories ignored heterosexuality and that the organizational structure considered gender-neutral was also understood as asexual. In twenty years, the situation has begun to look brighter in terms of recognizing heterosexuality, although it remains a clearly under-examined topic in research concerning work. For example, Attila Bruni and his colleagues (Bruni, Gherardi & Poggio 2005) have studied five relatively small companies in order to analyse gender in business-making. They have made conclusions about the presumed heterosexuality of organization, but only in relation to one company, a publisher of gay and lesbian magazine, with homosexual partners and employees. These conclusions could have been complemented with arguments about heterosexuality as the basic assumption in the other companies as well.

Another set of distinguishable dimensions of gender relations in work organizations is presented by Raewyn Connell (2005, 7; 2006, 839). She has developed these dimensions of gender relations from the model she had proposed earlier (Connell 1987). She has presented them as the four main structures of the modern system of gender relations, first without a particular focus on work organizations (Connell 2002, 57–68), but later also in relation to work organizations (2005, 7; 2006, 839). Her four dimensions have much in common with those of

Acker although they are not exactly the same. The first of Connell's dimensions is *gender division of labour* in work organizations. It refers to the ways in which production and consumption are arranged along gender lines, which includes the gendering of occupations and the division between paid work and domestic labour. Connell's second dimension of gender relations is *gender relations of power*, and it refers to the ways in which control, authority and force are exercised along gender lines. *Emotion and human relations* is Connell's third dimension, and it refers to the ways in which attachment and antagonism among people and groups are organized along gender lines, including such emotions as solidarity, prejudice and disdain, and sexual attraction and repulsion. Finally, *gender culture and symbolism* is a dimension which refers to the ways in which gender identities are defined in culture, the language and symbols of gender difference, and the prevailing beliefs and attitudes towards gender. The local culture of gender may de-emphasize difference and guide towards gender neutrality.

Table 1. Sets of Gender Processes in Work Organizations by Acker and Connell

Acker:	Connell:
- productions of gender divisions	- gender divisions of labour
- gendered symbols, images and forms of consciousness	- gender relations of power
- interaction between individuals	- emotions and human relations
- internal mental work	- gender culture and symbolism

The sets of processes by Acker differs from that of Connell in that Acker does not emphasize power relations as much as Connell does but instead includes them in the first set of processes. Connell does emphasize gendered power relations, but her set of processes seems to lack internal mental work of individuals, except emotions. This is, according to my interpretation, because Connell (2005, 6) sees that the key to an updated understanding of gender inequalities is to look at the relations between

genders and between groups, instead of single persons. These relations, she states, are constantly being produced, reproduced and changed in organizational processes. Acker and Connell have arrived at rather similar groupings of the processes of gender in work organizations but do not discuss each other's work on gender processes in much detail. However, it has been pointed out (Crawford 2008, 78) that Acker (1990, 153; 1998, 195) has drawn on Connell's (1987) theory of hegemonic masculinity, and Connell (2002, 128; 2005, 1; 2006, 838) has definitely credited Acker for her argument about gendered organizations.

What is common to Acker's and Connell's analyses of gender processes in work organizations is that these dimensions or locations – sometimes also called levels – can be used in distinguishing gender processes and practices of different types. It has been suggested that Acker's processes, obviously including those of Connell, reveal what locations of sociological abstraction – the locations of structures in interaction, symbols or personal notions – one ought to look for when seeking something important gender-wise (Korvajärvi 2002b, 102; Rantalaiho et al. 1997, 9). Connell (2006, 839) argues that her sets of processes provides a template for describing dimensions of gender relations in any work organization, and, in addition, a framework for data collection in interviews and observations.

Acker's gender processes are widely used and applied in studies concerning Finnish work life and work organizations. These studies concentrate on gender in different aspects of work organizations, such as the gendered nature of bank mergers (Tienari 2000), formal and informal aspects of work organizations (Korvajärvi 2002b), practices related to work-life balance in work (Kivimäki 2009), and gender discrimination (Husu 2001; Kantola 2008). Thus, it seems that the gender processes Acker has presented are applicable in different types of gender approaches in work organizations.

Instead of choosing only one of them, I have put both Acker's and Connell's sets of processes into use in my analysis. I employ them both in the way that Rantalaiho and her colleagues (1997) have suggested, in directing both data production and analysis in my attempt to find gender-related practices. I chose to use both Acker's and Connell's groupings of the processes because I see them completing each other with their different, although partly overlapping, emphases.

To conceptualize the contexts in which the gender processes emerge in work organizations, I borrow the analytical distinction made by Tuula Gordon and her

colleagues (2000, 53) between three layers of school in their school ethnography. They call these layers *the official*, *the informal* and *the physical school*. The official school, in their work, refers to documents of the school and the state. By the layer of informal school, they refer to interaction between and among teachers and students. The physical school focuses on the possibilities and limitations offered by school buildings and spaces for teaching, learning and interacting. As a result of their analysis, they noticed that some boys, more often than girls, are in the centre of the official, informal and physical layers of the school.

I found these three layers helpful in structuring my analysis of the organization of work in call centres, and will therefore use somewhat similar layers. By *formal organization*, I refer to mostly work-related activities and progress, such rules as policies, procedures and regulations, and the actual customer service done on the phone and activities related to this. In other words, these activities are more or less required at work. *Informal organization* in this study refers, for example, to interaction during lunch, coffee and smoking breaks, and other activities not necessarily directly related to work. These informal activities may support work even if they are not directly related to it. They are not required but done at employees' own free will during working hours at the workplace. *Physical organization* refers not only to office buildings and spaces, workstations, and technological and other tools the employees use in their work, but also to the means and possibilities of employees to embody these spaces. It is noteworthy that Acker's and Connell's gender processes are traceable in both formal and informal organizations and that they are likewise linked to the physical organization.

The distinction between the formal organization and the informal organization of employees goes back to the Hawthorne studies conducted at the plant called the Hawthorne Works in the US in the late 1920s and early 1930s. The set of studies was first initiated because the plant's management was interested in understanding the relationships between fatigue and monotony and between job satisfaction and dissatisfaction. Later on, the contradiction between formal and informal organizations was discovered. Formal organization was understood as referring to the patterns of interaction prescribed by the company rules, regulations and policies. In contrast, informal organization referred to the employees' personal interrelations which were not represented by formal organization. The researchers used this distinction between formal and informal organizations to suggest that workers were

not necessarily motivated by economic or other 'rational' interests such as wages. Thus, the effect of workers' informal organization on productivity was emphasized. Moreover, the researchers determined the physical organization, although not named as such, in which the workers operated during the set of studies. (Mayo 1945; Roethlisberger & Dickson 1949, Schwartzman 1993) The Hawthorne studies have also been criticized particularly for not seeing gender as a relevant point to consider in explaining organizational phenomena. Also, it has been argued that the experimenters' treatment of the men's group was very different from their treatment of the women's group, which had an effect on the results. (Acker & van Houten 1974)

In some everyday instances of work, formal organization intertwines with informal organization. As pointed out above, the concepts of formal organization and informal organization have been developed in relation to industrial work. As service work essentially differs from industrial work by nature, it is presumably not always possible to make a clear-cut division between formal and informal organizations in service work. In addition, physical organization offers equipment for work and also contextualizes the functioning of formal and informal organizations. In fact, gender cannot be situated in one or the other of these layers of work organizations but it can be related to all three of them.

An obvious instance for gender-related practices is interaction and mutual relations between individuals since gender is constructed in interaction and social doings (West & Zimmerman 1987, 127, 129; Yancey Martin 2003, 343). Interactions are part of the concrete work of an organization (Acker 1992, 253), and this is especially the case in call centres where an agent's primary task is to communicate with customers. More to the point, call centres are the kind of workplaces where communication *is* the job description (Cameron 2000, 91, emphasis original). In addition, Acker points out that in interactions on various levels of organizational hierarchy, policies and practices that create divisions are developed and images of gender are created and affirmed. In other words, interaction between individuals is the basic everyday activity in which gender becomes apparent in work.

The gender system and both Acker's and Connell's analyses of the gender processes in work organizations offer tools for analysing the logic in which gender is produced and continues to organize the workplace. In other words, although the

work of Hirdman, Acker and Connell provides a theoretical basis for formulating the research questions and for answering them, even more subtle tools for analysis are needed. Therefore, I move on to discuss other conceptualizations of gender-related practices.

### ***Gender Practices and Practising Gender***

In what follows, I discuss gender-related practices in work organizations which I understand as everyday activity through which individuals interact, as concrete doing and saying but also interpreting. In these processes, gender is continuously redefined and negotiated (Korvajärvi 2002b, 102; Rantalaiho et al. 1997, 10; Yancey Martin 2003). In order to understand the situational nature of gender-related practices, I present Patricia Yancey Martin's (2003; 2006) dual concept of gender practice and real-time practising of gender, which, in my view, both complement and are complemented by Acker's (1990; 1992) and Connell's (2005; 2006) sets of gender processes in work organizations. Moreover, I consider gender-related practices an integral part of activities in formal and informal organizations.

The first scholars who suggested that gender is doing instead of being and who made an explicit reference to 'doing gender' were Candace West and Don Zimmerman (1987) in their seminal article entitled *Doing Gender*. The idea of doing gender has its roots in earlier studies, first, in the work of Harold Garfinkel (1967). He wrote about Agnes, a transsexual female who was raised as a boy. Agnes developed a number of procedures for passing as a female both before and after her gender reassignment surgery. Thus, her behaviour was seen by others as normative gender behaviour of a female. From Agnes, however, this required continuous studies of everyday activities in order to produce correct decisions about how to make her gender appear an obvious, familiar, recognizable and serious matter of fact in commonplace settings.

Another key theoretical underpinning in West and Zimmerman's concept of doing gender is Erving Goffman's (1976) work on displaying gender. As Goffman understands it, when we interact with each other, we assume that everyone possesses an 'essential nature,' that is, a nature that can be perceived through the natural signs given off or expressed by us. However, these gendered expressions might reveal clues to the underlying, fundamental dimensions of the female and

male, but according to Goffman's view, these performances are optional. In other words, gender depictions are not direct and inevitable consequences of our 'essential sexual natures', but rather interactional portrayals of what we would like to express of our sexual natures. He states that it is our human nature which gives us the ability to learn to produce and recognize feminine and masculine gender displays, and that is a capacity we have by virtue of being persons, not females and males. Goffman's view on displaying gender seems to be somewhat confusing, and it is no wonder that West and Zimmerman argued that it is necessary to move beyond gender display, as they did with the conceptualization of doing gender.

According to West and Zimmerman, doing gender is largely unreflective but also unavoidable since our activities and being are always interpreted on the grounds of our supposedly appropriate biological sex (i.e., categorization based on assumed sex), but the interpretations of our sex category do not have to be congruent with our biological sex. Doing gender means, according to West and Zimmerman (1987, 137), creating a difference between women and men. This is congruent with Hirdman's (1990) gender system, in which the main mechanism is gender difference. Another mechanism of gender system is gender hierarchy, which cannot exist without difference. In other words, if difference is not made between genders, there are no grounds to make gender hierarchy, although other differences such as age, social class and what is called race may still be a basis for hierarchy. This study is framed by the conceptualization of doing gender, which refers to gender as being constructed and produced in people's everyday practices. The concept of doing gender allows taking a look at situational, interactional and alterable doings, sayings and interpretations in which gender is produced. The doing of gender may or may not be unsolicited, and the consequences of it can be for or against oneself, or both.

The approach of doing gender has been widely adopted and continues to be widely discussed and further developed. One such conceptual development is the two-sided dynamic of practising gender and gendering practices, elaborated by Patricia Yancey Martin (2003; 2006). She distinguishes between gender practices that are cultural resources of doing gender, and practising of gender that is constituted through interaction. Gender practices stand for a set of potential activities available for doing in social circumstances, such as words and deeds, while practising gender refers to the literal saying or doing of gender and to exercising agency in real time and space. A characteristic of practising gender is that

it is often rapid, directional, time bound and informed by minimal awareness, and yet, sometimes practised intentionally.

In some sense, Yancey Martin's gender practices as cultural understandings or resources come fairly close to Acker's set of processes of gendered symbols, images and forms of consciousness, especially when they are seen as referring to ideology and cultural ways of speaking. Accordingly, Connell's dimension of gender culture and symbolism, that is, gender identities in culture, the language and symbols of gender difference, as well as the prevailing beliefs and attitudes about gender, points in the same direction as the conceptualizations mentioned above.

In her empirical work, Yancey Martin (2003; 2006) has presented several stories based on interviews which she has analysed from the perspective of how men practise gender – or masculinity – with women and other men at work. She has noticed that women employees seem to have minimal concern about individual men's practising of masculinity. Yet, men's collective practising of masculinities affected women negatively even when they believed that men intended no harm. At work, Yancey Martin (2006, 267) points out, gender is practised in a context where men in general have more power, control more resources and exercise more influence than women, and this condition fosters events in which men's practising of masculinity upsets, harms or insults women or other men. This may be the case on the general level, but employing Acker's and Connell's sets of processes could help us to draw a more nuanced picture, instead of relying on a generalized description. Moreover, Yancey Martin refers to workplaces which are clearly gender segregated in terms of gender hierarchy since the top positions are occupied by men. Equally interesting would be to examine gender practices in workplaces which have adopted different ways of organizing gender.

Yancey Martin's conceptualization of practising gender and gendering practices has been criticized by Myra Marx Ferree (2003), who argues that:

*'Any practice thus can be 'gendered' but without specifying whether 'gendering' has any consequences for the overall gender order (subverting it or reproducing it) or whether the gender order from which the practice takes its meaning is an oppressive one. To say that a practice is 'gendered' one is therefore not to say anything about its relation to gender inequality or oppression.'*



I agree with Ferree in that calling a practice gendered does not reveal its relation to gender inequality. That is because ‘gendered’ refers to something that has diverged on the basis of gender, nothing more. Gender inequality is a consequence of sets of practices organized in an oppressive way, not a cause of gendered practices as such.

Ferree also questions Yancey Martin’s way of presenting her idea of practising gender and gender practices as kind of individual ‘*skills*’ rather than interaction. Ferree may be right in this, but according to my interpretation, it is more about Yancey Martin’s expressions than shortcomings of her conceptualizations. Yancey Martin (2003, 354–355) illustrates practising gender by comparing it to swimming, playing piano or riding a bike. These are not necessarily the best possible illustrations of practising gender because swimming, playing piano and bike-riding are quite specific, personal and unvarying skills, which practising gender necessarily is not. Instead, as I see it, practising gender is a more general, cultural, varying and situational skill than Yancey Martin’s illustration points out.

It seems that researchers have adopted different kinds of approaches when analysing gender-related practices in certain research material. Yancey Martin (2003), for example, seems to have captured her participants’ actual doings and sayings from vignettes that the researcher has shaped on the basis of interviews. By following earlier studies (Eriksson & Eriksson 2003, 154; Kleinman 2007, 12–14), I consider talk and discourses to be practices, too, and do not make a clear distinction between words and deeds. By doing this, I do not, for example, prefer observations of the employees’ actions over interviews. An interview as such is a practice, and it may or may not contain descriptions of other practices. In addition, what is mentioned and what is silent in the interviews provide fruitful information for analysis (Kleinman 2007, 14; Korvajärvi 2004a, 293). My intention is not to fill in the silences in the interviews but to point them out and to discuss the meaning of them. Moreover, I argue that the interview talk about gender is only one way to gain access to the ways in which gender is practised.

Although women and men practise a particular kind of gender, that is, femininities and masculinities, in empirical research it seems easier to identify practising of gender that is gender-consistent rather than inconsistent (Yancey Martin 2003, 355). However, the interpretations appear to be rather inconsistent between some studies. For example, Yancey Martin (2001) interprets that when

expressing fondness to each other, men practise their masculinity, whereas Bird (1996) argues that emotional detachment is the way to practise masculinity. Neither of them suggests that men who express fondness to each other practise femininity, although this suggestion is as arguable as Yancey Martin's and Bird's suggestions. However, taking a stance on this inconsistency goes beyond the scope of this study. Instead, I move on and present a particular form of practising gender, that is, male homosociality.

### ***Practising Masculinity through Homosociality***

I understand male homosociality as a form of practising gender, that is, a means with which men produce and reproduce their masculinity. Male homosociality involves excluding certain men, but also women, and does not therefore concern only men. In this respect, it is also linked to female employees. Homosociality is a particular way of practising gender and hence an apt example of what everyday practising of gender could be. Moreover, male homosociality is a conceptualization that I will use to analyse the research material of this study.

In my view, homosociality offers men or women an option to create togetherness and in this sense a bond with each other. The first scholars to employ the concept of homosociality (also called homosociability) were Jean Lipman-Blumen (1976, 16) and Rosabeth Moss Kanter (1977). Lipman-Blumen (1976, 16) defines homosociality as '*the seeking, enjoyment, and/or preference for the company of the same gender. It is distinguished from homosexual in that it does not necessarily involve (although it may under certain circumstances) an explicitly erotic sexual interaction between members of the same gender.*' While this definition by Lipman-Blumen does not refer to any gender, in the very next sentence she states that the basic premise of this homosocial view suggests that men are attracted to, stimulated by, and interested in other men. In doing so, she brushes women aside and focuses on male homosociality. This emphasis has remained ever since, and the empirical research concerning homosociality has focused on men's mutual togetherness and ignored female homosociality. This may suggest that women's togetherness is different and perhaps more ambiguous and subtle than that of men.

By referring to 'homosocial reproduction', Kanter (1977, 49–68) characterizes the processes through which certain managers and men are selected and

differentiated according to their ability to display appropriate social credentials. According to her, pressure to conform and the development of exclusive management circles closed to outsiders stem from the degree of uncertainty surrounding managerial positions. This can exclude not only women, but also many men from managerial positions. In her words, homosocial reproduction provides an important form of reassurance in the face of uncertainty and, therefore, managerial positions easily become closed to people who are considered different in some respect.

Both Lipman-Blumen's (1976) and Kanter's (1977) conceptualizations of homosociality and homosocial reproduction were developed in the context of studying work and organizations, while Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's (1985, 3) notion of bonding between men comes from another line of discussions, namely literary studies. This bonding often has, according to her, an erotic aspect and therefore she prefers to call it homosocial desire. Michael Roper (1996, 213), for example, uses Sedgwick's concept of homosocial desire and argues that the concept of homosociality suppresses the aspect of desire that gives male bonding in management its peculiar intensity. Furthermore, Roper (1996, 213) claims that the concept of homosocial desire '*identifies a distinctive category of intimacy in formally heterosexual settings which presents as non-sexual but which nevertheless involves potentially erotic desires.*' Moreover, it has been pointed out that men's mutual relations include aspects of competition and proving one's masculinity (Kimmel 1994; Tallberg 2003, 11–16). Thus, I argue that by using the concept of homosocial desire, the competitive and masculinity-proving aspects of men's mutual relations become suppressed. However, according to my understanding, homosociality includes the desire to be and act together with same-gender companions and may or may not include erotic desire of same-gender companions, whether this is emphasized or not.

I see male homosociality as offering men an option to practise masculinity. Masculinity is not a fixed entity embedded in the body or in the personality traits of men or of any individuals. Instead, masculinities are configurations of practice that are accomplished in social action and can therefore differ according to the gender relations in a particular social setting. Work, organizations and management are the major arenas in the construction of men, masculinities and men's power. In addition, men's gender identities are constructed, compared and evaluated by themselves and

others according to the symbolic benefits of wages, skills and experience, career progress and positions of power, authority and high discretion indicating personal 'success' in the workplace. (Collinson & Hearn 2001, 146; Collinson & Hearn 2005, 289; Connell & Messerschmidt 2005, 836) Consequently, men's means of practising masculinity also have an effect on women at workplaces. Implicit suggestions of female homosociality are rare in this study, although there are a couple of instances in which they surface.

Focusing on male homosocial behaviour is one way to discuss the somewhat ignored aspect of men's means of practising gender. In this sense, male homosociality seems to be a relevant concept that can be used in empirical research concerning men. Although the three call centres in this study are female-majority work environments, homosociality could be used to describe male managers' practising of masculinity in male employee groups. However, men's unities and ways of being together are not unchangeable, and male homosociality is therefore not a fixed entity but a loose and changeable set of practices.

To summarize gender-related practices in work, it could be said that the idea of doing gender lays the foundation for Acker's (1990; 1992), Connell's (2005; 2006) and Yancey Martin's (2003; 2006) work, as well as for this study. What is more, the dual concepts of gender practices and practising gender provide analytical tools for capturing the everyday doings and sayings in work organizations which may or may not be oppressive for women or men. The distinction between the two-sided dynamics of gender practices and practising gender pinpoints the notion that in order to be able to recognize the gender aspect in practising gender in interaction, one has to have a cultural understanding of the ways in which gender – or more precisely femininity and masculinity – is produced in the culture in question. In other words, femininity and masculinity are bound to culture. Otherwise, part of interaction cannot be interpreted as practising *gender* but as any kind of practising. Moreover, homosociality can be considered to be an additional, empirically relevant viewpoint to the analysis of gendered interaction.

Everyday practices have an emotive element, and the innovative and distinctive feature of practice is that it recognizes the embodied nature of human activity, whether it is performed through saying or doing. Moreover, human bodies are both agents in (social) practices and objects of (social) practices, which lay the emphasis of embodiment for the analysis of gender. (Connell 2002, 47; Poggio 2006; Yancey

Martin 2003, 344) In what follows, I move on to explore practices that are based on embodiment and emotions.

## 2.3 Emotional Labour, Aesthetic Labour and Heterosexualized Labour

In order to have analytical tools to consider gender in interaction between the call centre employees and their customers, I present a set of practices called emotional labour, aesthetic labour and heterosexualized labour, including their theoretical background. In doing so, I offer an example of everyday work practices which are found to require gender-differentiated expectations and performances depending on the gender of employees (e.g. Filby 1992, 24; Fineman 2000, 5; Hall 1993, 465; Hochschild 1983/2003, 162–181). Thus, these practices can be called gendered because they are sites for the reproduction of gender asymmetry (Pierce 1995). At the same time, this section sheds light on one aspect of the daily work of call centre agents.

Arlie Russell Hochschild's (1979, 1983/2003) concept of emotional labour is about patterns of feeling and their management as an important part of doing one's job. Drawing on the work of Erving Goffman, Hochschild has pinpointed how workers are expected to display required emotions and suppress unwanted ones in interaction with customers. Goffman's work is also on the background of West and Zimmerman's (1987) conceptualization of doing gender, and, in this respect, these two elaborations have the same basis. However, Hochschild and West and Zimmerman use different pieces of Goffman's work as references. Moreover, the approaches in which the conceptualizations of doing gender and emotional labour have been developed are basically different (Korvajärvi 2011).

The concept of emotional labour is used in several studies which concern service work in general and call centre work in particular. However, some of these studies mention only briefly that employees in call centres display emotional labour while working (e.g. Knights & Odih 2002; Buchanan & Koch-Schulte 2000), while other studies take emotional labour more seriously (e.g. Koivunen 2006; Korvajärvi 1999; Korczynski 2003). Whichever view is taken, emotional labour is a conceptualization of a very common and mundane practice.

In her book, *The Managed Heart*, Hochschild (1983/2003) analyses the work of flight attendants and debt collectors. She writes that she could have also studied the emotional labour of nurses, lawyers or salespeople at work, hoping very much someone else would do that. This suggestion has been responded to. In addition to several studies focusing on the work of flight attendants (e.g. Bolton & Boyd 2003; Williams 2003) and call centre work mentioned above, emotional labour has been researched in such occupations as nurses in a special baby care unit (Lewis 2005), barristers (Harris 2002), lawyers (Pierce 1995), police officers (Martin 1999), American 911 dispatchers (Shuler & Sypher 2000), door-to-door salespeople (Schweingruber & Berns 2005), employees of betting shops of a bookmaking company (Filby 1992), supermarket clerks (Tolich 1993), employees in a chain of British public houses (Seymour & Sandiford 2005), fashion models (Mears & Finlay 2005), image consultants (Wellington & Bryson 2001), and overseas tour reps (Guerrier & Adib 2003), to mention a few to give a glimpse of the variety of occupations on which the studies concerning emotional labour have concentrated.

Hochschild (1983/2003, 147) provides three common characteristics of jobs that call for emotional labour. First, they require face-to-face or voice-to-voice contact with customers or other public. Second, these jobs need the employee to evoke an emotional state in another person. Third, these jobs allow the employer, through training and supervision, to exercise a degree of control over the emotional activities of employees. Thus, there are a great number of occupations in which the employees display emotional labour, although the employer does not require or supervise it. The work of call centre agents is not one of them.

A conceptual distinction between ‘emotion work’ and ‘emotional labour’ has been made in order to differentiate between the places in which they are displayed and between their compensation (Hochschild 1983/2003, 7). Hochschild uses the term emotional labour to mean the management of feelings to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display. According to her, emotional labour is sold for a wage and it therefore has exchange value. By the term emotion work, she refers to these same acts done in a private context where they have use value. It is often difficult to distinguish between the occurrences of these two forms within the workplace (Taylor 1998, 85; Tolich 1993). Kiran Mirchandani (2003), for example, has used the broader concept of emotion work, instead of emotional labour. According to her, this is because the former concept better captures the practice of

managing one's feelings in both paid and unpaid work described in the interviews of self-employed women. However, in call centre work, employees' discussions with customers may resemble an informal chat because of their warm tone and unreservedness but still follow the form of the work task in noting the duration, strength, time and placement of feelings. However, from the worker's point of view, customer service in call centres is hard work that only rarely includes elements of unpaid work. Consequently, I prefer the concept of emotional labour when referring to the emotional side of the work.

The concept of emotional labour has been quite widely used in the literature but it has also been criticized. Hochschild's conceptualization or, more explicitly, her emphasis on the presentation and use of the concept has been questioned. For example, her limiting of emotional labour to jobs that are supervised, instead of also including the true professions, has been criticized. Accordingly, people who supervise their own emotional labour instead of having a supervisor to do it have jobs that place stronger demands on their emotion management (Wouters 1989, 100). Nicky James (1989, 19) finds emotional labour to be more social and interactional than Hochschild and argues that *'for most part management of emotion is a routine, predictable process, less reliant on personality than Hochschild suggests, and rather more reliant on the emotional labour of others.'* Others criticize that Hochschild focuses too much on the harm of emotional labour (Korczynski 2003, 57; Tolich 1993). This is a comment I understand well, although I recognize that Hochschild (1983/2003, 9) has also expressed the potentially positive side of emotional labour. Moreover, this very same criticism can be expressed towards numerous researchers focusing on emotional labour, especially in call centres.

When emotional labour is juxtaposed with Acker's (1990; 1992) and Connell's (2005; 2006) sets of processes, it can be recognized that emotional labour resembles Acker's set of processes called internal mental work. However, they have significant differences as well. A major difference is that internal mental work is done by employees spontaneously, while emotional labour is required and perhaps also supervised by management.

Several studies have concentrated on the consequences of emotional labour for employees (Abiala, 1999; Wharton, 1996; Williams, 2003) and found that there are both positive and negative consequences depending on organizational determinants.

For example, if employees feel valued by their employer, they experience emotional labour as more satisfying than those employees who do not feel valued by their employer (Williams, 2003). Thus, in work organizations, social, managerial and power relations strongly influence the way emotional labour is experienced at work. Moreover, it has been suggested that small firms and units are characterized by few explicit rules of emotion management and display (Seymour and Sandiford, 2005). This could be an important notion in the sense that in Finland the external call centres are rather small firms.

In many of the earlier studies, emotional labour is seen as a form of control and demands for workers (e.g. Abiala, 1999; Taylor and Tyler, 2000). In contrast, studies of such occupations as freelancer models emphasize the non-organizational side of managing emotions and the lack of the employer's supervisory aspect. Accordingly, emotions generated when a freelance model is judged by her or his appearance and rejected if she or he does not measure up, have to be managed if the model is to present oneself effectively in such an industry. (Entwistle and Wissinger, 2006; Mears and Finlay, 2005) These studies thus lack Hochschild's characteristics of jobs that call for emotional labour. In other words, freelance models do not have direct contacts with consumer customers, they do not need to evoke an emotional state in another person, and they do not have the employer or supervisor who exercises control over their emotional activities. Yet, the concept of emotional labour seems to be analytically competent in regard to the work of these models.

It is claimed by some that emotional labour differentiates men's work from women's work in the sense that women are more often required to display emotional labour than men. In this way, emotional labour is a basis for horizontal segregation and a wage gap. For example, female flight attendants find emotional labour more demanding than men, and thus unwelcome heterosexualizing propositions make emotional labour still more onerous for women. (Guy and Newman, 2004; Hochschild, 1983/2003; Williams, 2003) In the case of waiting staff, female waiters are seen as giving more friendly service than men waiters, and yet the behaviours that are classified under friendliness depend upon the context offered by different kinds of restaurants (Hall, 1993). Moreover, Jennifer Pierce (1995) has stated that women and men display different kinds of emotional labour in law firms in the US. She found male attorneys using intimidation and strategic friendliness, while women



were more or less mothering. According to her, women and men were also expected to display different emotions, and female attorneys who behaved like male attorneys were viewed as difficult. These findings reflect the gendered nature of emotional labour and suggest that emotional labour may be a form of practising gender if women and men display different range of emotions.

The concept of emotional labour has been widely and increasingly used in the research literature. In addition, the concept has been further elaborated by numerous researchers. One conceptual development on the basis of emotional labour is the invention of the concept of aesthetic labour (Witz, Warhurst & Nickson 2003). Hochschild (1983/2003) describes the importance of the flight attendants' bodily appearance: the smile and straightness of teeth, facial regularity and make-up, hairstyles, undergarments, jewellery, shoes, weight, figure, age, and complexion, which she lumps together with managing feelings and, thus, with displaying emotional labour. It has been argued that in Hochschild's work, the body becomes synonymous only with its surface devoid of authenticity, while the soul becomes synonymous with depth as the authentic, feelingful core of the self (Witz, Warhurst & Nickson 2003, 36–37). Anne Witz and her colleagues (2003) argue that by developing the concept of aesthetic labour, they have sought to move beyond the oppositions of outer bodies and inner selves and to refocus on the analysis of interactive service work to capture its embodied aspects.

Thus, aesthetic labour is distinct from the concept of emotional labour in that it directs attention to the workers' embodiment instead of foregrounding the worker as a mindful and feelingful self. However, Joanne Entwistle and Elizabeth Wissinger (2006) have criticized this way of thinking by arguing that replacing the concept of emotional labour with the concept of aesthetic labour fails to capture the entire embodied self. According to them, the concept of aesthetic labour focuses on the visual (or the aural) appearance and thus on the surface of the body. Therefore, Entwistle and Wissinger see aesthetic labour adding to, or extending, rather than supplanting, emotional labour.

The concept of aesthetic labour is also used in studying call centre work. The concept has made it relevant to pay attention to call centre employees' skills and abilities, such as the quality of vocal communication, voice and accent, and employees' performance as output (e.g. Thompson, Warhurst & Callaghan 2001; Warhurst et al. 2000). In call centres, visually aesthetic appearance is not expected

from workers because the contact between workers and customers is produced without visual perception. The workers' bodily appearance does not have to be especially well groomed, except for the voice. Nevertheless, Buchanan and Koch-Schulte (2000, 36–37) have written about how surprised they were by the gendered dress codes enforced in many call centres in Canada. They assumed that the dress code was linked to either the disciplinary control of the workers or to the construction of the professional image of work, because the appearance standards were required even though the customers were unable to see the workers. This suggests that aesthetic appearance is meaningful not only in customer relations but also in the social community of work.

Following Anne Witz and her colleagues (2003), it could be said that aesthetics imbues work organizations from three angles. First, the *aesthetics of organization* refers to the physical environment of the workplace and its products which signify the identity of the organization and are intended to add value to it. Second, *aesthetics as organization* explores the aesthetic side of organizational life setting aside the rationalist paradigm of organization. Third, *aesthetics in organization* comprises a range of the workers' behaviours, physicality and the way in which they present themselves. In contrast to the former two, the latter concentrates on the aesthetic actions and appearance of the workers that are usually called aesthetic labour. This study mainly employs the third approach, but there are also some references to the aesthetics of organization.

Earlier research on aesthetic labour has concentrated on occupations in which the bodily appearance is significant, such as retail sales assistants (Pettinger 2004), performers working in theatre and television (Dean 2005), fashion models (Entwistle & Wissinger 2006), employees and job seekers in retail, tourism and hospitality, and financial services (Nickson et al. 2003; Witz, Warhurst & Nickson 2003), and self-evidently, airline cabin crew (Hancock & Tyler 2000; Spiess & Waring 2005). These studies of emotional and aesthetic labour imply that the heterosexualized aspects of service work are embedded in aesthetic labour or in emotional labour (Brannan 2005; Filby 1992; Hochschild 1083/2003). However, the concept of heterosexualized labour captures the heterosexualized components more explicitly. Heterosexualized labour complements aesthetic labour theoretically in explaining how the mobilization of the workers' embodied dispositions can move beyond the mere aesthetic appeal to appealing to the heterosexual desires of some

customers. The boundary between aesthetic and heterosexualized labour is largely determined by the way in which the customer interprets the message. In this way, the customer is invited into the labour process and may view the labour that is supplied as either purely aesthetically pleasing or heterosexualized. (Spiess & Waring 2005)

It has been suggested that there are three forms of heterosexualized labour in interactive services (Warhurst & Nickson 2009): the first one is passively sanctioned by management, the second is actively subscribed to by management, and, the third is an explicit management strategy. Moreover, Chris Warhurst and Dennis Nickson (2009) refer to heterosexualization, but call it sexualization (similar to Spiess & Waring 2005), which reproduces the consideration of heterosexuality as a norm and other sexualities as exceptions of the norm (Jackson 2005, 17). In order to avoid this conceptual inaccuracy, I have chosen to use the term heterosexualized labour instead of the shorter and broader term of sexualized labour.

Another perspective to aesthetic labour has been offered by the analysis of the recruitment and selection of workers to service jobs. Aesthetic labour is then considered the embodied capacities and attributes of individuals, such as ‘the right’ sort of visual or aural appearance, and job applicants are filtered on the basis of these kinds of aesthetic sensory experiences. (Warhurst et al. 2000) Moreover, it seems that airline management, for example, has consciously used aesthetic and heterosexualized labour as a commercial strategy and packaged them as a part of the value proposition posed to customers (Spiess & Waring 2005), while the actors and models have to adapt to fluctuating aesthetic trends or changing roles and commodify themselves in the absence of a corporate aesthetics. (Entwistle & Wissinger 2006; Dean 2005)

Increasing attention to employees’ aesthetics and what is termed feminization of work occur simultaneously, and it seems that they share certain similarities. The statement that work in general has been feminized refers, first, to the increasing rates of labour force participation of women and to the declining rates of participation of men. In other words, it refers to the process of the labour force becoming mainly female. (Adkins 2001; Britton 2000) In addition, the increase in the number of service sector jobs has been part of the feminization of the labour force, as it has simply been assumed that women do service work. Moreover, feminization refers to a new sovereignty of appearance, image, and style at work,

where the performance of stylized presentations of self has emerged as a key resource in certain sectors of the economy, particularly in new service occupations. This is thought to constitute a feminization of work because appearance, image, and style are understood to be closely aligned to the aesthetics of the feminine. Furthermore, an important aspect of feminization is that the work in question is based on interaction with customers. (Adkins 2001; Jokinen 2005, 82–83; McDowell 2009) Thus, several practices in work are considered to be part of feminization regardless of the gender of the person displaying these practices.

In sum, previous studies on emotional labour and aesthetic labour emphasize such aspects of work as employees' well-being and stress, control and monitoring, and dealing with irate customers. However, emotional and aesthetic labour as forms of practising gender have not yet been fully elaborated empirically. Moreover, aesthetic labour has been examined in relation to occupations in which appearance and good looks seem to play a key part, but not so much in more 'ordinary' occupations or in jobs in which voice-to-voice contact with customers is used. Moreover, when the concepts of emotional and aesthetic labour are considered in relation to West and Zimmerman's (1987) conceptualization of doing gender, it has been argued that the major difference between them is their basis in separate but intertwining approaches. The concepts of emotional and aesthetic labour are derived from the economic approach, while the conceptualization of doing gender is independent from the economic dynamics and is instead based on gender dynamics (Korvajärvi 2011).

By using the concepts of emotional, aesthetic and heterosexualized labour, I want to direct this study towards taking the call centre employees into account as feelingful, embodied and gendered beings, although the research questions are not directly linked to these concepts. To a certain extent, the questions still allow me to analyse the emotional, aesthetic and heterosexualized labour of the employees. Empirically, I do not make a sharp distinction between emotional labour, aesthetic labour and heterosexualized labour. I do realize, however, that when one of them is identifiable in the research material, there are also traces of the others. Theoretically, the concepts complete one another by drawing attention to certain dimensions, manifestations and consequences of the phenomenon in question. The use of these concepts thus makes the analysis more descriptive and accurate. This is so even though the contents of the concepts cannot essentially be told apart because the

emotional, aesthetic and heterosexualized aspects of work are empirically intertwined.

## 2.4 Research Questions

In the following, I present the actual research questions that are formulated to achieve the general aim of the study, which is to explore the ways in which gender organizes the workers' and the managers' actions, deeds and understandings in the three call centres. On the basis of preceding discussion, it is possible to conclude that call centres are a clearly under-researched area in Finland. This study therefore contributes to the broadening of the picture of the Finnish call centres, call centre employees and call centre work. Moreover, there is a lack of research on relatively small and external call centres because the call centre literature and research have so far concentrated on large, in-house call centres. Furthermore, gender has been taken under analysis in only a few studies concerning call centres, although many scholars have recognized that call centre work is not gender neutral.

The theoretical framework of this study can be seen as twofold. On the one hand, the study is embedded in the existing call centre literature with its diverse research interests. The earlier research interests which are salient also to this study are the characteristics and organizational features of call centre work at large, including the location of the firms and the interactive service work with customers on the telephone, that is, the basic content of the call centre work. Because interaction involves human beings, emotions are also present as an integral part of the work. In addition, managing of the call centre work, particularly recruitment and hiring, are common themes in call centre literature as well as in what follows.

On the other hand, the theoretical framework of this study is drawn from discussions on gender-related conceptualizations. To begin with, the study is based on the idea of the gender system, according to which gender follows the principles of difference and hierarchy in society (Hirdman 1990). In other words, difference is constantly made between women and men, and, moreover, men are hierarchically valued over women. This study brings this rather large idea of gender system into the realm of work organizations. In addition, the set of gender processes in work organizations, elaborated by Acker (1990; 1992) and Connell (2005; 2006), are

taken into use in analysing gender in call centres. These processes focus on gender divisions, gendered culture, images and symbols, gender relations of power, interaction between people, and emotions and internal mental work. In short, they function as a methodological map directing the analysis towards gender-related occurrences.

Furthermore, the dual concept of practising gender and gender practices (Yancey Martin 2003; 2006) is adopted in order to take a much closer look at gender-related practices at workplaces than Acker's and Connell's sets of processes allow. Practising gender refers to actual sayings and doings of gender in interaction between people, while gender practices refer to cultural understandings about organizations and relations based on gender. In general, practice-based approach draws the focus on what people do in their everyday lives in a particular context (Rantalaiho et al. 1997, 10), which here are the call centres. Finally, the practices of displaying emotional labour and aesthetic labour, that is, managing one's emotions, aesthetic appearance and heterosexualizing behaviour, as well as practising masculinity through homosociality, are apt illustrations of how gender organizes different work-related expectations and preferences.

These two theoretical frameworks are not completely separate but partly overlapping. Although the majority of the call centre studies do not adopt a gender-sensitive perspective, gender has been studied in call centres, for example, in relation to segregation, interaction between employees and customers, instances of heterosexualization, and technology. The gender-related theorizations are not elaborated exclusively for service work organizations, but can also be used in analysing other kinds of work organizations. This study brings these two intertwining frameworks together. This combination works as the theoretical tool with which gender is brought to discussion and into the centre of the analysis. Based on the above, I formulate my research questions as follows:

- **What kinds of workplaces are call centres from the gender perspective?**
- **What are the ways in which gender is practised in customer service work in call centres?**
- **What are the ways in which gender is practised among the workers, between the management and the workers, and among the managers in the call centres?**

These three questions are closely related to one another but differ in their approach to gender. Although they are to a great extent oriented to the research material, they also provide opportunities for drawing theoretical and methodological contributions from the empirical analysis. All three questions cut across the chapters of this book, although they are differently weighted in different sections.

The first question about call centres as workplaces from the gender perspective refers to the features of workplaces in the call centre business in general and in the case study organizations in particular. The question focuses on the contextual matters at large, such as the regional characteristics in terms of local labour force and labour use, and the local understanding of work in relation to gender. In addition, the question refers to gender-related practices on various levels and instances of the call centres, as well as to the ways in which gender affects organizing work, the work conditions and the process of gendering the products and services that the call centres represent. Moreover, the question includes issues linked to the selection, recruitment and training of employees on the basis of gender lines and the role of corporate clients in these processes. The question also refers to the spatial arrangements, technology, and reward systems of the employees in the work organizations.

The second question on practising gender in customer relations focuses on the interaction between the employees and the customers in all three call centres. This interaction is loaded with expectations of practising gender, displaying emotion management and displaying heterosexuality. These expectations are expressed implicitly or explicitly by management, customers and sometimes also by employees. The expectations are usually fulfilled, sometimes strategically opposed, but seldom ignored.

The third question concerns practising gender among the workers, between the management and the workers, and among the managers in the call centres. It focuses on interaction among and between different personnel groups. This interaction may be related to work or be informal by nature but it occurs among colleagues. Accordingly, the question refers to gender relations within a work organization in terms of gendered recruitment and gendered positions in the organizational hierarchy. In other words, the chances of female and male workforce to enter the

work organization, to advance in their career and to interact with other employees are considered from the point of view of gender.

Thus far I have presented the theoretical frame underlying the research questions and the conceptualizations needed to process the research material from the viewpoint of each research question. In what follows, I move on from theorizations towards the empirical part of the study and present the strategies I used in conducting the fieldwork, analysing the research material and writing ethnography in order to answer the research questions.



### 3. Fieldwork, Research Material and Methodology

This chapter aims to describe and evaluate the methodological foundations of the research process. First, I present the process of conducting fieldwork and provide a description of the research material produced. The study started with the interviews of eight experts who are familiar with the Finnish call centre business. The main research material, which includes interviews, non-participant observations, digital photos and documents, was produced later on in the three case study organizations. Second, I explicate the analysis of the ethnographic research material. The analysis of the research material, which consists of interviews and observations in the form of written text, supplemented with documents and digital photos, involved the development of analytic categories and generation of concepts, working with them, and ethnographic writing (Hammersley & Atkinson 1995, 210–245). Above all, the analysis focused on gender-related practices. Third, I look at the methodological background of the study that lies in ethnography and interviewing, as well as the significance of the researcher's reflexivity. Finally, I include in the discussion the ethical considerations that arose during the research process, focusing mainly on fieldwork, analysis and writing of the ethnographic research report. This section thus offers the reader a possibility to evaluate the strengths and limitations of the research design, as well as the choices made and techniques used in the production and analysis of the research material.

Barbara Poggio (2006, 229) has pointed out that when fluid processes, such as gender-related practices, are at the centre of analysis, it is necessary to possess research tools with which to grasp the processuality and complexity of the phenomena. She argues that one tool for this kind of analysis is ethnographic research. I agree and, consequently, chose to conduct ethnographic fieldwork in order to answer my research questions on gender in general and practising gender in

call centre organizations in particular. This is because the theoretical framework of the study and the study design are compatible with the ethnographic approach.

Moreover, as many feminists, I do not believe that one method of gathering knowledge is inherently better or worse than another (Hesse-Biber, Leavy & Yaiser 2004, 11). Yet, some methods, such as ethnography, are more applicable than others in producing contextual and situational knowledge of gender in work (Henttonen 2010, 16). Therefore, I argue, ethnography is appropriate for aiming to answer the research questions on gender presented in this study. The notions that the researcher is not taken for granted as the knowing party, that the nature of knowledge is partial, situated, and subjective, and that power is imbued and relational (Haraway 1991, 188–193; Hesse-Biber, Leavy & Yaiser 2004) are feminist ideas that I also follow. These are the methodological starting points for the study, to which I return later with a more detailed analysis.

### 3.1 Fieldwork and Research Material

This section looks more closely into the actual research practices concerning fieldwork and the gathering of the research material in the case study call centres. To protect the anonymity of these three call centres, I call them Purple, Green and Blue. I conducted the fieldwork partly together with Päivi Korvajärvi during the period of 2004-2006. The research material includes also eight expert interviews, which are described in detail in the Appendix.

#### *Expert Interviews*

To map out the call centre business in Finland, I interviewed some of the key persons and experts in the field. In the process of searching and selecting the experts, the most important source of information was the Internet, which offered the contact information of the experts. In addition to using Internet search engines, I also exploited the snowball method by asking the interviewees who else they thought I should interview. The searches on the Internet and snowball queries from experts frequently led to the same names. Finally, eight experts were interviewed: two pioneers of the Finnish call centre business; a representative of the employment

authority; a representative of a trade union; a representative of the interest group of direct marketing companies; a representative of a business college providing vocational education for telemarketers, and two representatives of the regional development programme.

During the interviews, I asked the experts whether they could suggest to me convenient case study call centres, and most of them mentioned a couple of firms. The expert interviews thus directed the selection of the call centres. Moreover, they provided a great deal of valuable background information on the call centre business from various viewpoints. I also asked them about gender in call centre business, but their answers were rather cursory and mostly concerned with the fact that the workers in call centres are mostly women.

### *Finding the Case Study Call Centres*

When the process of finding the case study call centres was at hand, there were no extensive lists nor statistics available about the call centres in Finland. Therefore, it is more accurate to talk about searching for sites for fieldwork rather than selecting them. The Finnish Direct Marketing Association (FDMA) maintains a list of its member companies on its website, which was an important source of information in the search of call centres willing to participate in the study. FDMA's website provided me with the contact information of several telemarketing companies for magazine subscriptions. I visited the websites of the companies and, on the basis of the website information, I contacted the managing director of the first company, who consented to my request to conduct fieldwork in the organization.

My first case study call centre is thus a company that telemarkets magazine subscriptions, which I will refer to as Purple in this study. The main reason why I initially became interested in telemarketing was the observation that telemarketing magazine subscriptions is among the less valued jobs in Finland. Despite the fact that the work of these telemarketers is extremely important to publishing houses and to consumers as it facilitates subscribing to a magazine, it does not increase the valuation of the telemarketing work. On the contrary, according to call centre employees interviewed earlier (Koivunen, 2004), telemarketing magazine subscriptions served as a crucial distinction between good jobs and bad jobs. The employees interviewed stated that a call centre with no telemarketing of magazine

subscriptions was a desirable place to work. Comments like *'Hey, c'mon. We are not like magazine subscription telemarketers'* were so common that I decided to find out more about these companies that sell magazine subscriptions.

The second case study call centre, which I call Green, was an obvious choice because I already had access to the research material produced there during 1999–2001 and in 2003, which allowed me to conduct a small-scale follow-up study. I also had a contact person in the management of Green, whom I contacted first. Unlike Purple, Green was a relatively large organization judged by the number of its employees, and, moreover, it was owned by an international contact centre network. In addition, Green emphasized trustworthiness in its operation and made efforts to increase its overall appreciation.

The third call centre under scrutiny is called Blue. The search for the third and last call centre organization concentrated on the northern and eastern parts of Finland, because those regions provide somewhat different operational environments for firms than the more populated areas. Before contacting Blue, I contacted by email the CEO of a different type of call centre located in the same northern region. I received a polite reply stating that they did not find it possible to engage themselves in the study at that time because they were busy expanding their business. However, the CEO asked me to contact him again after six months, which unfortunately was too late considering my schedule. Blue was mentioned in several expert interviews as an example of a call centre which implemented a policy concerning the location of its offices. This aroused my curiosity, and I wanted to find out whether the firm's operation and personnel were organized in any specific way due to this policy. In addition to its location, Blue differed from Purple and Green in many other respects and was therefore a convenient choice. Thus, I contacted Blue's CEO who, after a conversation, approved of my request.

The process of searching for and finding the case study call centres was relatively easy, given that the subcontractor call centres are quite invisible to consumers in the sense that they do not advertise themselves. Without the possibility to consult the Internet, I assume that it would have been very difficult to find and contact any call centres for potential case study. Daniel Neyland (2008, 76) also points out the importance of websites and states that they may provide sufficient informational access to companies when suitable locations are needed for research. What is more, he adds, websites offer the first impression which eventually may or may not be

consistent with the observations that the researcher makes when visiting the physical workplace. This was also the case in this study, and particularly relevant to Purple and Blue I was not previously familiar with. I did not analyse the websites of the companies in detail but nevertheless included the knowledge I gained from them in the background information on the call centres.

### *Gaining Access to the Call Centres*

Access to the case study organizations was formally negotiated with their top management. I conducted the negotiations by myself without help from any association, union or shop steward that are sometimes employed in these kinds of negotiations (e.g. Collinson 1992, 234; Korvajärvi 1998, 50). How I accessed the organizations indicates that the call centres are easily accessible, co-operative and relatively open. In addition, I assume that the call centre companies' decision to participate in this study was more or less motivated by the idea of making call centre work and the call centre business more visible to consumers and corporate clients, as well as improving their business image. Accordingly, I had the feeling that several employees wished that my research report would benefit them or their work in some way. This was also said aloud: '*Write a really good report about us*' was a wish expressed by one middle manager when I was leaving the site.

Some studies have reported constraints in negotiating the possibility to produce qualitative research material in British, Australian and Canadian call centres. Apparently, such constraints were caused by critical press reports about the working conditions in the call centres, which is why research material was gathered differently than originally planned. (e.g. Cameron 2000; Buchanan and Koch-Schulte 2000; van den Broek 2004) Deborah Cameron (2000; 2006) realized that the management of the call centre she had access to was very cautious but at the same time eager to show the positive side of their work organization. Despite their eagerness, they were still reluctant to let her talk with the employees without the managers present and wanted to read and accept research reports before publishing. Cameron mentions that her pilot study came to an end as the employees were strictly forbidden to talk about their work with any outsiders. Therefore she had to mobilize a dual strategy. She approached some call centres 'officially', and when access was granted, she made observations. 'Unofficially' she interviewed some

employees outside their workplaces. She recruited the interviewees by asking her students at the university whether they knew any students working in call centres. According to Cameron, these unofficial contacts offered the best possibilities to conduct interviews but also enabled her to access such textual material as confidential manuals. The employees revealed textual material and information to her that they were not supposed to reveal, although they knew that if their employer found out that they had given such material to the hands of a researcher, they would probably have been dismissed.

Cameron (2000, 185–187) states that her interviewees did not consider it ethically suspicious to provide the researcher with confidential material belonging to the call centres. Similarly, Cameron does not consider her responsibility to the firms. Instead she argues: *‘The question is whether the commercial interests of capitalist organizations should override any public interest in scrutinizing workplace practices. It will be evident that I believe they should not, and fortunately this view was shared by my informants’* (p. 186). However, I am not very keen to share her view on the unimportance of co-operating with the companies in relation to gaining access to them. In contrast, I rely more on co-operational relationships with call centre organizations. I argue that because I was allowed access to the call centres, I should respect that and collaborate with them in such a way that they will welcome researchers also in the future. My aim was then and still is to co-operate rather than to ‘reveal’ something scandalous about the call centre operations. I was also careful to deal only with the employees of the case study organizations, not with job candidates or other persons who were outsiders in the sense that they were not working for the call centres. A case in point is when I was sitting next to a job applicant in the lobby of one of the companies. It would have been interesting to ask her about her choice to apply for a job in that particular call centre and about the procedure in general. However, I chose not to do so, because I did not see her as a call centre employee whom to ask for information about the company but as a private person.

There are other researchers who have arrived at a fairly similar procedure as Cameron regarding fieldwork. An example is Buchanan and Koch-Schulte’s (2000) fieldwork conducted in Canada. In the pilot study, Buchanan conducted about ten interviews with call centre employees in their workplaces during their working hours. She conducted another ten interviews using the snowball technique among

her friends and acquaintances for several years, thus outside the work organizations. After the pilot study, they recruited interviewees for the actual study by attaching posters to bus stops and other outside places in the area of Winnipeg where the majority of call centres were located. Moreover, they contacted interviewees through their acquaintances. The interviews were conducted in coffee shops, restaurants and sometimes in homes. In Toronto, attaching posters did not result to anything, and after having realized that, the researchers decided to pay 20 dollars to every volunteering interviewee.

What is more, a strategy of participant observation has been employed in call centre research. Brannan (2005; Brannan & Hawkins 2007) gained full-time employment at a case study call centre in the UK for 13 months by applying for a post advertised. Brannan was recruited as customer service representative through the standard selection process of the call centre. For reasons of ethical consistency, he made the research agenda known to the management and his co-workers. Brannan (2005, 425) writes that '*the securing of managerial consent was somewhat surprising, as at the time a number of high-profile stories of poor conditions in call centres had broken in the national news media.*' He had noticed a subtle trend among managers of eagerly showing the other, positive side of call centre work to the researcher and assumed that managers considered him a useful vehicle for a managerial public-relations agenda.

Compared with these experiences, my access to the case study organizations was relatively easy and simple. Two of the case study organizations agreed to provide me with unlimited access to observe, photograph and conduct interviews with the organizational members, obviously giving due attention to the work assignments that had to be solved and to whether or not the employees were willing to participate. The third case study organization, Green, allowed me to interview the employees but not to observe or take photos of them. This was also the case when previous research material in this organization had been produced. The practice was justified by an appeal to the organization's policy of protecting privacy which guaranteed full privacy to their corporate clients. At this point, I explained that my research was about everyday practices at work, strategically not emphasizing my interest in gender-related practices. However, I did not hold back the fact that I was then working at the Department of Women's Studies, which could hint towards my interest in gender issues.

### *The Selection of the Interviewees in the Case Study Organizations*

The managing director or the CEO of the three call centre organizations was interviewed as early as possible during fieldwork. After that, at my request, the managers of the call centres then organized the practicalities at the workplace, including arranging the interviews with employers and managers from the different levels of the organizations. Moreover, my wish was to interview different kinds of employees regarding their age, gender, position, work assignment, length of employment in the firm, and educational background to highlight different points of view on call centre work. It is impossible to accurately assess whether this wish was fulfilled but I presume it was, at least to a certain extent. Unfortunately, I did not have an opportunity to meet or interview any of the temporary employees in Green who were provided by local agencies for temporary work. The interviewees were selected by one of the managers, and she did not pick any temporary employees. It did not occur to me in time to ask whether it would be possible to interview one or two of them. Neither could I interview a self-employed telemarketer working at Purple because he turned down my request to interview him.

The main practices of selecting the interviewees varied according to each research site. Principally there were three ways to select or recruit the interviewees. The first one was to follow the management's decisions or suggestions about whom to interview. The managers' help made it easy to start the interviewing, but, at the same time, also allowed the managers to control the researcher's doings at the workplaces. The second way included instances of employees volunteering for interviews. In the third way, the interviewers spontaneously suggested interviewing some of the other employees. All interviews in each call centre were conducted during working hours in offices, coffee rooms and meeting rooms at the workplace. The selection process carried out in each call centre will be explained in greater detail in the following sections.

### *The Quantity of the Research Material*

The empirical research material analysed in this study was produced in the three case study organizations: Purple (in 2004 and 2006), Green (in 2005) and Blue (in



2005).<sup>5</sup> This research material includes altogether 54 semi-structured interviews, 75 pages of field notes, 82 digital photos, and 20 pages of documents. In addition, it contains eight expert interviews as background information. In total, the research material on each work organization was produced as follows. First, in Purple, 17 interviews, 43 digital photos, about 35 pages of field notes and about 2 pages of documents were produced. Second, in Green I conducted 17 interviews and wrote about 10 pages of field notes. In addition, 30 interviews and 10 pages of field notes were conducted earlier in Green (2000–2001 and 2003). Finally, 20 interviews, 39 digital photos, about 30 pages of field notes and about 18 pages of documents were produced in Blue.

While almost an equal number of interviews were conducted in each case study organization, the same does not apply to observations, digital photos and documents. This is because I was granted a more open access to Purple and Blue than to Green. However, the research material produced in Green during several years enabled me to do some longitudinal interpretations. It could be said, then, that the research material gathered in the three call centres are not commensurable but vary slightly depending on the call centre in which the material was produced.

### *Conducting Interviews in the Work Organizations*

When producing research material in the field, it was necessary to emphasize the different aspects of fieldwork in every case study organization. However, the primary activity undertaken throughout the fieldwork was interviewing. The other activities, that is, observing and photographing when allowed, were carried out ‘within’ or ‘in between’ the interviews. This arrangement proved a good one time-wise because both interviews and observations were produced concurrently and, moreover, the interview situations offered me an excuse to observe and take photos without intruding into the employees’ offices or workstations and interrupting their work.

For me, the employees in the three case study organizations represented average working adults. The employees may have had special characteristics, but I was not interested in them. In addition, waged work is usually understood as an important

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<sup>5</sup> More details about the quantity of the research material, the background information on the case study organizations and the fieldwork process are provided in the Appendix.

part of people's public life, but people's public life is as personal to themselves as their private life is. Hence, interview questions that I considered to be ordinary may in fact have been rather delicate to the interviewees. As researcher, I wielded the power to set the agenda (Hoffmann 2007) but the interviewees had the power to refuse to answer. However, only one interviewee refused to answer a particular question, while the others may have evaded uncomfortable questions, for example, by answering something else.

I would describe my way of interviewing as peaceable. In other words, I tried to create an amiable ambience and calm interaction between the interviewees and me. I saw how some of the interviewees were a bit nervous at the beginning of our meeting, and one of my aims was to make them feel more relaxed in the interview situation. Moreover, I did not challenge my interviewees' answers and views but sought togetherness and like-mindedness with them instead. This is in line with the notion that one aspect of the Finnish speech culture is to seek and maintain harmony instead of arguing directly (Wilkins & Isotalus 2009, 13). Assumably, the interview situation underlined the harmony-seeking attitude of the Finnish way of speaking because I was interacting for a specific, not just any, purpose of looking for research material for my study.

During the periods of fieldwork, Päivi Korvajärvi and I together conducted interviews with three male managers. In these interviews, I let Päivi lead and present the questions, while I mostly stepped back more like a silent observer. She has more experience in interviewing and fieldwork than I in general, which could be seen in her behaviour and even in the transcripts of her one-to-one interviews, which I read afterwards. She also commented a few words on some of her interviews to me. In addition, she wrote the field notes that I included in the research material. It could be said that Päivi's notes were more fact-oriented, while I focused more on ideas and impressions.

In general, the interviewees were very helpful and, to a certain point, open-minded. In Finnish culture, there are some sensitive and delicate topics that are not necessarily easy to talk about. For example, gender is often found to be a provocative issue. I had a lot of questions about gender in my question guide when I started the interviews but, during the interviews, I sometimes found it difficult to bring up some of these questions and eventually skipped them altogether. In such interview situations, gender did not feel like an appropriate issue to introduce and,

often when I did bring it up, I only received elusive answers. At Finnish workplaces, bringing up gender in conversations is, on the one hand, understood as a conflict and a provocative issue (Kantola 2008, 218; Katila & Meriläinen 1999, 164). On the other hand, gender is considered a remote and irrelevant topic (Korvajärvi 2002a; 2002b). Consequently, I decided to reduce the number of gender questions in order to keep up the good relationship with the interviewees. I am under the impression that this did not cut down the occasions when the interviewees' talked to me about gender issues during the interviews.

Another culturally delicate topic in Finland is money, wages in particular. I found it very difficult to ask how much my interviewees earned and managed to raise this question in about three or four interviews in only one of the call centres. The interviewees whom I asked about their earnings replied to my question either exactly or vaguely, except for one woman who refused to answer the question. This one refusal made me feel that I had upset her and that she became rather distant after that, which cannot be observed in the transliterated interview but which I sensed during the interview.

I found it difficult to bring spontaneous questions or topics into the conversation with the interviewees, especially at the beginning of fieldwork, because so much time and effort was put into making the question guide. In other words, I did not vary the form of questions sufficiently from one situation to another. As interviewer I was quite inexperienced and therefore felt that in the interviewing situations I needed something pre-arranged to grasp. The fact that I stuck to the question guide can be seen to have led to slight awkwardness and formality in some of the very first interviews. I share the notion that the interviewer's lack of courage and experience can be seen in the interview transcriptions, for example in transitions from one issue to another (Laitinen & Uusitalo 2007, 320). Some of my transitions were partly rather clumsy. Thus, the interaction was not informal and spontaneous but more like a process of asking and answering. Moreover, when I read the first notes on the interviews I had carried out, I noticed that they were quite a few clues and hints that were invitations to discuss the issues the interviewees wanted to bring up. Afterwards, I found it embarrassing how seldom I grasped the hints but kept on asking questions from my question guide.

Fortunately, my interviewing technique improved noticeably as the fieldwork progressed. I became more familiar with my topic in general and with the interview

situation in particular. Consequently, I relaxed and became more confident. I also listened to the interviewees more carefully and asked them spontaneous questions. However, all the interviewees did not necessarily feel relaxed, although I did. For example, a man called Mika who worked in Blue was formal, wary and buttoned-up at first. Before I had a chance to explain the background and purpose of my visit, he started by asking whether I had a business card or something that shows who I am and where I come from. He also asked whether we had management's permission to conduct interviews with the workers. I reassured him that we did. I was surprised that he had not heard about our presence in the work organization, because it was agreed that the managers inform the employees about us, and I am sure they had informed some of them. This incident with Mika indicates that one cannot rely on the word about the research conducted at the workplace reaching every employee at once, or at all. Therefore, I find it necessary that the interviewers repeat what they are doing and why at the beginning of every interview, as we did.

Establishing a mutual understanding with the interviewees was not self-evident. Sometimes it was even difficult to understand what the interviewee was saying, although we shared a common language. The incident with Mika also provides an example of how guarded an interviewee may be. At first, Mika was a reluctant interviewee but as soon as I had explained the state of affairs, he agreed to give an interview. This kind of guardedness occurred quite seldom, and the interviewees were mostly forthcoming. Sometimes the start was difficult and the interviewee answered my questions either formally or bluntly. In some occasions this changed if I started to mumble and stammer, as I often did, which I suppose relaxed the interviewee and broke the ice. Usually people relaxed when they started to talk about their everyday work and realized that the interviewer was genuinely interested in pedestrian issues and ordinary work that they knew best. When I posed questions about women and men, many of the interviewees answered hesitantly that they really have not thought about that. However, right afterwards they continued by expressing surprisingly strong and elaborated opinions on women and men. Many of the employees also said at the end of the interview, that '*hope you get something out of this.*' My interpretation of this is that they found their work so banal and the content of our conversation so ordinary that they felt hardly anybody could be interested in it.

The interviewees' doubts about the usefulness of their responses did not overshadow their enthusiasm to participate in the study. Carol Warren (2002, 90) has noted the interviewees' willingness, or even eagerness, to talk about themselves in interviews in the North American context. Similarly Ben Lupton (2006, 111) found that his male interviewees were keen to engage in the research. The same kind of willingness to participate also occurred when call centre employees were interviewed for this study. Yet this eagerness cannot be generalized to concern all the employees I met with. Some of them were rather reluctant and had to be encouraged or even persuaded. Moreover, two male telemarketers from different organizations refused to give an interview to me (Koivunen 2010a). In a similar vein, Karen Butera (2006), for example, has described in her article, entitled 'Manhunt', how she struggled very hard to find male participants and, despite her efforts, eventually failed. In contrast to Butera's experiences, I managed to recruit the call centre employees for interviews fairly easily.

### ***Observations in the Case Study Organizations***

Observations of workers and managers bring together information gathered from interviews and everyday practices in call centres. As David Silverman (1993, 30) puts it, the social science observation is fundamentally about understanding the routine, and a good observer finds excitement in the most everyday, mundane kinds of activities. However, observing mundane activities such as work is obviously not enough. Therefore, the research material also includes observations of the office layout, size, furnishing, equipment, colour, and noise, which all appeal to the senses of the employees. Importantly, the office space is not just a physical framework and a setting for other means and techniques of managerial control. Instead, it is a control device in its own right and should be analysed as much as other control techniques. (Hofbauer 2000, 166) In studies concerning the control of call centre work, such analysis of the office space is done relatively often (e.g. Alferoff & Knights 2003; Baldry, Bain & Taylor 1998; Taylor & Bain 1999), as it is also done in this study.

The observations were mostly carried out on the side of interviews. As a preparation for making observations, I made an observation guide together with my supervisor. The guide consisted of several issues, such as gender and

heterosexuality, relations between employees and customers and among employees, control of work, work-life balance, and, finally, mistakes and conflicts. The observation guide was obviously only suggestive. I could not expect to see all of the issues, for example, be present during a major conflict situation. Instead, I could observe any hints of disagreements and tensions between people. The issues for observation were drawn from my research interests, but, at the field, the decisions what to follow were always situational, and directed by general social rules. The most common social rule was my unwillingness to obtrude myself on the employees who were concentrating on their work. Moreover, during the fieldwork, it was difficult to decide whether a particular situation was related, for example, to gender, and the observation was therefore carried out with a large range of interests.

During fieldwork when my purpose was to observe call centre work, occasionally workers started to socialize and chat with me. In one occasion I had to give up observing and leave the place because the employee kept interrupting work while talking to me. This instance of observation turned into an interview (for a similar notion, see Korvajärvi 1998, 53), which was not my intention nor approved of by this particular employee's superior. In advance, I had imagined that I would not need to interact with the employees when observing them, almost as if I had been invisible. However, I was not invisible in the field and my presence invited the employees to interact, which in many informal situations eventually led to a conversation.

What is noteworthy in comparison with school class ethnography (e.g. Gordon, Holland & Lahelma 2000) or with participant observation (Brannan 2005; Brannan & Hawkins 2007), for example, is that the call centres had no physical space available for the researcher. This was emphasized by the fact that while the employees were working, I could not chat with them or say anything casual because they were talking with their customers. It has been said that participant observation is '*the queen of methods*' in workplace studies (Tope et al. 2005, 490) and it definitely has its benefits in comparison with non-participant observation. For instance, Matthew Brannan (2005; 425–426) has written that during his participant ethnography in a call centre he was able to record observations in his fieldwork journal during the quieter periods when the workers used a word processing software required in their work. Hence he was able to record entries without attracting unwanted attention. For us, such a discreet way of observing and making

notes was not possible. From time to time, it was challenging just to hang around at the workplace and do nothing perceivable but make notes with a pen in a notebook. In general, interviews are easy to justify and explain to employers and managers, while observing is not. Although I was doing my work, I was worried that it seemed like I was doing nothing. Therefore, I usually kept myself busy with writing field notes about everything, which looked more like actual doing than ‘mere’ observing.

In addition to making notes, taking photographs was a means to record observations that I used in my study. For me, the purpose of photography was to illustrate the research material and take me ‘back there,’ as far as it is possible, instead of burying myself under transcripts. From the very beginning it has been clear to me that I will not use the photos to illustrate this book, although it would have made it more approachable. This was also a question of convenience; I was permitted to take the photos by saying that they were for my own use only. Another point is that the photos are not very illustrative but are more like family album snapshots which have to be explained in order to be understood. Still, the photos are informative for me in recalling the fieldwork periods, the people and the office spaces.

The eagerness of the employees to participate in the production of the research material did not extend to taking photos, quite the contrary. Finns are usually shy in front of the camera and do not want to be photographed (Eräsaari 1995, 45). To illustrate this, when I was about to take a photo of one office room, the worker whom I just had interviewed in it said that she would move aside in order not to end up in the photo. When I said to her ‘*No, stay there,*’ she stayed. Afterwards I reflected the possibility that I forced her to stay in the photo<sup>6</sup> by being too bossy. I concluded that my action was not questionable or too pressing because, although I told her to stay, she still had a genuine possibility to move away from the scene. This was the reason why I sometimes found it difficult to distinguish genuine refusal from the cultural kind: that is, when someone refuses to do something because of the Finnish cultural code which frowns upon a person looking too keen and eager<sup>7</sup>.

During fieldwork, I was not always certain about how far I could direct people, and I assume that I was occasionally a bit too sensitive. In one instance I asked a self-employed subcontractor about the rent of his office. He replied very abruptly:

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<sup>6</sup> I consider the photo unrecognizable because only the worker’s back and neck are in sight.

<sup>7</sup> The Finnish word ‘kursailu’ illustrates this procedure perfectly.

*'it is an issue between me and the managing director.'* *'Okay, that's fine,'* I said and thought that I had presented too delicate a question to him. Other people present started to laugh because they realized that the man was making fun of me. In this situation, my sensitiveness surfaced too quickly at least partly because I did not know the man personally and I did not have experimental knowledge of joking in that work community, as the other people present did. (Koivunen 2010a, 697–698) In the end, however, he told me exactly how much the rent of the office was.

In short, the process of producing research material in the case study organizations was rather a smooth process which did not involve any noteworthy resistance or disagreement. From the perspective of ethnography, although the fieldwork periods were relatively short, the research material that was produced proved rich and extensive. This is so even though the form and the quality of the material varied slightly depending on in which call centre it was produced. Accordingly, the quality of the material has an impact on its analysis and on the knowledge that can be achieved through analysis, even if all the research material basically goes through the same process of analysis. More to the point, in one of the call centres, the analysis focused more on the interviews, and the knowledge produced was based more on the views of the interviewees than in the other two call centres, where the interviews were supplemented with observations and digital photos.

## 3.2 Analysis of the Research Material

In this section I present the analytical process and strategy of this study. In ethnography, the analysis of research material is not a distinct stage of the research but an on-going process that begins in the pre-fieldwork phase and continues through the process of writing reports, articles and books (Brewer 2000, 107; Hammersley & Atkinson 1995, 205). Bearing that in mind, I focus here on explicating the analysis conducted after the fieldwork periods, when the basic organizing, coding and classifying of the research material were done. What is more, the processing of the research material not only involves analysing the case study organizations one by one, but also connecting the cases to one another.



Further, the process blends with writing, which I understand as an integral and essential part of the analysis.

John van Maanen (1995, 4–13) has divided ethnography into three stages: fieldwork, textwork and headwork. Fieldwork refers to ethnographic data gathering, to the researcher's stay in the field. Textwork points to the writing process of an ethnographic research report as well as to the written representation of culture. Finally, headwork refers to the reading of the research report.

What I would like to add to van Maanen's division above, is the analysis of the research material and process of interpretation that I call datawork. It would emphasize yet another central stage of the research process instead of giving an impression that everything that the ethnographer has to do after producing the empirical material is to write the report. Accordingly, this view is supported by fact that it is customary to refer either to fieldwork or to results – a report – with the term ethnography (Wolcott 1995, 82–83). But this custom, along with van Maanen's division, obscures the fact that an ethnographer has to organize and analyse the data and make interpretations before or simultaneously when writing a report.

I would argue that, consequently, it is crucial to offer some level of reflexivity also in relation to datawork – that is, working with the data. It could be argued that analysis is not necessarily a separate stage of research but a continuous process (Brewer 2000, 106–107) and therefore it does not need to be specifically named. Yet the process of analysis should not be hidden from the readers, regardless of the phase of the research it involves. In other words, my intention here is to encourage describing the process of analysis and interpretation despite the difficulty of the task.

Working with the data after producing it, typically begins by shifting it into a manageable form. This usually involves transcription of the interviews, observations and other forms of material produced in the field. It is notable that transcription is not purely a mechanical procedure, but involves numerous choices which shape the data and prepare it for the upcoming processing. (Ojala 2010, 133–135)<sup>8</sup> Moreover, a researcher needs to know her or his data well and to read it repeatedly, or familiarize her or himself with it by other means. Analysis with qualitative methods always involves so much manual work that it is crucial to know the data well before

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<sup>8</sup> More information about the transcription process of the ethnographic research material that is analysed in this study is offered in the Appendix.

any systematic analysis can be made. Every researcher has their own means to proceed with the analysis; some work with paper sheets and highlighter pens, others with a computer and a qualitative data analysis software package, for example. The means and forms of datawork may vary but everybody has to do something with the data.

### *Datawork – the Analysis*

In this study, datawork concerning the transcripts of the interviews and field notes in particular can be roughly divided into different stages, although in practice the stages were not sequential but overlapped, and, moreover, interpretations were continuously made throughout the entire research process. Loosely following Hammersley and Atkinson's (1995, 210–245) stages of analysis – identifying analytical concepts, working with analytical categories, and writing – I have reduced datawork to three stages which I proceed to describe in what follows. The aim is to illustrate how to carry out datawork with ethnographic research material. Simultaneously, this transparency offers the reader an opportunity to evaluate the process of datawork, on which the findings of this study are based.

I carried on datawork by familiarizing myself with the research material as well as by organizing and classifying it. To facilitate this, I used a qualitative data analysis software package, entitled Atlas.ti. I analysed both the interviews and the field notes with the software, which was treated as a means to accomplish coding, classifying and memoing of the research material. In addition, I did systematic thematic reading of the data several times. (Brewer 2000, 110) In practice, I read through the research material with special attention to a few predetermined themes, such as control and surveillance, work commitment, conflicts, locality, sexuality, wages, and technology. These themes were selected from earlier studies and the question guide. I marked a section with a code whenever I found myself or the interviewee talking or doing something related to these specified themes. (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2002, 94–99) Because the research questions were not completely finalized at this point, the themes also helped to direct the questions. Obviously, the material allowed me to consider some themes more closely in relation to some of the cases.

In addition, I read the research material without any predetermined themes. This kind of reading is evidently informed by theoretical discussions and earlier studies. In other words, the themes were not selected only on the basis of the research material or on the basis of the theoretical frame, but also on the basis of dialectics between the research material and theory (Käyhkö 2006, 279; Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2002, 99). When I found something interesting and thought-provoking in relation to the research questions or otherwise, I created a new code for the software. For example, in Blue, issues related to the trade union and to long commuting distances were raised in several interviews, which meant that I created a new code for them. What is more, I searched for, and usually found, other references to the codes I had created in order to determine whether these were topics that emerged in one interview or one call centre, or whether they were more common and shared. I also created free memos attached to a particular point of the interview, which reminded me of the similarities and dissimilarities between the case study organizations, the interviewees, the courses of events and other details that I considered significant and calling for attention.

Thus, developing analytical categories and generating concepts were part of the first stage of datawork. This process followed the same logic that was suggested by Martyn Hammersley and Paul Atkinson (1995, 208) as the initial stages of ethnographic analysis: first, careful reading of the research material and, second, generation of analytical concepts. The research material is not already structured in terms of a finite set of analytic categories determined by the researcher but the process of datawork involves developing a set of analytic categories that capture the relevant aspects of the material.

The process of re-describing actions of individuals and the situations in which they occur is called an abductive research strategy (Blaikie 2007, 10; Ojala 2010, 140–141; Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2002, 97–99) in the language of science. An abductive research strategy involves constructing theories that are derived from individuals' language, meanings and accounts in the context of everyday activities. Such research begins by describing these activities and meanings, and is then derived from the categories and concepts that can form the basis for an understanding or an explanation of the problem at hand. An abductive research strategy is based on idealistic ontology, which assumes that what we regard as the external world is just appearances and has no independent existence apart from our thoughts, and on the

epistemology of constructionism, which claims meaning is not discovered but constructed, and the observer plays an active role in this construction. (Blaikie 2007) For example, when doing datawork, I exploited different concepts that I had not decided to use beforehand. An illustration of this is the concept of ‘*gendered organizational citizenship behaviour*,’ which I first used with the research material concerning one of the case study organizations but eventually abandoned because it did not seem to help me enough in answering the research questions or in analysing and structuring the research material. Thus, the concepts used were selected in a dialogue between the research material and the theoretical framework.

At the second stage of the datawork I related the call centres to each other and sought divergent and unique cases to form an idea of the gender-related practices. In other words, I created the analytical categories and used concepts which either connected the cases or distinguished them from each other. (Brewer 2000, 117; Käyhkö 2006, 280; Silverman 1985, 21–22) For instance, I looked for the recruitment routines in all three call centres and related the practices, statements and experiences about recruiting to one another. Consequently, I was able to draw a picture of the hiring routines in the call centres: the practices they use and do not use, the problems and advantages of hiring new employees, and, finally, the kind of workforce they *want* to hire and *actually hire*. In other words, I related the cases to one another and juxtaposed them in order to perceive the differences and similarities between the workplaces.

However, there has been scepticism towards comparing cases. For example, Robert Stake (2003, 148–149) has argued that ‘*when there are multiple cases of intrinsic interest, then, of course, it can be useful to compare them. But more often than not, there is but one case of intrinsic interest, if any at all. Readers with intrinsic interest in the case learn more of it directly from the description, not ignoring comparisons with other cases but not concentrating on comparisons.*’ I agree with Stake that a description is a more elaborated source of information than a comparison. Furthermore, instead of systematically comparing my case organizations, I use the comparison of the cases in a broad sense, according to which comparison is central to empirical social science. Comparison provides a basis for making statements about empirical regularities and for evaluating and interpreting cases (Ragin 1987, 1), and virtually all empirical social research involves some kind of comparison.

The third stage of the datawork is ethnographic writing (van Maanen 1995; Emerson, Fretz & Shaw 2001). Writing is a way of knowing – a method of discovery and analysis with which it is possible to discover new aspects of the topic and the writer's relationship to it (Richardson 1998, 345). At this stage, empirical research is complemented by secondary literature and the findings are related to earlier studies and theoretical discussions. Moreover, ethnographic writing binds the pieces of analysis together into a coherent research report and takes the study back to the original context of the work organizations.

As an ethnographic piece of writing, this research report is characterized by two qualities. First, I have aimed to write myself into the text instead of staying invisible and remote to the readers. This follows a feminist idea that knowing the speaker will deepen one's understanding of the speaker's speech (DeVault 1999, 3). In other words, I see bringing the researchers and their self under scrutiny as part of the research process. Accordingly, Amanda Coffey (1999) has written about the ethnographic self and addressed the researcher's personal, emotional and identity dimensions of undertaking fieldwork. The self-reflective point that Coffey offers makes it clearer to the readers how the researcher affects the research process and the knowledge achieved. Thus, Coffey pinpoints the obvious but surprisingly frequently suppressed fact that the researcher is actively present during the whole research process; a fact that has an effect on both the researcher and the study. Second, my intention in writing this research report is to follow a story-like form, where convenient. The text includes the narratives shared by the interviewees, the narratives of the researchers in the field, and the stories I wrote to the readers, and at some points they intertwine.

Narrative enters organizational studies in at least three forms (Czarniawska 1997, 26–27), which are, first, organizational research that is written in a story-like manner; second, organizational research that collects organizational stories; and third, organizational research that conceptualizes organizational life as story making and organizational theory as story reading. The first one, the narrative form of organizational studies, is easy to find in case studies which use chronology as the main organizing device (Czarniawska 1997, 26), and in this respect, this study is not an exception. Although the study contains narrative features, the primary purpose of the fieldwork was not to collect narratives and, accordingly, the aim of datawork was not to produce narratives.

What is more, a contemporary tradition designated as narrative ethnography has been brought up (Prasad & Prasad 2002, 199–200). Narrative ethnography is, according to Pushkala Prasad and Anshuman Prasad (2002, 197), a tradition that refashions some of the contours of ethnography, which they see as necessary in the determinedly plural world we live in. The objective of narrative ethnography is to resist the influences of such institutional structures as the conventions of ethnographic writing, commonly unquestioned conceptual categories such as class and identity, and deeply-seated dichotomies between researchers and subjects, theory and data. Moreover, it also aims to break the monologic nature of texts written by ethnographers. To some extent, I commit myself to these aims of narrative ethnography but my attempts to reach them remain modest.

For example, the aim of narrative ethnography to break the monologic form of the text is identifiable in selecting the interview excerpts in the text. In doing that my intention was to include many quotes so that other voices, besides mine, could also be heard. However, by saying this, I do not mean to strip researchers of the power to make significant decisions. On the contrary, researchers wield power over their interviewees and decide what is valued, which stories are told, as well as which perspectives are privileged and reified. After fieldwork, researchers wield power by deciding what to do with the data and how to use it (DeVault 1999, 216; Fontana and Frey 1994, 370–372; Hoffmann 2007; Smith 2002, 20–21). Furthermore, researchers make representations of their own deeds but also of other people's action. Researchers are also given a great deal of authority as translators and mouthpieces of the participants, which in practice means interpreting, condensing, excerpting and polishing the participants' talk (DeVault 1999, 74–75).

Accordingly, I modified the interview excerpts to make the spoken language more clear, consistent and compact by removing repetition and expressions such as '*you know*'. All the quotations are in italics. In the excerpts, the symbol (...) signifies an omission. The symbol ... indicates a pause in the interviewees' talk or the point in which the content of the speech changes substantially. My own clarifying interpolations or anonymizations in the excerpts are in square brackets [ ].

So far I have mainly described the datawork done with the interviews and field notes. In the following, I will explicate the datawork that was done with the rest of the research material. First, the expert interviews are mainly used to provide the background information about the call centre business in Finland and to direct the

search for and selection of the case study organizations. Therefore, these interviews are treated differently from those conducted with the call centre employees. The expert interviews are read and made notes of in order to pick the background information that was employed in the different stages of the research process. Hence, I will return to the expert interviews every now and then to check the details and general information provided by the expert, but I have not analysed them systematically.

With regard to the digital photos, there were basically two ways to do datawork with them. First, the photos taken of the notes written on paper and put up on the notice boards were written into text and afterwards analysed in a similar manner as other documents. Second, the photos were used in writing about the interiors and exteriors of the workplaces. I found them to supplement the research material and therefore provide a limited opportunity to triangulate the aspects of spoken and written words in relation to pictures. Quite similarly, I found the documents to complement the research material and to be useful in finding out facts, details and instructions. Thus, the role of the digital photos and documents is mainly to contextualize and make sense of the other forms of research material. In other words, the photos and documents are not being analysed as such, as particular parts of the research material, but only in relation to other forms of research material. However, this is not to say that the photos and documents are somehow less important parts of the research material. On the contrary, for such themes as the interiors of the offices, and the wages of the employees, the photographs and documents have been irreplaceable in the analysis.

### ***Analysing Gender***

The basic phenomena this study examines are gender-related practices in the call centre organizations. Since gender is practised differently in different relations, I look at the relations within the work organizations particularly between the employees and the managers, between the co-workers, and, finally, between the employees, the customers and the clients. However, because of the research material, the relations between the management and the corporate clients cannot be analysed fully, although some references will be made to these relations. I also

consider, at least to some extent, the work organizations in relation to their regional and national settings.

The datawork done in all three cases is described more or less in the same way, and thus all three empirical sections are similar to one another. However, every section approaches the practices from different perspectives, that is, from the perspective of the case study organization in question. There is some variation depending on the location, gender segregation and workforce of the call centre, which provides a special point of view to common practices. The contents of the empirical sections that are presented in the table of contents of this book were formed during the whole process of the study. I first assumed that the contents of the sections on each call centre would differ more from one another, but in the end they resembled each other. The contents could be condensed to recruitment practices, gender segregation, gendered products, gendered interaction with customers, gender within the social community of work, and, finally, gender in relation to control and remunerations. The selection of the contents of the sections was influenced by their ability to offer a context for the answers to the research questions and, above all, for the theoretical frame of the research.

The actual analysis of gender conducted on the basis of the research material involved the instances in which gender was mentioned. More specifically, the participants talked about the doings and characteristics of women, men and genderless individuals but not about gender as such. Gender is thus a conceptualization that I adopted from the theoretical frame of the study. In other words, the conclusions I made about gender are based on the interviewees' utterances concerning women and men and, of course, on my own observations.

Correspondingly, I have also teased out gender from other pieces of data in which gender is present on a more subtle level than in direct references to women and men. A case in point is when the employees are talked about on the basis of their vocational education, such as registered nurse and engineer. These are very gender-segregated fields of education and occupations in Finland (Kinnunen 2001, 103), and, therefore, refer directly to female registered nurses and male engineers, although it is not said aloud. Identifying this requires specific knowledge of the cultural context. In different usage, the gender of the person is usually expressed with the prefix 'female' or 'male', such as male registered nurse or female engineer. Another example of teasing out gender would be to focus on the division of



organizational tasks to employees and see whether any kind of pattern emerges according to the gender of the employee. Similarly, gender needs to be traced from different contexts of organizational life. These ways to analyse gender require a somewhat flexible understanding of the concept's content. Gender is mostly analysed as something which is socially constructed, but may also have other shades of meaning. I do not see this as a problem but rather as a sign of the many-sidedness and fluidity of the concept of gender.

In short, ethnography in general is a flexible idea of doing research since it adjusts to various forms and amounts of research material. The different forms of the research material that I analysed simultaneously and in juxtaposition supplement, complement, support and establish one another. In other words, the research material provided an opportunity to triangulate (Letherby 2003, 96) the aspects of the ethnographic account. Moreover, there are resources of feminist analysis in use, which enables a better understanding of the gender processes and practices in the context of Finnish work life. Such understanding of gender is a conceptual construction derived from my research material concerning women and men. Teasing out the gender has been the main analytical process in this study.

### 3.3 Methodological Considerations

In the following I draw together and discuss the methodological considerations of the study. This study adopts two methodological directions: the ethnographic tradition and the method of interviewing, with an emphasis on the latter even though several types of ethnographic research material are used. Both of these directions are discussed below, together with the perspectives of both feminist methodology in general and the researcher's reflexivity in the study in particular.

Sandra Harding (1987, 2) has argued that discussions of method and methodology are intertwined with each other and with epistemological issues. She differentiates between a research method, methodology and epistemology. A research method is, according to Harding, a technique for gathering evidence. She condenses all the existing evidence-gathering techniques to three categories: listening or interrogating informants, observing behaviour, and examining historical traces and records. Research material from all three categories is used in this study

and, furthermore, attention is paid to the ways in which the interviewees talked about the issues raised. This has relevance not only to the methods employed but also to epistemology.

Moreover, Harding continues, (1987, 2), epistemology is a theory of knowledge. In other words, epistemology refers to the essence of knowledge and to possibilities to gain knowledge. Following feminist epistemology (Ramazanoğlu & Holland 2002, 152; Stanley & Wise 1990, 23), I understand knowledge as situated in contexts, mainly in the contexts of time, place and individuals. That is, knowledge is produced, for instance, in social relations between researchers and participants. The findings of this study are therefore produced by both the researchers and the participants. The epistemological and methodological issues cannot thus be fully separated from each other. Furthermore, Harding describes methodology as a theory and analysis of how research should and does proceed and, accordingly, the ways in which the researchers investigate the issues of which they want to gain knowledge. In Harding's terms, ethnography as a methodological choice has delineated the adaptable methods and epistemological guidelines of this study.

Feminist methodology is suggested to be distinctive to the extent that it is shaped by feminist theory, politics and ethics, and grounded in women's experiences (Ramazanoğlu & Holland 2002, 16). This study is attached to feminist methodology in the sense that it is informed by feminist theory, politics and ethics. It has its basis in women's experiences in the same way as the tradition of feminist research has its foundation in women's lives. The research is empirically grounded on the experiences of both female and male participants and, furthermore, on the female researchers' experiences in the field.

This study follows Hammersley and Atkinson's (1995, 1) definition of ethnography referring to a particular method or a set of methods. Ethnography usually combines certain features in specific ways. Its major feature is fieldwork that is conducted over a prolonged period of time employing different research techniques and involving the researcher in participation and observation. Fieldwork is conducted within the settings of the participants with an understanding of how the context informs the action. Moreover, fieldwork involves an account of the development of relationships between the researcher and the researched, as well as focusing on how experience and practice are part of wider processes. (Hammersley

& Atkinson 1995, 1–2; Skeggs 2001, 426) These features also frame this study, except that the length of the fieldwork periods was restricted.

Moreover, there are several specifications that have been given to ethnographic studies, usually by adding a prefix to the word ethnography (Wolcott 1995, 90). For example, this study can be classified under feminist ethnography. According to Beverly Skeggs (2001, 426, 429), there are several grounds for a study to be called feminist ethnography. First, the work can be defined as *ethnography* by the author(s). Naming the work as ethnography is, as Skeggs argues, as much about historical placement and disciplinary location as it is about the methods employed. Second, *feminist ethnography* converses with the general debates in feminist theory about politics, methodology, ethics and epistemology. In other words, feminist ethnography is informed by feminist politics concerned with power: how it works and how to challenge it. It is also informed by feminist methodology including feminist ethics in resolving ethical dilemmas, and feminist epistemology stating that all knowledge is situational, partial and interpretative. This study meets all these requirements.

In addition, this study could also be classified under multi-site ethnography (Neyland 2008, 68–69) in the sense that it involves not just one field site but three separate work organizations. More than just about moving from one place to another, Daniel Neyland argues, multi-site ethnography is about changing perspectives and developing a particular kind of ethnographic attitude. I understand this attitude involving readiness to look at the phenomenon under scrutiny in several sites without being stuck in any of them. In other words, the phenomenon is studied from the perspectives offered by the sites, taking into consideration all the perspectives they offer.

Traditionally, ethnography has strong links to case studies, as does this study (Brewer 2000, 77). Case study is said to be a choice of what is to be studied (Stake 2003) which here includes the examination of three work organizations. I focus on call centre organizations, not only on call centre employees or call centre work, in order to gain a broader picture of the practices related to gender than I would have gained had my cases been restricted to the employees or a certain group of them. My cases include the employees as an integral part of the work organizations, but the unit under scrutiny is larger than individual workers. One criterion for the selection of cases was to find call centres that vary from one another by size,

ownership, location, work assignments, and workforce. However, it has been stated that although variety may be important, opportunity to learn from a case is of primary importance. Moreover, it may well be that the case from which one feels one can learn most means choosing the most accessible case. (Stake 2003, 151–153) Therefore the cases are never selected only on scientific but also on practical grounds.

In his attempt to answer the basic question ‘*What is a case?*,’ Charles Ragin (1992, 9–11) has presented four possible starting points. First, with *found* cases Ragin refers to empirically real and bounded yet specific units which are identified and established as cases in the course of the research process. Second, some cases are *objects* in the sense that they are empirically real and bounded, but have no need to verify their existence or establish their empirical boundaries in the course of the research process, because cases as objects are general and conventionalized. Third, when cases are *given*, they are neither empirical nor given but gradually imposed on empirical evidence as they take shape in the course of research. Finally, cases are seen as *conventions* by researchers who see them as general theoretical constructs but, nevertheless, view these constructions as the products of collective scholarly work and interaction and therefore as external to any particular research effort. Moreover, Ragin reminds us that this fourfold division of case conceptions is not absolute and, in fact, most research involves multiple uses of cases.

The formation of the cases in this study could be seen following different ways of reasoning. The cases are, to start with, objects because they are conventional units. Work organizations are very conventional units which have a relatively long history as cases in research. Furthermore, the call centre organizations are not included in this study in their entirety; only a specific number of their field offices are included, and it is in this sense that my cases are also found. Yet the inclusion of the number of the field offices was very much dictated by practical matters that occurred before the fieldwork was conducted, not during the research process, and thus this definition is arguable.

In addition to ethnography, this study has its roots in the long tradition of interviewing people. The interviews of this study may thus be characterized as semi-structured interviews. The topics of a semi-structured interview are predefined, but the method is quite flexible and allows new questions to be raised during the interview, therefore providing great breadth, given its qualitative nature (Tuomi &

Sarajärvi 2002, 77–78). Furthermore, and in relation to the background of this study in ethnography, the interviews in the research material can be called ethnographic interviews. And finally, the interviews are also feminist interviews.

David Silverman (2000, 37) has stated that '*ethnographies are based on observational work in particular settings.*' He thus considers ethnographies to be more fundamentally observing than interviewing. I agree with Silverman in that this has been the case earlier, but I would argue that the understanding of ethnography is broadening, partly because of practical reasons. Accordingly, I do not see any hindrance to why interviews or any form of research material could not be considered primary in ethnography. Moreover, Hammersley and Atkinson (1995, 131), for example, explicitly encourage ethnographers to use interviewing. They point out that interviewing can be an extremely important source of data, which may allow one to generate information that would be very difficult, if not impossible, to obtain otherwise. What is quite characteristic of ethnographic interviewing is that more often than not ethnographers interview a range of people, some of whom may need to be interviewed more than once. Moreover, interviewing intertwines with observing, and sometimes these two are hardly separable. Furthermore, Hammersley and Atkinson (1995, 131) argue that the researcher's goal must be to discover the correct manner of interpreting whatever research material an ethnographer has. Thus, ethnographic interviewing seems to be flexible as to the form of the interviews, and consequently, the emphasis is more on the ways in which they are analysed and interpreted than on standardizing them.

In feminist interviewing, instead, the emphasis seems to be more on the ways of conducting the interviews and especially on interaction with interviewees, such as avoiding control over interviewees and developing a rapport and a sense of connectedness between interviewers and participants. Some feminist researchers, especially during the 1970s and 1980s, developed face-to-face, qualitative and interactive methods as the most appropriate ways to produce research material on the realities of women's lives. This approach encouraged researchers to give voice to personal, experiential and emotional aspects of existence and to deconstruct power relations in research. Feminist social research has thus often been equated with a woman-to-woman, sensitive style of qualitative interview, observation or life history, or one that involves research participants in the production of knowledge.

(Ikonen & Ojala 2007; Oinas 2004; Ramazanoğlu & Holland 2002, 154–155; Reihanrz & Chase 2002; Skeggs 2001, 433–435)

Characteristic of feminist interviewing is its sensitiveness to power relations, and commitment to feminist methodology and ethics. This does not mean that it would in practice differ that much, for example, from ethnographic interviewing or ethically informed semi-structured interviews in general. However, feminist interviewing has its background in feminist research and in the discussions and experiences related to that. This is its particular characteristic that sets it apart theoretically, while there might be no actual difference in interviewing practices. Moreover, feminist interviewing has a specific aim to produce feminist knowledge about the phenomenon under scrutiny.

Feminist researchers have often reflected upon women's experiences of interviewing other women, while women's experiences of interviewing men are still relatively rarely discussed. This is, according to my interpretation, because the focus of feminist research has not been on men, but rather on women's lives and experiences, which may also have been a deeply personal starting point for the research (Ikonen & Ojala 2007; Reihanrz & Chase 2002; Skeggs 2001). More recently, feminists have become interested in men's lives as well, but several women researchers have reported difficulties in recruiting men to participate in research, while women have volunteered eagerly (e.g. Butera 2006; Pierce 1995). Moreover, it seems that feminist researchers have considered interaction with male interviewees as quite normative and customary and have reflected on the interaction mostly when something unusual has happened (Koivunen 2010a, 685).

According to Beverly Skeggs (2001, 426; also Stacey 1988, 22), ethnography and feminism appear to suit each other because they both have experience, participants, definitions, meanings and sometimes subjectivity as a focus and they do not lose sight of context. Similarly, interviewing has been considered a 'women-friendly' method of producing research material (Oakley, 1981; Oinas 2004; Reinharz 1992, 18–20; Reihanrz & Chase 2002). As I understand it, these roots in ethnography and interviewing are not in contradiction with feminist ideas of methodology. Instead, they are quite easily combined and intertwined because somewhat analogous discussions and starting points have been presented within the framework of both traditions.

One point of methodology is the researcher's reflexivity and identification of the research relationships that are directly related to producing the research material (Korvajärvi 1998, 53–57; Ramazanoğlu & Holland 2002, 158). It has been said that what feminist researchers share is a commitment to reflecting on the complexities of their own and participants' social locations and subjectivities (Oinas 2004, 218; Reinharz & Chase 2002, 232). To begin with, I identify myself as an outsider in the case call centres because I have never worked for a call centre, unlike Brannan (2005), for example, who did participation observation in a UK call centre. I do not therefore have the same first-hand knowledge of service work done voice-to-voice as an employee has. What I do have, instead, is work experience from other kinds of service work, and experiences of being a customer at the receiving end of the phone. Moreover, I come from a working-class family and have worked in several working-class jobs before and during my academic education. For this reason, I found the working class discourses and work cultures I encountered during my study fairly familiar and easy to identify with. This does not mean, however, that the participants considered me their equal in terms of social location.

Considering gender relations during my fieldwork, I would say that in general I found the female employees much easier to interview and interact with than most of the male employees. This is so even though I follow Marjorie DeVault's (1999, 62; also Oinas 2004, 222) line of thinking that women do not always, or even usually, understand each other easily. All women do not obviously behave in the same way in interviews and no two men's experiences are identical, although all the experiences of women and men are related to their gender (Reinharz & Chase 2002, 221–225; Schwalbe & Wolkomir 2002, 203). To some extent, the ease with female interviewees came from my own way of being and acting in the field, and, consequently, my behaviour was neither neutral nor insignificant in regard to the interviews.

In an interview situation I never said aloud the words '*I disagree*,' although I frequently did disagree with the interviewees. Thus, while interacting with the call centre employees in the field, I was doing emotion management myself (Henttonen 2010, 38; Letherby 2003, 110) by avoiding confrontation and by seeking like-mindedness and mutual understanding. I was on my interviewees' side, not against them. In the context of this study, however, it is impossible to concentrate on analysing my own emotional work in detail, I only point it out as a methodological

point of the study. Thus, emotional work during interviews is not done to please someone for whom the interviewer works but it is part of the interviewer's own research process (Coffey 1999, 57; Hoffmann 2007, 325; Kleinman 2007, 69). My motive to do emotional work was to have access to the call centres and produce research material for this study. If I had not displayed agreeableness but challenged or even confronted the participants' answers and points of view, they might have reacted by clamming up. This was what I wanted to avoid, although challenging the respondents would probably have produced exciting research material. However, my aim was to leave the employees in the field with a good impression of me, feminist research and the university, and leave them with no objections to participating in other studies in the future.

The feminist aim to create reciprocal relationships between researchers and participants has put emphasis on power that the researcher wields over the study and its participants. The researcher wields power by deciding which stories are told and how they are told. (DeVault 1999, 216; Fontana & Frey 1994, 370–372; Hoffmann 2007; Smith 2002, 20–21) This is the position of power I also held. I did not tell the participants much about myself or my work because of one reason only: they did not seem very interested in this background. When I tried to follow the feminist ethical principals that I had learned and tell them about what I was doing, the interviewees looked bored. I did not want to bore them and instead, encouraged them to ask me anything they wanted to know. Some of them asked a question or two, but others did not pose any questions. In my case, reciprocity refers to a two-way possibility to gain knowledge by asking questions.

Consequently, I understand knowledge as a view from somewhere particular. The aim is to avoid the god-trick, the mythic illusion that the researcher and the study are not interdependent upon one another or that social research can ever be neutral or hygienic. (Barad 1996, 180; Coffey 1999, 12; Haraway 1991; Richardson 1998, 348) Moreover, as we treat the others as human beings, we cannot remain objective, faceless interviewers, but become human beings and must disclose ourselves, learn about ourselves as we try to learn about the others (Fontana & Frey 1994, 373–374). My research relationships and positions are therefore an integral part of the study and consequently impossible to separate from the whole. Moreover, ethical guidelines and considerations are part of methodological theory and analysis of how research should proceed. Feminist methodology follows other delicate



methodologies in implying that researchers bear moral responsibility for their politics and practices (Ramazanoğlu & Holland 2002, 14). These are discussed in detail in the following section.

In sum, all research occurs within a particular society, and that society's beliefs, ideologies, traditions and structures, as well as other dimensions, all impact the research in multiple ways (Hesse-Biber, Leavy & Yaiser 2004, 13). The dimensions that have affected this study were made perceptible to the readers in the preceding discussion. I understand the knowledge of this study as produced instead of collected (Ramazanoğlu & Holland 2002, 154). It is produced first in the field together with the participants and later on in the course of the analysis. The research material that was produced in the field concerns everyday work, but also the style in which it was produced. This style of the production I would describe as rather mundane. Had the research questions been different, I would not have behaved in such a peaceable manner in the field. Regardless of how peaceable my way of being in the field was, the gender relations between me and the participants aroused some tensions which will also be analysed in the following chapters (also Koivunen 2010a). A research process takes time, it is personal, and at some points I would even call it intuitional. In addition, the analysis in this study is informed by my experiences in the field and the research relationships which form an epistemological context for the interpretations. As a consequence, contextual and situational knowledge was produced with methodology that combines aspects from various research traditions.

### 3.4 Ethical Considerations of the Research Process

The following discussion brings together some of the ethical considerations that I encountered during the research process. The ethical dilemmas vary depending on the stage of the research process, and the considerations in this section focus mainly on the planning and designing of the study, the fieldwork, the process of analysis, and finally, the writing of the research report. By including a separate section about ethical issues, I want to emphasize their importance and help the readers to find and distinguish the ethical questions that I was faced with. Moreover, the ethical

questions directed some of the choices I made during the research process and therefore it is important to identify and reflect upon them.

The traditions of qualitative research differ from one another in how they take research ethics into account. At one end, research ethics is approached as a technical norm, and the ethical questions are mainly seen as concerning actual research activity, such as the informed consent of the participants, the reliability of the methods used in data gathering and analysis, the questions dealing with securing the participants' anonymity, and the presenting of the research findings. Thus, the ethical principle is to protect those who participate in the research from harm and to protect their rights. At the other end, research ethics is seen as a methodological issue, which means that each and every choice made during the research process, whether it is, for instance, about writing proposals, negotiating access, gathering and analysing data, or disseminating findings, is a moral choice. (Hallowell, Lawton & Gregory 2005, 7; Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2002, 125) My point of view lies in between these extreme ends, being closer to the latter than the former. Thus, while I believe that there is more to research ethics than just technical norms, I also see many choices as having been done for practical rather than moral reasons during the research process, although they may have moral backgrounds and moral consequences. Moreover, during this research process, I have pondered over the majority of the methodological issues as ethical choices as well, even if I do not repeat them in this section.

Feminist researchers, according to Skeggs (2001, 433), often use prescriptive ethics such as reciprocity, honesty, accountability, responsibility, and equality. Yet Skeggs (2001, 435) suggests that there cannot be a fully ethical ethnography, as a fully ethical study would mean that all ethical issues are completely resolved. Instead, she continues, it is how feminists use their knowledge to resolve ethical dilemmas that produce a particular feminist ethnography: highly critical reflexivity and ethical sensitivity are a case in point. Furthermore, it has been argued that the ethical dilemmas must be resolved situationally, considering the individual circumstances that each dilemma encompasses (Goodwin et al. 2003; Pink 2001, 36–39). Strict observation of ethical codes may not provide real protection to research participants but may actually increase the risk of harm by blunting the ethnographer's sensitiveness to the issues specific to an ethnographic research process (Murphy & Dingwall 2001). Having said that, I do not mean that

considering ethical dilemmas and writing about the decisions made is unnecessary or irrelevant. On the contrary, it is important that the ethical issues surrounding the research are discussed, since it enables us to consider the costs at which the production of knowledge during the research process is achieved.

It is in the phase of selecting the research topic that researchers may already imagine the delicateness of the ethical dilemmas they might face. Still, as Hallowell and her colleagues (2005, 152) suggest, one should always expect the unexpected. This does not indicate, however, that the proceedings should not be properly planned in research. The planning and designing phase of this study involved the selection of the case study organizations. It is clear that the selected case study organizations cannot be too unique and specific because they should remain unidentified. Moreover, one major issue during the planning phase concerns gaining the access to the work organizations. One has to decide how much information about the study is enough for the contact person and how much is too much and, furthermore, how to inform the potential participants truthfully and convincingly about the study which is only starting to find its form. My tactic with the contact persons and other managers was to explain the major lines of the procedure somewhat briefly yet in depth and rely on that I would be asked for more information and details, if needed.

One of the ethical principles in research projects is to obtain from the participants a freely given informed consent for participation (e.g. Coffey 1999, 74–75; Hallowell, Lawton & Gregory 2005, 146; Sin 2005). I have written about the consent of the participants to be interviewed and observed in detail elsewhere (Koivunen 2010a). My experience could be summarized by saying that the procedure of selecting the interviewees and employees to be observed was not sufficiently transparent in every organization so that I could have been certain about the consent of the participants. However, even if the employees may have been reluctant to participate – and my understanding is that only a couple of them may have been reluctant or only shy and hesitant – I could not have forced them to speak with me. In other words, all the information that the participants gave me was volunteered, not forced.

When interviewing the employees, I mentioned to them that I was interested in their everyday work and the social community of work. For strategic reasons, I did not say anything about gender before getting their consent to be interviewed. My

purpose was not to conceal my research interests but to avoid provoking the employees because gender is sometimes found to be a provocative and controversial issue in Finland. Eventually, I asked several questions concerning women, men and gender at work, which did not leave any doubts about my research topic.

In the analysis phase, the ethical dilemma to be solved lies in the selection of which parts of the ethnographic data can be used. Research material may include knowledge that has to be left out of the report due to ethical reasons. Merja Laitinen and Tuula Uusitalo (2007, 323), for example, have divided confidential knowledge offered in the research material into three categories. First, the researcher may gather knowledge that can be reported only if the anonymity of the parties involved is taken into consideration. Second, the research material may include knowledge that the informant reveals but does not want, for one reason or another, to share with other people than the researcher. Finally, there may be knowledge that the researcher notices but cannot report on the personal level.

I encountered all these three categories of confidential knowledge in my research material, as I illustrate below with examples. The first category is, at least in principle, relatively easy to work out by protecting the anonymity of both the companies and the persons involved. In the phase of transcribing the research material, I gave pseudonyms to the case study organizations and all the employees involved. Thus, all the names of the interviewees and companies in this study are fictitious. However, it is obvious that pseudonyms do not guarantee the anonymity of the interviewees (Juvonen 2002, 64–65; Murphy & Dingwall 2001, 341). Consequently, parts of the research material needed to be left out from this study because they included too delicate information which may be linked to a certain person or to a group of people. The securing of anonymity also involves the shaping of the extracts by for example changing dialect words to literary language (Juvonen 2002, 37; Laitinen & Uusitalo 2007, 323), which I did carefully, although it may have concealed the situationality of the extracts. In addition, I left out even the pseudonyms if it appeared that separate excerpts or information together might compromise someone or introduce too delicate information.

The second category of knowledge that interviewees only wish to share with the researcher is also noteworthy since in the transliterations of the interviews there are utterances such as: *'this is really not so much worth [making] notes about, but it is so that...'* and *'between you and me'* and another example from the end of one

interview recording: *'I have that other [job] ... Turn that thing off [the interviewee points at the recorder].'* These kinds of expressions were rare but could be found in some interviews. Obviously, any information passed to me this way, I left out of the analysis and did not report. Yet this kind of information enriched my understanding of the practices in these call centres even if it was not directly reported.

The third category of knowledge refers to the kind of research material that requires more than just using pseudonyms to protect the anonymity of the participants, because it contains, for instance, too many details about personal characteristics and other recognizable information. A case in point is an incident described to me by one interviewee as an illustration of difficulties at work. The interviewee had been offended by someone but had never told anyone except me about her or his feelings toward the colleagues who had offended her or him. I refer to such social relations at workplaces on an abstract level only, leaving aside the exact incident on which my arguments are based. However, references to information about such delicate and personal instances are quite rare in this study.

In research, the ethical questions have to be taken into consideration when defining the level of abstraction of the research report. Because of all the ethical matters presented above, the level of abstraction in this book varies according to the call centres and research topics. To protect the anonymity of the participants, I sometimes present very detailed knowledge in a more abstract form. However, my orientation is towards small-scale practices, events and details which I find important in the interviewees' lives. Therefore, I was at first more reluctant to write about abstract matters than about concrete and detailed matters. However, I accept the argument of ethical responsibility, which naturally causes a shift from detailed writing to a more abstract discussion of empirical matters in the research material.

Many feminists aim at developing knowledge with their research participants who bring their own experiential knowledge, concerns and emotions into the project (Hesse-Biber, Leavy & Yaiser 2004, 12). Although I concur on this view, I have not let my interviewees read this research report in the making, first because only some of them can read English, while others, I suppose mainly elderly employees, cannot. If all the interviewees do not have the chance to comment on the report, I find it problematic to let only some of them, maybe only the minority, to do it. The second reason is the fact that some of the interviewees had left their workplace – if the workplace still existed – and could not be reached. The span from gathering the

research material to finishing and publishing the research report is several years and therefore the call centres I once visited no longer exist in the same form as they did earlier. This is a fact that, on the one hand, facilitates the protection of the work organizations and the employees. On the other hand, it makes it more difficult to predict the ways in which the publication of the research report is going to affect the people involved with it. To overcome these problems, I decided not to let the interviewees read the report before its publication (for a wider discussion, see Reinharz & Chase 2002, 233–234).

In short, ethical questions are not a separate component in the research process but they are present all the way from the selection of the research topic to the last written or spoken word of the research. Although I have above presented the existing ethical dilemmas rather shortly and in a simplified way, in practice they are a much larger set of questions and involve the whole research process. In many cases, ethical questions are solved on site in a very practical manner. In addition, ethical issues are frequently intertwined with other questions, especially with choices concerning research methods and practices. When the process of producing research material involves other people's participation, as is usually the case in ethnography, ethical dilemmas are generally derived from these interactional research relationships. Even though this study does not concern fundamentally sensitive topics, there were definitely sensitive situations and ethical dilemmas which have to be considered carefully. By saying this, my intention is not to undermine the ethical codes or the possibility to harm anyone. Instead, I have tried to make my ethical and other methodological choices transparent to the readers and by so doing bring the strengths and weaknesses of this study visible and open for criticism. As a consequence, during the process of conducting this study, I have produced knowledge about the complexity of the ethical questions.

## 4. The Case Study Organizations: Purple, Green and Blue

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce the three case study organizations and the analyses of the workplaces as the empirical basis for this work. I start with shortly introducing Purple, Green and Blue, the three call centres in which the fieldwork was carried out. I continue by presenting the background information of these work organizations, including their history, occupational structure, personnel, job contracts, working hours, and the main aim of the companies. I then analyse each of the three case study organizations, focusing on their office spaces and technology, which seem substantially different in every call centre. I also discuss their recruitment practices, everyday work, and distribution and control of work. Further topics of examination include the interactional relations with consumer customers and the social community of work, including relations among the employees. Within these themes, I investigate the empirical phenomena of gender practices and the ways in which gender is practised, used and barely considered in the workplaces. Consequently, the selection of the themes presented directs this study towards discussing the conceptualizations of practising gender and gender practices on the basis of empirical analysis.

What was common to all three case study organizations was that they were independent subcontractor firms to which several corporate clients had outsourced a share of their customer service and telemarketing. Moreover, at the time of fieldwork, all three call centres were members of The Finnish Direct Marketing Association (FDMA), which was an important asset in finding the firms for the case studies. The three call centres that were selected were also members of the employers' confederation and followed the collective agreement. This is quite exceptional because, according to the convener of The Service Union United (PAM), most of the Finnish call centres were at that time 'wild' ones, which means that they were not members of the employers' confederation and therefore not

obligated to follow the collective agreement. The collective agreement was not generally binding, which is why the unorganized call centres did not have to follow it. (Martikainen 1997, 52–53) In Finland, the collective agreement is ratified as generally binding if about half of the employees working in the sector are unionized and employed by an employer which is a member of the employers' confederation. This was not the case in the call centres; the call centre personnel was unionized, but belonged to several different trade unions on the grounds of their previous jobs and occupations. Therefore, most of the employees were not members of The Service Union United (PAM), which represented the employees' side when the collective agreement was being negotiated.

Another point common to the call centres was that there were more women than men working on the office-floor level. The gender division varied on the levels of middle and top management in the work organizations. Thus, the hierarchical gender segregation which refers to the gender differences in organizational hierarchy also varied among the call centres. What was divergent then was that the operations of all three work organizations were based on the use of slightly different workforce in terms of the employees' age, educational background and prospects in the labour market. While one of the work organizations employed students, the other two employed people at work life. The firms also differed in their use of other kind workforce: one of them used temporary employees, provided by local agencies for temporary employment, and another one used self-employed telemarketers.

One more common feature in all call centres was that their employees from the shop floor to the top managers were concerned about the bad reputation of the call centre business among prospective customers and potential employees. Although the call centres used varying means to tackle the issue, all of them still aimed to improve the image of the whole industry at the same time as they were building up the image of their own firm.

What distinguishes the firms from each other is their location. Call centres are not evenly distributed globally or nationally. Examples from Sweden – a neighbouring country that resembles Finland in many respects – show that customer services in call centres can be performed outside urban areas, in locations in the European periphery (Lorentzon 2004). On the basis of Finnish newspaper articles, similar transition from urban areas into the countryside has been happening in Finland. Notably, Finland is one of the largest countries in Europe by its acreage



and yet, at the same time, its population density of about 5 million inhabitants is one of the lowest in the EU. The southern parts of Finland are usually called ‘The Rush-hour Finland,’ even though the rush hour in the sparsely inhabited Finland bears a totally different meaning to the rush hour in the metropolises of the world. Nevertheless, other areas of Finland, especially the northern and eastern parts are very sparsely populated compared even to southern Finland.

## 4.1 Characteristics of the Case Study Organizations

In order to discuss the past, current operation and personnel of the case study organizations, certain background knowledge is needed (Korvajärvi 1998; Stake 2003, 139–140; Winiecki 2005). This section provides an illustration of the characteristics of Purple, Green and Blue on the basis of the following outline:

- brief history of the call centre
- occupational structure
- number of personnel
- age structure of personnel
- educational background of personnel
- gender segregation in personnel
- types of job contracts
- working hours
- aim of the company
- technology in use

### *Purple*

Purple was a family-owned company with about 30 employees. It was founded in the 1980s by a female entrepreneur who had earlier worked as publisher’s subcontractor telemarketing magazine subscriptions. She first started telemarketing at home in the evenings and weekends, with her husband, children and neighbours later helping her. In the 1980s, she resigned from her nine-to-five job and founded the company in southern Finland. The firm was at its largest just before the

economic recession of the early 1990s. In those days, the company consisted of a number of field offices, one even abroad, and had more than one hundred employees. During the period of fieldwork, Purple still comprised several offices. It had no spoken intentions to expand although there was an attempt to establish a new office in another region, which eventually failed. A couple of months after the failed attempt, the main office moved from one office building to another.

The occupational structure of Purple was threefold: the office-floor level had about 30 telemarketers and two clerical workers. Roughly one-third of the telemarketers were men and two-thirds women. The mid-level consisted of two female sales managers who had worked in the firm for a considerably long time. The head of the office was the managing director, who was the son of the founder of the firm and one of the owners. According to him, it took ten years for the firm to be transferred into his management. The founder of the firm was no longer involved in the daily operations but continued as the chair of the board. Thus, as far as the hierarchical gender segregation in Purple is concerned, the work organization appeared to have a female majority, except for the managing director's post.

The ages of Purple's employees ranged from 25 to 65. Most of them were in their fifties or sixties, although it was impossible to define the average age of the employees on the basis of observation only. There were also a couple of part-time pensioners working as telemarketers. The educational backgrounds of the employees varied: several telemarketers only had the compulsory education of six to nine years while some others had mainly trained in vocational colleges for traditional working-class jobs, such as various craftsmen's trades in construction or clothing industry, or in the service sector. In addition, some of the telemarketers had had or still had jobs, for example, in the service, transport and health care sectors, or other jobs which may not have required any specific education or vocational training.

The telemarketers had various kinds of employment contracts: from permanent to fixed-term, from part-time to full-time, from eight hours a day to only a few hours a month. In addition, there were a few self-employed subcontractors who rented office space from Purple. The telemarketers also had a possibility to work at home, although this was not recommended.

The telemarketers' work basically consisted of making outbound calls to pre-existing customers whose fixed-period magazine subscriptions were about to end. In addition, the telemarketers made calls to potential customers whose contact information was in the publishers' database. The range of magazines whose subscriptions they marketed was wide, excluding, due to the firm's choice, national newspapers. The telemarketers focused only on selling, and for example the invoicing was done by the client publishers. Work in Purple was organized in an individual-based way because all the telemarketers did the same sales work. Thus, there were no actual work teams in Purple, although a distinction between initial calling and follow-up calling could be done. The telemarketers worked with ordinary telephone sets or mobile phones, or with both in turns. There was no integration of computer and telephone systems in Purple but the telemarketers dialled the phone numbers manually. Therefore, the technology used in Purple can be characterized as reliable and easy to use, but not too sophisticated in comparison to some modern call centres.

### *Green*

The office of the call centre Green employed about 150 employees and was located in southern Finland. It was first founded in the early 1980s, and in the late 1990s, the owners of the firm sold it to an international contact centre network. Since then, the office has gone through a range of organizational changes such as mergers, changes in ownership and organizational structure and, consequently, even a name change. These organizational changes seemed to emerge continually even in the 2000s, ten years after the change of ownership. Green's office operated in association with other offices belonging to the network but it had the strongest relations with the other Scandinavian offices. Thus, unlike Purple, Green was administratively run by the contact centre network.

The occupational structure of the work organization was multi-levelled and quite manifold in terms of managerial relations. In addition to the customer service agents who worked on the office-floor level, there were 14 team leaders working alongside the agents and about ten managers with different duties in middle management. The managers were in touch with the firms and organizations that had outsourced their assignments to Green or were planning to do that. Furthermore, Green's top

management consisted of the call centre manager and the CEO. In addition to the agents and managers, there was also an internal IT unit with four employees, and other operations which were not directly related to the service work in the call centre.

The agents' ages varied roughly from 18 to over 60 years and, like in the other case study organizations, it was not possible to define the average age of the personnel in Green. However, with a slight simplification, it could be estimated that the customer service agents were, on the one hand, young people from about 18 to 30 years of age with little occupational training or students who earned extra money for their living. The majority of the agents were women, although there were also young male agents working mainly on various helpdesk assignments requiring at least some technological knowledge. On the other hand, some agents were middle-aged women in their forties or fifties with a long work history mostly as clerical employees. There were more women than men, or women and men in equal numbers on every level of the organizational hierarchy, and even the CEO was a woman. Thus, the quantitative division of labour by gender was quite equal.

The customer service agents in Green had two kinds of contracts, full-time and part-time. In addition, there were several employees hired through an employment agency for temporary work. The working hours of full-time agents were 37.5 hours per week and those of part-time agents 16 hours per week at the minimum. Consequently, the work shifts varied in Green. The first of the agents to arrive at work started their morning shift at 8.00 am. The ones that followed came in every hour so that the last of the agents started working at 5.00 pm. The employees stopped calling at 9.00 pm at the latest. Some agents also did regular shifts during the weekends, both Saturdays and Sundays.

Green had many kinds of corporate clients and outsourced tasks, such as telemarketing, various kinds of helpdesks and invoicing. The work of its customer service agents consisted of making outbound calls to customers, taking inbound calls from customers, or doing both in turns. The work was organized in teams depending on the clients' assignments. Sometimes, the company did not have enough agents to deal with the assignments and, therefore, outsourced some of them to other call centres. Green used computer software which includes a predictive dialling system. Thus, there were both inbound and outbound calls and, moreover, technology that enabled the agents to use the Internet, e-mail and SMS in customer

contacts, although the telephone was still the main tool for customer service. As for the sophistication of its technology, Green was probably one of the forerunners in Finland.

### ***Blue***

Blue was the newest of all three case study organizations and had about 140 employees. The call centre was located in the northern part of Finland, in a rural region with a relatively high unemployment rate. The office was founded in the early 2000s by an entrepreneur who had sold it to the call centre company called Blue. He had kept a share of the ownership and continued as one of the shareholders represented in the board of the company.

The occupational structure of Blue was multi-levelled but not as manifold as that of Green. First, the office-floor level consisted of agents, telemarketers and their supervisors, almost an equal number of women and men in each group. In addition to their usual supervisors' responsibilities, the supervisors performed the same customer service and telemarketing tasks as the agents and telemarketers. Their assignments were organized in teams and, in this respect, Blue resembles Green. Second, the mid-level of the organizational hierarchy consisted of two call centre managers. Each of them was in charge of several offices, and they also negotiated and maintained relations with existing and prospective corporate clients. Finally, the all-male top management was the CEO, who had started in his post only a couple of years before the fieldwork. Before that there was a period of time when Blue did not have a managing director at all, apparently, because of the lack of appropriate applicants. During that time, the executive committee consisting of the male representatives of the shareholder organizations of Blue was in charge of the business.

The office where fieldwork was conducted had 70–75 employees. Many of the employees were middle-aged, although the age of the employees varied from 18 to 60 years. While differences existed in their educational backgrounds, many had completed a three-year course in commercial college. Roughly estimated, about three-fourths of the agents were women and one-fourth men. The men worked mainly in the helpdesk assignments in which there were as many female agents as male agents. In outbound assignments women outnumbered men.

The employees' job contracts in Blue were permanent. Their working time was either six or eight hours a day in three shifts: the morning, day or evening shift. On weekdays, customers were phoned until 8.00 pm at the latest. In some of the teams, the agents had service duty also on Saturdays every third month. Usually on Saturdays a couple of agents only worked the morning shift. There were also extra agents who were, for instance, on part-time pension and worked from ten to twelve six-hour work days a month.

Several corporate clients had outsourced to Blue tasks which were mainly outbound assignments. These tasks included mostly selling and marketing of various products and services or taking care of customer appointments. Moreover, there were also inbound calls coming in for the clients' helpdesk services. New computer software had been implemented at Blue, which did not include a predictive dialling system but enabled the distribution of inbound calls.

The similarities and dissimilarities among the case study organizations described thus far are summarized in Table 2. The first combining characteristic is that all call centres followed the collective agreement. Second, there was gender segregation in all three work organizations although in Green it was only vertical, while in Purple and in Blue it was both vertical and horizontal. Moreover, the majority of the workers on the office-floor level were women. This is typically the case in the call centres in Europe and North America, but not so much in India, where call centre employees work at nights (Belt, Richardson & Webster 2000; Noronha & D'Cruz 2009, 55; Taylor & Bain 1999). The third common aspect is the age structure of the personnel. It was quite wide in the work organizations, although in Purple the employees were, on average, older than in Green and Blue. Purple and Blue did not hire students to work as telemarketers, while Green did. This is also quite exceptional in the international comparison of call centre personnel (e.g. Holtgrewe 2007; Taylor & Bain 1999). Finally, yet another similarity between the three case study call centres was that although the employees' job contracts were diverse, part-time working was possible in all of them. However, fixed-term job contracts existed in Purple and Green, but not in Blue. Such variety in employment contracts is congruent with call centre studies in general.

Table 2. Summary of the Characteristics of the Call Centres

	<b>Purple</b>	<b>Green</b>	<b>Blue</b>
<b>Ownership</b>	Family-owned firm	International contact centre network	Joint-stock company
<b>Collective agreement</b>	Followed	Followed	Followed
<b>Gender segregation</b>	Horizontal and hierarchical	Hierarchical	Horizontal and hierarchical
<b>Gender of top management</b>	Men	Women	Men
<b>Gender of middle management</b>	Women	Mostly women	Men
<b>Gender of workers</b>	Two-thirds women	Three-quarters women	Three-quarters women
<b>Age structure of personnel</b>	Mostly middle-aged and older, no students	Mostly middle-aged and students	Mostly middle-aged and young, no students
<b>Types of job contracts</b>	Permanent and fixed term; part-time and full-time; self-employed subcontractors	Permanent and fixed term; part-time and full-time; temporary agency employees	Permanent; part-time and full-time
<b>Organization of work</b>	Individual-based	Team-based	Team-based
<b>Technology in use</b>	Not advanced	Advanced	Mid-advanced

The size of the three case study organizations varied but they were all still rather small in comparison, for example, with the call centres in the UK which employ several hundred or even several thousand employees. In two out of the three work organizations, the organization of work was based on teamwork. Also, the level of the computer and telephone technology in use was different in every call centre. The degree of technology use in my case organizations differs from that described in earlier call centre studies, in which one of the starting points is that employees are working with a sophisticated computer-based system that dictates the pace of their work and monitors its quality (Callaghan & Thompson 2001; Taylor & Bain 1999; Taylor et al. 2002). The dissimilarity had an effect on the employees' working conditions, which appeared to be relatively unrestricted in the Finnish call centres.

## 4.2 Purple: Togetherness and Communal Interaction

The following analysis of the case study organization Purple begins with a short introduction to the interior of the workplace and the everyday telemarketing work in order to provide the material and operational context for gender practices and practising of gender. First, I describe the office space and the setting that it offers for work and interaction. Second, I focus on recruitment practices, the telemarketers' routes to employees, and their wages and individual incentives. Third, I discuss the work of magazine subscription telemarketers in relation to their customers. In doing so, the attention is paid on the gendered patterns of interaction with customers and gender divisions of magazines. Finally, I analyse the social community of work, which was largely formed because Purple was a family-owned company that offered a setting for emotionally draining telemarketing work. I start from the analysis of the concrete context and equipment with which the work is done, including the office space and technology. Then I examine the actual process of doing work with the organizational recruitment practices. Finally, I analyse the employees' social spaces first with customers and then with co-workers and managers in detail.

Purple's main office was located in the southern part of Finland. The office operated in a city which is among the ten largest cities in Finland, in an office building next to the centre of the city. From the outside, the building in which the



firm was located appeared rather unnoticeable but if one looked carefully enough, the name of the firm could be seen on the windows and doors. The front door of the office was locked, and the visitors needed to ring the doorbell to enter the premises.

The interior of the office consisted of cellular single and double offices and horseshoe-shaped corridors with paintings and art posters on the walls and colourful carpets on the floors. There were lots of plants around the sofas and bookshelves, and other decorations to make the whole office appear more cosy and home-like. Some of the employees had decorated their offices by hanging up their own posters, photographs and children's drawings on the walls and by bringing in soft toys and potted plants. During the period of fieldwork, the office was moved from one building to another. The new office also had cellular single and double offices along the corridors in the shape of a tuning fork. It was more modern with its harmonious style of decoration and colour scheme, although a lot of the decoration was transferred there from the old office. A telemarketer called Mervi was one of the most eager to decorate her working space and the keenest to comment on the interior of the new office:

*This is just a lovely place. All the colours and decorations are just so, if you compare the old place and this, the difference is like night and day. Just lovely. And I like my own cubicle at least, a small one, you know, in the back corner, I like it. And that you are allowed to decorate it the way you like.*

The employees were allowed to personalize their offices by decorating and modifying them. Unlike in open-plan offices, in Purple the employees could adjust the lighting, temperature and ventilation of the office to meet their personal needs. Control over one's office space is usually connected to the social order and status in an organization's hierarchy so that the further up one climbs the hierarchical ladder, the more control one has over office operations (Baldry, Bain & Taylor 1998; Hofbauer 2000). Cellular offices are particularly associated with the legal profession, universities, research institutes and other contexts with high status and highly autonomous individuals who need protection from distraction (Duffy 1997). As for Purple, some of the employees clearly enjoyed the privacy of a single office, while others preferred to work with their co-worker in a double office. I understand

that the possibility to work in a single or double office behind a closed door was a sign of management's trust and confidence in the employees.

The organization of the office space in Purple was the first and most visible thing that differentiated this work organization from those presented in the earlier call centre studies. In the typical UK call centre, as has been described, serried ranks of mainly female workers donned in cumbersome telephone headphones are bent over their computers seeking to translate micro-electronic data into meaningful customer communication (Alferoff & Knights 2003, 70). Call centre work is likely to be done in an open-plan office (Baldry, Bain & Taylor 1998; Taylor & Bain 1999, 115) but this was not the case in Purple where the employees had more privacy. Work buildings and office spaces are, among other things, structures of control, and they facilitate control through the way in which space is organized. At the same time, office space creates conditions for interaction and supervision. Cellular offices may, for example, obstruct communication and informal contacts and therefore appear disadvantageous. (Baldry, Bain & Taylor 1998; Hofbauer 2000)

Bureaus of the public sector in Finland have been examined by Leena Eräsaari (1995, 153–159), who has found that in most of them the managers' offices are cosier and more home-like than those of the employees, and, moreover, the furniture, indoor plants and rugs are more common in the offices of managers in high rather than middle positions. Accordingly, if women in lower positions have indoor plants or rugs in their confined offices with no room for extra furniture, they have usually brought them from home, whereas the managers' suites and indoor plants are paid for by the organization and taken care of by someone else than the managers themselves. This was not exactly the case in Purple, where the majority of decorative things belonged to the owners of the firm. What is more, the managers' offices were not significantly different from those of the telemarketers, although the furniture in the office of the managing director was solid and probably quite costly in comparison to the furniture in the rest of the office. The managing director's single office and the project managers' double office were situated centrally, not in the remotest end of the corridors sometimes considered as the most prestige location in offices.

Purple's founder, Ms Syrjä, commented on the home-like interior by saying that she had always taken good care of the comfortableness and satisfaction of the telemarketers: when they feel good, they work effectively. She argued that the

cosiness and aesthetics of the office interiors increased the employees' comfortableness, although to the customers it was invisible. The office was thus not designed to impress passers-by or visiting clients with its organizational prestige or modernity, but to reinforce the employees' feeling of contentment. Ms Syrjä did not explain whether she assumed that especially women – the majority of her employees – thought it important to work in an aesthetic environment, but that is the impression I received. In addition, she may have felt that it was important to her as a woman to emphasize the aesthetics of the work environment. In contrast, the male managing director did not bring up the same views as Ms Syrjä did, but concentrated more on the operational issues of the firm than the aesthetic aspect of the office interior. It seems that at this workplace gender was linked to the aesthetics of the office space so that it was women more often than men who were affected by the office aesthetics and who appreciated it.

Another aspect of the physical work environment of the telemarketers that has to be taken into consideration was the telephone system they used. It was characteristic of Purple that the integration of a telephone and data system had not been seen as worthwhile equipment, unlike in call centres in general. Consequently, its management did not have a possibility to listen to or record the telemarketers' calls without their knowledge. Yet, some monitoring reports about the number and length of calls could be received after a delay. According to the managing director, there was no need for more specific monitoring of the telemarketers and the phone calls. The monitoring reports were not used as a basis for negative feedback to the telemarketers, not even in instances where their performance was occasionally poor or their sales were declining. Thus, the telemarketers were given only positive, heartening responses by the sales managers, which encouraged them to improve their performance.

In the world of gender dichotomies, technology is usually associated with men and masculinity. Therefore, it has been said that there is a nexus between men and technology which seriously undermines women's agency within the technologically mediated society (Vehviläinen 2005, 23–24). Accordingly, the fear of technology is often identified with women and femininity (Berg 1996, 121). Nevertheless, women have been users of technology in many workplaces, such as banks for many decades (Lehto & Sutela 2009, 117). Yet, in call centres, for example, women have been recognized as customer service representatives rather than technology experts

(Korvajärvi 2004a). In modern call centres, new technology is a common basis for work and employees are able to take advantage of it, even though their work is predominately understood as interaction.

The telemarketers in Purple used ordinary phones with headsets. They dialled the phone numbers manually instead of computer dialling and discarding busy lines and calls with no reply. Their work was mostly about waiting for someone to answer the phone calls. Customers with land line phones were not always at home to answer, and customers with mobile phones did not necessarily answer calls from an unfamiliar number. Thus, the majority of the calls the telemarketers made were not answered. Because it was hard for the telemarketers to get into contact with customers, they often described their work as being repetitious and therefore boring. This boredom was underlined by the office interior; almost all the telemarketers worked in a single office and could therefore not keep company to each other between the calls. Instead, they passed the time, for example, doing crossword puzzles, knitting, stretching their arms and legs, or doing some other easily interruptible thing while they waiting for someone to pick up the phone. Surprisingly, the shift from fixed telephone sets to mobile phones did not much alter the telemarketers' work in regard to waiting. This was said to be because many customers could not answer their private mobile phones at work.

Purple was a subcontractor of several publishing houses and kept a register of their former and current customers. On the basis of that register, it delivered register material to the subcontractors. After discussions with Purple's management, I came under the impression that the publishing houses were not interested in the styles with which their products were marketed. Consequently, the telemarketers in Purple were allowed to decide the wording of the calls themselves since there were no written scripts to follow. Also, the pace of the work was dictated by the telemarketers themselves. The telemarketers had individual sales styles which they varied in order to catch the attention of potential customers. The telemarketers' purpose was to sell magazine subscriptions by making unsolicited calls to customers who were rarely willing to talk to the telemarketers or make a decision to subscribe. Therefore, the very first moments of the customer contact were crucial in terms of arousing her or his interest.

I constructed a fictitious example of lines that a telemarketer could say to a customer during a phone call concerning a magazine subscription. It illustrates the

work that the telemarketers do day in day out. This example shows only the imaginary telemarketer's lines, not the customer's lines:

*'This is Jane Bloggs from Glossy Magazine, good day.'*

*'I sent you a sample copy of Glossy Magazine. Have you had time to read it?'*

*'Sure. This is a busy time of the year, I know. I have a special offer for you. You can get the annual subscription of Glossy Magazine with a very low price of only 56 euros. You can pay it in three instalments. And if you place your subscription now, you will get a nice silk scarf as a present.'*

*'I see.'*

*'Oh, I'm sorry to hear that. I hope you will get better in no time.'*

*'Do you have anybody you could subscribe the magazine as a present?'*

*'Right. Another time, then. Bye.'*

Telemarketing in general and magazine subscription telemarketing in particular are among the least valued jobs in Finland (Suomen Kuvalehti, 2004; 2007), although Finns typically read and subscribe to magazines regularly. Only less than 15 per cent of magazine circulation is single-copy sales. Moreover, it has been estimated that approximately 40 per cent of the magazine subscriptions are bought via telephone, thus, mainly from the telemarketers. (Statistics Finland, 2007; Finnish DMA, 2004) In this sense, telemarketing of magazine subscriptions is important and profitable work which increases the availability of publishers' products. Despite this, the low status of magazine telemarketing set the atmosphere for Purple's operation and for the telemarketers work.

In sum, it can be said that Purple was rather different from the 'new sweatshops' described in some call centre studies (e.g. Fernie and Metcalf 1998). In Purple, there was not much direct control or emphasis on the organizational hierarchy, whereas in Fernie and Metcalf's study, control over call centre agents was more a point of departure than a result. In Purple, the degree of telemarketers' autonomy and independency was relatively high, which may have hindered collaboration with their co-workers. At the same time, however, the demand of effectiveness was present in Purple, although more or less in the background. The managers' superiority was not emphasized by the decoration, location or size of their offices. Instead, the office interiors diminished the differences in the employees' positions in the work

organization and created a comfortable atmosphere. There was, however, a slight difference in the keenness of women and men to decorate their offices: it can be said that women were more interested in it than men and that the male telemarketers' offices were plainer than those of their female colleagues. In other words, women bestrode the setting of everyday physical organization.

#### 4.2.1. Recruiting Middle-aged Telemarketers

In this section, I examine the recruiting processes and the hiring channels used in Purple. In addition, I look into what kind of employees the call centre preferred in recruitment, how the applicants came to work in Purple, and what they thought of their wages. Recruitment as a social process enables us to perceive the ways in which gender-related practices and hierarchies are sustained. Employers may, for example, select and recruit employees whom they prefer in terms of gender, age and race (Reskin & Padavic 2002, 81–83). Thus, recruitment is not innocent; employees are selected according to cultural understandings that show a gender hierarchy as a basic mechanism behind the practices. Similarly, during the recruitment process, applicants form their preview about the workplace, and the recruitment process is thus their first chance to form an idea of the prevailing circumstances at the workplace.

According to the managing director Janne, the major problem in Purple was the lack of good telemarketers to hire: *'It is not every day that a good [worker] walks in the door. When you get someone to come in, you like to keep them here.'* Successful recruiting and hiring practices were therefore essential to ensure the continuity of the business. One example of the difficulties in hiring new employees was illustrated by the series of events described by Janne. The company had started up a new field office in another city, where Janne had had negotiations with the local authorities, who welcomed the office with pleasure. The office was in operation for five months, and during that time they had, in addition to the project manager, only one telemarketer working there for two days. Two people were interested in having a job there, but were obviously not interested enough to really try the work out in practice. Finally, the company had to close down the office because they were not able to hire anyone, even though they tried to recruit telemarketers by contacting

local vocational institutes and employment offices, by handing out flyers and by advertising in a newspaper. According to the managing director, one or two telemarketers would have been enough for a start, but nobody showed up. He knew that previously in the same building there had been several telemarketing firms which had not paid the employees' wages as agreed. This was obviously one reason for people's distrust towards the new telemarketing office.

Purple demonstrated, according to the managing director, a remarkably low turnover rate. Several studies have showed that the staff turnover rate in call centres is high (e.g. Lewig & Dollard 2003; Odih & Knights 2007), but this was said not to be the case in Purple. For example, a couple of telemarketers were at retirement age but wanted to continue working there. Nor were they encouraged to retire. Considering employee well-being, this obviously shows that the employees were content and happy with their work since they were not in a hurry to leave, and their personal resources and competences were not in conflict with the work requirements. What is more, the firm needed and valued good telemarketers regardless of their age and offered them 'bridge jobs' that follow career employment and precede permanent retirement (Doeringer, 1990, 6). To put it differently, to many employees, Purple was a workplace between their career employment and retirement, in which they could cut down their working hours and get used to the idea of being outside work life.

Purple's personnel were selected and hired through certain processes and criteria. In order to shed light on these recruiting processes and principles employed, I explicitly asked the managing director Janne whether there was a difference between the performances of female and male telemarketers in telemarketing of magazine subscriptions. His answer was '*no, not that much.*' According to him, gender did not make much difference, except that women had more empathy towards customers and better communication skills than men. In other words, he first denied that gender makes a difference in telemarketing, and then elaborated on the differences between female and male telemarketers. According to my understanding, the view that women are more empathetic and have better communication skills than men is adopted not just by this managing director, but also more broadly. Later on, the managing director continued by commenting implicitly on the telemarketers' gender:

*Janne: Someone once asked whether there is a certain stereotype that would fit well into this job, so I said that the best experience we have is of people who have been in nursing and in that kind of a people skills field. They already have the experience, they know how to talk with people. And that has a huge positive effect in this. And why we are looking for older candidates, they have life experience; they know how to talk with people.*

Apparently, Janne preferred to hire employees who were accustomed to work with people, such as older registered nurses, which in practice means women because in Finland registered nurses are rarely men. Throughout their interviews, Purple's management described the skills and qualities a good telemarketer should have: certain personality traits, communication and especially verbal skills, politeness and life experience were expected of the telemarketers on the basis of their previous jobs and occupations. When the telemarketing recruits already knew how to talk with people, management did not need to train their communication skills. This is in line with findings from call centres in the UK where the managers explicitly stated their preference for older female employees on a number of occasions, claiming that, what was repeatedly termed as their greater life experience, was invaluable in the call centre environment (Belt, Richardson & Webster's 2002, 28; Odih & Knights 2007, 119). During their previous training and work experience, many of the telemarketers in Purple had acquired these skills. Thus, the skills the telemarketers needed were not specific to any job or occupation but rather general experience gained from work life and human relations.

What Janne does not say in so many words in the excerpt is that the telemarketers' gender and age have an effect on their work performance. This is in line with earlier findings, according to which the call centre managers hold gendered assumptions and expectations about the differential abilities of women and men (Belt, Richardson & Webster 2002). Moreover, it has been suggested (Cameron 2000) that the view that women are more co-operative and have better communication skills has led to a widespread employment of women in the communication industries, such as call centres. In his interview, Janne carried on talking about the gender of the employees and gender segregation:



*Janne: We do have men, too. Somehow there are more [women]. I don't know why [that is]. Maybe it's the appreciation of the work. These are not the sexiest job titles so we attract more women.*

*Tuija: So you have more women even among the job seekers?*

*Janne: Yeah, sure. It's purely that. I once said somewhere when it was asked that there are about 70% women and 30% men. Of course, of those who turn up there fewer are men, but the men who show up, manage to get into the job better. Maybe they are themselves better segmented into the fact that this is the job that they want to try out.*

What the managing director Janne said here is that there were fewer men among job seekers but, in practice, a male job seeker had better chances to be hired. The last sentence is slightly unclear but, according to my interpretation, the managing director means that when a man has decided to try out telemarketing, which is usually considered women's work, he is very highly motivated and therefore should be hired. Janne's idea explains at least partly the fact that in Purple about one-third of the telemarketers were men, which seems to be a rather large proportion when compared to the cultural image of telemarketing as women's work. Janne did not mention any specific skills or previous jobs expected of men. Neither did he justify his preference for male job seekers, for example, by wishing to correct the gender-bias, but said only that male job seekers are more highly motivated to work as telemarketers.

Apparently, Purple's management had (at least) two contradictory assumptions that influenced the recruitment and hiring practices of the company. On the one hand, the company preferred recruits with communication skills that they had learnt in their previous jobs. Therefore, it was considered particularly advantageous if the job seeker had previously worked as registered nurse, for example, which is an occupation where the majority of employees are women. On the other hand, men were favoured in the hiring process because they were seeking a job in a female-majority business, not because of their particular skills or previous jobs. Thus, these men were rewarded for their willingness to cross the lines of horizontal segregation. In Purple's hiring process, gender was linked to two different arguments: first, women's alleged skills and competences were valued and, second, men's

willingness to work in telemarketing was valued over women's alleged skills and competences.

### *Routes to Recruits*

The employees I interviewed did not reflect very much on how they had started working in Purple, perhaps because many of them had been working there for so long and could not remember how it happened. Several interviewees described their entering into the company by saying laconically that they wanted to work in Purple, contacted its management and then got a job there. Many of them had heard that Purple was a firm with good references, and had therefore sought their way into it.

*Erkki: I've been [here] for about three years. And originally I came to have this job so that I was first [a craftsman] for a very long time. But then I had to give up [the craftsman's] job first of all because there was so much unemployment and then my back was in such a bad shape that I couldn't do it. I became an entrepreneur and I came for the heck of it, I went to try out when I saw this ad [of a magazine subscriptions company]. This was a little less than 20 years ago. Well, it turned out that this became my main job. And, well, I was in that [other] hard competing company for almost 10 years. Some disagreements arose and I left the company and came [here]. (...) I've known Ms Syrjä for years. I told her what the situation was and that if she doesn't want to have me I'll quit this job completely. So Ms Syrjä, of course, I was a good salesperson, she said, she could take me.*

*Tuija: So she did not interview you in a big way?*

*Erkki: No, but she knew me. And really the circles are so small in magazine subscriptions that we all know each other.*

Erkki's road to Purple is relatively common in the sense that his recruitment was mainly based on Ms Syrjä's social relations and acquaintances. Several interviewees told me that they looked for a job at Purple because they knew Ms Syrjä or another manager or telemarketer in the company, as Erkki did. Later on, however, this pattern changed, which became visible in two ways. First, Ms Syrjä stopped taking part in Purple's everyday operations and, therefore, her acquaintances were not utilized any more. It is also possible that her former acquaintances had retired or

sought their way to other kinds of jobs. Second, Purple had started to employ other, less personalized methods to find job seekers. One or two newcomers had seen the company's job advertisement on the website of an employment office and sent in their job applications. One telemarketer was hired after a training period organized as part of active labour market policy measures. A few telemarketers, however, had approached Ms Syrjä personally to find a job, even after she had formally stepped down from Purple's management. In conclusion, Ms Syrjä's acquaintances and networks had been an important asset in the company's hiring process, but eventually the situation had changed towards less person-oriented recruiting processes.

It appeared that Ms Syrjä had been a very outgoing and active person with a large number of acquaintances, both women and men. She knew a lot of people and had great many connections, the kind which Mark Granovetter (1973) calls weak ties. Weak ties are casual acquaintances, not close, intense or intimate friends or family members. As Granovetter states, a large number of people can be reached through weak ties. This is because strong ties, that is, friends and kin, are likely to know the same people and, for example, the same job opportunities. Granovetter (1973, 1732) has pointed out that when he asked his respondents (in the 1970s) whether a friend had told them about their current job, they said: '*not a friend, an acquaintance.*' In addition, Granovetter argues that weak ties are an important resource in making job mobility possible. When people change jobs, they are not only moving from one network of ties to another, but also establishing a link between the two. This also happened at Purple, where new employees helped their acquaintances to find work at Purple.

Thus, several employees were recruited via Ms Syrjä, but many were also recruited via employee referrals. The telemarketers both informed their acquaintances, especially other telemarketers, about job opportunities at Purple, but were also asked about job opportunities by telemarketers and other people who were seeking jobs. Employee referral is a process which offers a rich pool of recruits (Fernandez, Castilla & Moore 2000, 1351), and which is particularly important to work organizations that have difficulties in hiring new, good employees. Purple had overcome this difficulty by making use of Ms Syrjä's social network, which helped to recruit suitable workforce from among her or other people's acquaintances. One employee let me understand that Ms Syrjä as managing director had even recruited

too many telemarketers, including some whose personal problems prevented them from working properly. Yet, she had wanted to offer work to them, I was told, because she was so kind-hearted that she pitied them. In contrast, the current managing director Janne was described as more profit-oriented and ‘*counting everything on paper,*’ and, as a result, the company no longer had any unproductive employees. Thus, the managing style had changed along with the change of the manager’s gender and generation.

I talked a great deal about how employees entered Purple with one telemarketer, Jenny, who had been working for the company for only two months. She had seen Purple’s job advertisement on the website of an employment office and became interested in trying out the work. During the interview, she repeated how happy she was to have the job, and that she was very keen on learning to sell magazine subscriptions and interact with the customers. I noticed that she did not interact with her co-workers much and brought this up:

*Tuija: You don’t take a lot of coffee breaks, for example, do you?*

*Jenny: No, I’m a lot like this. I don’t know if it’s, that in a way I want to have a really good day [saleswise]. I don’t know if that’s it. Maybe something like I’d bloody well like to make more calls. Or then I start when I know that there’s just going to be a break, I start to look at the papers and quite often I write down a little note for myself because I can’t remember things off the top of my head. Like when I started, I had to stick little notes in the folders to know that I’ll find that [thing] in there. It can be that I write them again during the break. So that’s how I spend my break, this is sort of how it goes. I have thought to myself too that no, I have to go to have coffee there, so that I’ll get to know [people], God. That I cannot always fiddle around with little pieces of paper here, that it just doesn’t work.*

Jenny seemed to find it hard to work in a work organization where all the other employees were considerably older than she. Moreover, most of the others were good and experienced telemarketers, while Jenny was only just learning how to do it. Because of these difficulties, I was not surprised to hear after fifteen months when I revisited the firm that Jenny was no longer working there. Although the job in telemarketing is relatively simple to have and try out, it is not easy to find motivation to keep doing it day in day out. As Jenny’s story implies, the majority of

the new workers who took a job in the call centre business rarely continued to work in the industry. As the managing director Janne pointed out, when the company came across good employees, they wanted to keep them. Respectively, those people who were selected to stay in the business were usually very committed to telemarketing.

As explained by the sales managers, the telemarketing of magazine subscriptions was so draining that some of the telemarketers took a notably long break from their job at Purple and for a while worked in some other jobs. Most of them, however, came back to Purple sooner or later, since it offered flexible working hours which could be adjusted to changes in the employees' circumstances.

### *Wages*

The employees I interviewed considered wages to be an unnecessary or uncomfortable topic to discuss with their co-workers. Apparently, wages did not arouse any great passions or turmoil, and nobody said that their wage rates were too low, although many telemarketers wished they could make more sales. In the interviews, the telemarketers said that they were jealous of other telemarketers' sales rates rather than their wages. I believe this is due to two issues. First, personal wages are a culturally silent topic in Finland, and referring to sales numbers, instead of wages, is a means to avoid talking about earnings and personal finances. Second, and more importantly, the workers' self-esteem as telemarketers was built on and maintained by their skills and success in making sales rather than their wages. Successful sales obviously raised wages, but wages were not considered as high a priority as the sales rate.

Some male telemarketers brought up their success in making sales in the heroic stories about their strengths and willingness to work hard without taking the summer holidays or sick leave they were entitled to have. For example, one telemarketer who had earlier worked as independent telemarketer at home was overly dedicated to his work. Although he currently worked as Purple's employee, it was as if he had maintained an entrepreneur-like working style. He had given his private mobile phone number to several customers so that they could call him whenever it would be convenient for them. In practice, he had no strict working hours but was always available for his customers, which created a trustworthy basis for a privileged

relationship between him and the customers. Moreover, he made a large number of calls to potential customers since he worked longer hours than the other telemarketers, many of whom could not devote themselves to the same extent to customers because of their other interests and responsibilities.

I asked one of the telemarketers if she had found any advantage in being a woman working at Purple, and she answered that gender was meaningless in a work in which the wages were based on commissions and the employer paid the same commission to women and men. *'I don't see in this kind of work in which you work for commission, it doesn't make a difference whether you are a woman or a man. It is according to your own work input that you get paid.'* Thus, she found the wage system to be gender equal. Having said that, the telemarketer went on thinking which magazines men manage to sell better than women, and what kind of sales techniques women could use to sell these magazines more successfully. In other words, she contemplated gender differences in relation to both magazines and contacts with customers, but not in relation to wage differences as such, as if she had found that the telemarketers' wages depended purely on their success in selling and that selling was unrelated to gender.

Avoiding 'hard selling' was a company policy in Purple, which may have, in the short run, diminished the sales the telemarketers made and consequently their wages. However, the interviewees did not see any contradiction between the two goals of the quality of interaction and the immediate quantity of sales. Instead, the telemarketers pointed out how emotionally demanding it was to achieve the sales goal day after day, because every day they had to start over. At the beginning of the work day, they never knew whether or not they were going to reach their sales goal. The number of rejections they experienced in a day might distress them and, more importantly, have an impact on their wages.

The employer paid the minimum hourly wage set by the collective agreement in instances where the average commission-based wage was below the minimum hourly wage.<sup>9</sup> However, every telemarketer's personal sales were related to the company's profit. The employer could not keep a telemarketer who only earned the minimum hourly wage because it was unprofitable for the firm, as the managing

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<sup>9</sup> In 2004, the telemarketers' minimum hourly wage was 6.47 euros. In comparison: the hourly wage of warehouse keepers in 2005 was on average 11.41 euros, practical nurses 8.13 euros and cleaners 8.68 euros (Statistics Finland. Wages).

director explained. This way of thinking was also shared by several telemarketers, who considered the minimum hourly wage as unwanted or even disadvantageous. They believed that every telemarketer should turn a profit to the firm. Apparently, this was the reason why some telemarketers did not want to have the hourly wage but only the commission from the sales they made. One example of this is a telemarketer who worked part-time and who had no hourly wage, which was how he wanted it to be, and who said: *'You get to be as you like.'* This agreement about his wage may have diminished his emotional pressure to accomplish the sales goals, and in this way he did not need to worry too much about losing his job. This arrangement possibly also improved his performance in achieving the set goals for sales. Thus, the pressure to get commission came from the employer but in interaction with the telemarketers themselves and the social community of work.

In addition to the performance-related pay, there were individual incentives in the form of games and competitions in Purple. The competitions varied in length from short-term pushes for spot prizes, such as jumpers or jackets, gift vouchers to a pizzeria or a bottle of wine, to longer-term projects with a short cruise as the main prize. The incentives offered material compensation and, in addition, they were the telemarketers' means to break the boredom of repetitive work. Accordingly, incentives have been found to be a means to generate more sales (Alferoff and Knights, 2003). Such incentives were subsequently used in the site not only for profit-making, but also for the annual contract negotiations with the clients, the publishers. The contracts were negotiated for a year, and the previous year's sales numbers affected the following year's outsourcing. The more magazine subscriptions the firm was able to sell, the better customer register material it received from the clients. Respectively, if a certain sales rate was not achieved with a certain material, the firm would not receive similar register material next time. In this way, every subscription the telemarketers managed to sell was meaningful for the firm's future success.

In short, recruiting new telemarketers and maintaining their commitment was a challenging process in Purple. The company's management did not consider gender to be a meaningful difference affecting the recruitment of telemarketers, although they preferred recruits with certain kinds of backgrounds. However, the backgrounds of the recruits did vary according to their gender, and women, more often than men, had worked in jobs involving social and communication skills that

the recruiters valued. In a recruiting process in which employee referrals are utilized, it is more difficult to trace gender assumptions than when some recruitment criteria are explicated. Yet, assumptions about gender differences could be found in how the employees understood the difference between the actions of the former female managing director and those of the current male managing director. Moreover, wages based on commission were found to be gender equal because women and men were paid the same rate. However, the possibilities to dedicate oneself to telemarketing work and consequently increase one's earnings were not brought forth in relation to wages. I assume this is because the employees' habits of spending time were understood as private matters and not directly related to wages.

#### 4.2.2. Gendered Interaction with Customers

In what follows, I concentrate on the interaction between the telemarketers and the customers and provide an analysis of the ways in which gender is significant in these relations. Generally, the low status of telemarketing became obvious to the telemarketers in their dealings with the customers. Getting in touch with the customers and selling them subscriptions required perseverance – many people do not answer the telephone for one reason or another, or hang up when they hear that the caller is a telemarketer selling magazine subscriptions. From the customers' point of view, the telephone rings most often in an inappropriate time and place, which makes many customers unresponsive and even annoyed. (Koivunen 2007) The telemarketers told me that they had noticed that female customers were very busy at work and therefore rather irritated when a telemarketer called and disturbed them. In contrast, men had more time to talk with telemarketers during the workday. In other words, the telemarketers let me understand that there was a clear difference between the responses of female and male customers in respect to their busyness during the workday

Few consumers today have never heard about telemarketing fraud, which usually refers to a phone call from a high-pressure salesperson soliciting funds or selling products based on false assertions or enticing claims (Shover, Coffey & Sanders 2004, 61–62). This became apparent in the customers' attitudes towards the telemarketers' phone calls. According to Purple's managing director Janne,



customers associate telemarketing fraud to magazine subscription telemarketing in general, because in many firms the telemarketers use fallacious sales scripts.

*Janne: You hear and see all sorts in this business but we have kept to the old style that we sell the product. And tell about the benefits and savings that you get when you order it. That we won't start with what was quite predominant a while ago when you sell them, that when you are a good customer and have earned some bonus or get half a year's subscription of some magazine for free. Because they are like, they are like lies, nobody has that. That you cannot get any magazine for free and you cannot collect any bonuses. That is a kind of a battle-field of which I have always said to the publisher that you have to get rid of this. That otherwise this business won't gain respect if you sell with half lies.*

The managing director Janne claimed it was the responsibility of the publishing houses to outsource the marketing of magazine subscriptions only to those firms which operate in fair and respectable ways. In addition, the personnel of Purple emphasized the use of ethical principles in their business practices. The telemarketers I interviewed recognized the low status of their work but said that the other firms and other telemarketers had caused this. I was told several stories of how badly some other telemarketers had treated their customers and how this could never had happened in Purple. Moreover, the firm and its employees aimed to maintain or even improve the firm's reputation which was already considered to be relatively good. An example of this could be the story that Viljo told the interviewer:

*We just had such a situation where the seller [a telemarketer from another magazine subscriptions company] had behaved in an absolutely appalling way. We [with management] then thought about what we can do. I called the guy again and asked if he read books. Well, he was a bit stupefied. I said I won't ask any questions, please just answer and you won't get a bill for this. Well, he admitted that he read books, I asked who by, etc., and then we went to the storage room to get two books and mailed them to him. I put my card in between one of the books and about a week and a half later he calls [back].*

Viljo did not indicate whether or not the customer called back to thank him or even to subscribe to a magazine. However, a customer calling to a telemarketer on friendly terms was such a rare event that it did not matter why he called. In any case, it pinpointed Viljo's success in impressing the customer. Management's aim in this incident was probably to enhance the status of telemarketing magazine subscriptions as valuable work, which would, if succeeded, cut down the number of irate and resisting customers.

In an earlier study concerning female-majority workplaces in Finland, some women believed that the arrival of more men would help to push up their wages (Korvajärvi 1998, 66). However, no such opinions were expressed in Purple. Instead, there were several comments suggesting that the low prestige prevented men from seeking their way to telemarketing jobs.

*Ursula: I think that men don't appreciate this work. This is not an easy job although they say that you have it made when you sit here and make calls. But probably a lot of men prefer a sort of technical work and something where they get to work with electricity and drive cars and so on. That because this is what it is, for men who like to talk with people but do not want to work in a shop, for such a person this is [a good alternative]. And then generally for younger men, that there are very few older men that I have seen. That they have some sort of occupation. You have to work fairly long hours here if you want to support your family. Because you work on commission, so if you have five children, it means you have to work rather long hours.*

Ursula implies above that telemarketing is a rather demanding job which requires long working hours without guaranteeing a good salary, which is something that men do not appreciate. However, she also implies that to some men, usually young men, who want to talk with people but do not want to work in a shop, a telemarketing job might be a good alternative. Consequently, Ursula did not expect all men to seek their way to telemarketing jobs but mostly to apply for other, quite traditional working-class manual jobs as electricians or bus drivers.

The firm enhanced the discretion of the telemarketers in dealing with irate customers. The telemarketers were allowed to apply personal and situational styles to deal with the customers in general, but also with the angry ones. However, the

telemarketers said the number of irate customers was in fact relatively small in comparison with how common the discussions were about the annoyance the customers felt about telemarketers of magazine subscriptions. Several telemarketers described the means they had successfully used to calm down annoyed customers. On some occasions, they ended the call quickly because they did not see any point in hard selling a subscription against the customer's will. If the customer was in a foul mood and the situation was not and would not be favourable for selling, the best thing to do was to end the call, they explained. However, it may generally be difficult to recognize when the situation with an irate customer is impossible and when there is still a chance to sell a subscription.

*Johanna: The funniest call has been the kind that the customer first yelled her/his eyes, mouth and ears off and then when I apologized nicely for disturbing her/him at a bad moment and intended to end the call, then she/he asked, by the way, which magazine were you selling? Then I told her/him which one. Well, then she/he subscribed to it. I feel, why did she/he have to yell at me in the first place? But it just was that way at that moment.<sup>10</sup>*

Part of the telemarketers' job was to be in a good mood and willing to serve customers who were not always amiable. In other words, they displayed emotion management conceptualized as emotional labour (Hochschild 1983/2003). In many cases, the company's management expected the telemarketers to have a friendly face at the other end of the phone because customers could hear the smile in their voice (e.g. Belt, Richardson & Webster 2000, 375; Koivunen 2006, 8; Noronha & D'Cruz 2009, 8–9). In Purple, however, the telemarketers were expected to do emotional labour not by displaying certain behaviour, but at their own consideration. Such freedom of displaying emotional labour is called emotional autonomy (Taylor 1998), and the consequences of it to the employees are not necessarily as harmful as the consequences of emotional labour may be. In Purple, emotional autonomy was part of the telemarketers' work and, according to my interpretation, allowed because of their relatively high age and wide experience of life. The telemarketers were

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<sup>10</sup> The Finnish language uses the same word for 'she' and 'he' (hän). This is why we cannot tell whether Johanna is talking about a female or male customer. To keep both options open, I have included both genders in the excerpt.

allowed to manage their own emotions, but emotional autonomy was expected to benefit the firm and enhance the selling.

As far as gender is concerned, the interviews showed that there were two contradictory patterns of interaction employed in the telemarketing of magazine subscriptions. The first one was the heterosexualized view of interaction, which considered cross-gender interplay to be successful in displaying heterosexualized labour. The second, more infrequently argued view, that I call the homosocial view of interaction, refers to gender-based bonding. It assumes that same-gender interaction is more effective and desirable than cross-gender interaction and, therefore, requires more like-minded emotional labour than interaction based on the heterosexualized view. In both heterosexualized and homosocial patterns, gender is considered a starting point for interaction.

Other conceptual divisions have also been made in relation to sexualization in work. For instance, in regard to interactive service work, Chris Warhurst and Dennis Nickson (2009) have pinpointed the difference between informal and formal employee sexualization. By informal employee sexualization, they refer to behaviour that is driven by employees for employees, while formal employee sexualization is driven by organizations for commercial benefits. The distinction between these two is conceptually significant. Moreover, Warhurst and Nickson point out that most of the literature analysing sexualized work, including their own work, does not focus on any sexualizing behaviour but particularly on *heterosexualizing* encounters. Accordingly, it has been suggested that work tasks include gendered work styles which define the interaction, bodily movement, gestures and tones of voice and, characteristically, that these work styles are explicitly or implicitly considered as heterosexualizing (Kuosmanen, 2002).

Attila Bruni and his colleagues (2005, 110) have found that the relationship between the salesperson and the customer, whether a man or a woman, is managed on the basis of both of their gender. They suggest that the relationship with and among women is based on emotionality and its intention is to reassure, while the relationship with and among men is more distant, or at any rate regulated by more objective parameters. Apparently, this characterization is adequate for describing relationships between the salespersons who are marketing fitted kitchens in Italy and their customers, usually couples, as is the case in Bruni's study, but it seems too

simplistic for describing the magazine subscription telemarketers and their relationships with individual customers.

In telemarketing work, the gendered work style concentrated on the telemarketers' voice, which may also convey a heterosexualizing tone, constructed in specific situations of interaction. The heterosexualizing work styles appeared in the views expressed by some interviewees that a male telemarketer's manly voice and mode of speaking appeal to female customers and, similarly, that female employees were able to 'sweet talk' to male customers. This is how some of the telemarketers expressed it:

*Teija: In the end then women find it easier to talk with male customers, I feel. It's easier to talk with men. And it is the same when men call women, so maybe women stay better on the line when the telemarketer is a man.*

In contrast, here is an extract that describes same-gender interaction:

*Johanna: In many cases it can be that the magazines sell easier when you are a woman. That a woman to a woman it's easier to present the case, that it's just like this kind of fact-oriented magazines [for women], all these that are factual magazines, they sell better.*

In this respect, same-gender interaction is regarded as trustworthy and accurate, as if there were a gap between women and men that cannot be overcome by communication and interplay on the phone (also Eriksson & Eriksson 2003, 158). These two overlapping patterns of interaction were described as occurring simultaneously without being questioned or found inconsistent. The patterns of interaction diverge from each other in that the homosocial pattern is based on gender, creating a bond between a telemarketer and a customer, whereas the heterosexualized pattern utilizes one form of sexuality, heterosexuality, which is expected to be adopted by every telemarketer and customer. In other words, the homosocial pattern emphasizes the sameness and similarity of people with the same gender. Respectively, the heterosexualized pattern takes the alleged difference between women and men as the starting point of interaction.

In some sales situations, the heterosexualized pattern of interaction may be brought into play by the customers. An example of this is a customer who told Jenny, one of the youngest telemarketers in Purple, that she had a nice and friendly voice and asked her on a date. Accordingly, Jenny assumed that some of the male customers stayed on line because they simply wanted to hear her voice. In this way the embodiment Jenny presented with her voice acquired a heterosexualizing tone that she did not originally intend to present but which she recognized from customer responses. Quite similarly, the heterosexualized aspect of flight attendants' work is argued to be a consequence of the way in which the customer interprets the messages that the flight attendants send (Spiess and Waring, 2005). In this sense, then, the heterosexualization of work is more about interpretation than about original intention.

In some other instances, the heterosexualizing tone was intended and used by telemarketers as a starting point for an interplay with the customers, it was not only the customer's interpretation. One telemarketer, Anne, described this by saying: *'Often it's like if you talk with the men nicely, so even just based on you talking nicely, they are more inclined to subscribe.'* Correspondingly, it has been noted that waiting staff at restaurants, particularly women, do flirt as part of cross-gender interaction with customers. Moreover, the waitresses seem to prefer waiting on male customers and waiters on female customers. (Hall, 1993) Flirting and *'talking nice'* was also done by the telemarketers, especially by women. In doing this, the telemarketers might even have taken advantage of their visual appearance, and they were also encouraged to do this. The sales manager Asta describes this as follows:

*A lot of the times I said that now you cannot make deals, well, now put on your heels and add lipstick so you really become you. Well, not to men. But when you have put on make-up and do your hair and have a little bit of lipstick on and you're wearing heels, so you sit in a completely different posture. And if you just have your woollen socks on, and are so like 'nobody orders anything', so nobody does. And then often I say that now put on your lipstick and start calling men and purring, so it starts to get [going].*

What Asta suggests here is that when the female telemarketers look nice and feminine, they also succeed better in selling. By changing their appearance with

heels and lipstick, the telemarketers ‘*really became who they are,*’ that is, women. This kind of aesthetic labour related to visual appearance was not expected to be done for the sake of the customers seeing them but for the sake of the telemarketers’ own state of mind. This means that the telemarketers’ visual appearance mattered although it was invisible to the customers. In other words, how the telemarketers looked could at least to some extent be heard in their voices. For example, lipstick and heels as such were not audible, but the customers may have heard the impact that lipstick and heels had on the voices of female telemarketers. Women’s appropriate use of make-up is strongly linked to assumptions of heterosexuality and credibility in the workplaces in Dellinger and Williams’ (1997) interviews. Expectations to wear make-up at work do vary by occupation and work organization, but all 20 women that they interviewed in the US found that make-up connoted heterosexual femininity. I argue that also in Purple lipstick and heels were signs of femininity, the use of which made it easier for the female telemarketers to add a tone of heterosexual femininity to their interplay with the customers.

In Purple, there was no conformity in the telemarketers’ visual or audible appearance and, thus, they used a range of different voices. The managing director stated that a speech defect, for example, was not an obstacle to telemarketing magazine subscriptions as long as one was able to express the important points and facts to the customers. On the contrary, he considered a speech defect to be a personal and interesting characteristic that could arouse the customers’ interest in and curiosity towards the product to the extent that they did not hang up. In contrast, what were not considered to be personal and interesting characteristics in one’s voice were such bodily states as sickness and tiredness. This is how one of the telemarketers, Erkki, described his own embodied use of voice, which occasionally led to personal failures and inability to succeed in work:

*When I’m tired, my voice changes. It’s like it came from the other side of the grave, so nobody [listens to] this. My ex-wife asked me when I called her that where are you calling from. Now that I’ve been ill, I’ve noticed that when you’re tired, it just doesn’t work. But then sometimes you have good days and you’re able to sell almost anything.*

Erkki had health problems that affected his voice and consequently diminished his working ability. In other words, Erkki was still able to work regardless of his condition, but his ability to sell had decreased because of the impact of the sickness on his voice.

Other features that were audible in the telemarketers' voices were their dialects and accents. It has been described how in a transnational call centre located in India, employees receive extensive training on '*Voice and Accent*', which involves detailed information on the American English grammar, pronunciation, speaking rate and emphasis in order for them to be able to serve North American customers (Mirchandani 2008). Similarly, in British telephone banking, recruiters for call centres assess job seekers' vocal qualities of tone, pitch and warmth, combined with energy and enthusiasm to produce fluency and rapport (Callaghan & Thompson 2002, 242). In Purple, there was rather a different attitude towards the employees' way of speaking. Several employees used a thick dialect in telemarketing and said that more often than not the customers liked their dialect. On the other hand, the company had employed Estonian telemarketers, who spoke fluent Finnish with an accent. The managing director argued that in telemarketing tasks, Estonian women '*succeeded quite well*' but Estonian men aroused customers' suspicions and distrust. Apparently, untrustworthiness was related to foreign men more easily than to foreign women.

In sum, heterosexualized and homosocial patterns of interaction structured the interplay between the telemarketers and the customers in a gender-based way, and, accordingly, these patterns formed the femininity and masculinity the telemarketers practise with their customers. In Warhurst and Nickson's (2009) terms, the telemarketers' heterosexualized work was informal in the sense that it was driven by the telemarketers themselves, although evidently subscribed by management. Heterosexualized interaction formed a pattern of behaviour that helped to build and maintain confidential relations with customers. In this sense, heterosexualization served as social glue that dictated the telemarketers' communication and interaction manners with the customers, even though they were all hardly heterosexual. However, homosocial pattern of interaction did not relate to non-heterosexual relations because the pattern was lacking references to sexuality. Both of these interaction patterns are based on rather an essentialist conception of gender as an unvarying possession. Further, there is space for interaction in the junction of



telephone technology and the employees' body (Korvajärvi, 2004) and, accordingly, telemarketing involves the entire embodied and gendered self of the telemarketers, even if the interaction is mediated by telephone technology.

#### 4.2.3. Gender Division of Magazines

Magazines, the subjects of telemarketing, are linked with gender in various ways, which I proceed to describe in this section. Most of the telemarketers interviewed had chosen for themselves specialist magazines to sell, which they usually managed to sell well. Such choices were based on the telemarketers' gender as far as they themselves had subscribed to or read magazines divided along gender lines, because they usually, if not categorically, marketed subscriptions of magazines they were familiar with. Their success as telemarketers was thus simultaneously based on their skills to sell magazine subscriptions which required the ability to interact with customers and on their own reading habits and areas of interests.<sup>11</sup>

The telemarketers adjusted their selling styles depending on the particular customer they were interacting with and on which magazine's subscription they were marketing. There were various kinds of magazines whose subscriptions were marketed in Purple. These included general interest magazines, such as gardening and country living; women's magazines, such as pregnancy and baby, fashion and interior decoration magazines; men's activity magazines, such as motorsports, boating, hunting, fishing and wilderness magazines; special interest magazines, such as craft and cookery, crossword and sudoku puzzle magazines; children's and teen magazines; comics; and trade and business magazines.<sup>12</sup> Purple's managing director explained that they did not market subscriptions to newspapers, nor to pornographic magazines; everything else was available, even magazines containing erotic short stories targeted to women readers.

The female telemarketers in particular described how they frequently took advantage of their own emotions, experiences and life spheres when selling

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<sup>11</sup> I was told several times a heroine story about a female telemarketer who managed to renew a customer's subscription which was about to end. The telemarketer had never heard about the magazine in question nor seen a copy of it. Yet she was able to convince the customer to continue her/his subscription.

<sup>12</sup> The division of magazines of general interest into women's magazines and men's activity magazines follows the division made by a publishing house on its website.

subscriptions. This coincides with earlier studies indicating that in many service jobs, for instance, in call centres and restaurants, women are expected to be friendlier and do more emotional labour than men (Belt, Richardson & Webster 2002; Hall 1993). Moreover, the social skills of emotional labour have frequently been deemed naturally feminine and, as a consequence, undervalued (Nickson & Korczynski 2009, 296; Taylor & Tyler 2000, 91). In the telemarketing site, for example, children's and family magazines were marketed only by female employees, most of whom had children of their own, because they had the ability to handle various kinds of situations requiring multifaceted emotional labour. An example of this could be telemarketing subscriptions to a children's magazine and talking to a parent and finding out that something unlucky had happened to her or his child.

In contrast, the male telemarketers argued that what they sold most were not the subscriptions of nonsense magazines but general fact-oriented magazines and some specific professional magazines to certain occupational groups. According to the telemarketers, the target group of such magazines consisted mostly of male customers, and the subscriptions were marketed with a correct selling style, excluding extra interplay or small talk. Moreover, they suggested that emotional display was quite minimal because the selling style was not adapted to each customer personally to the same degree as it was with other types of magazine subscriptions. Rather, the selling style was adapted according to the accurate content of the magazine.

The male telemarketers did market, at least occasionally, magazine subscriptions targeted to the female customers. According to the interviews, instead of displaying emotions themselves, in such situations the male telemarketers made use of the female customers' emotions, as Erkki points out:

*Tuija: Well, do you think that your being a man in such a female-majority workplace could be an advantage?*

*Erkki: It is an advantage, I mean in sales. I am so old that I don't think about anything else. In sales, sometimes it's funny when I've sold handicraft magazines. Well, yes, women are, like they have a sort of a maternal attitude when I try to explain to them with a little twinkle in the eye what kind of magazines they are and*

*what sewing patterns they have. The women know I know nothing about the patterns. So in that sense it is an advantage.*

Erkki described how he was using his gender for his benefit when he was selling subscriptions to a women's handicraft magazine. He was letting the female customers behave 'in a motherly way,' as he put it, and tell him about the contents of the magazine. Additionally, when the customers' proficiency in relation to handicrafts in general and to the handicraft magazine in particular became obvious, the expertise of the telemarketer was diminished. He was interacting with the female customers who, as former subscribers to the handicraft magazine, had certain expertise commonly considered specific to their gender. Further, he had 'a twinkle in the eye,' which I understand to refer to his position as a telemarketer who should know the product but who admitted knowing nothing about the sewing patterns, the true experts being the female customers.

Some of the female telemarketers also sold fact-oriented magazine subscriptions to male customers, but not to the same extent as men did. Some male customers had a somewhat challenging attitude towards female telemarketers who were occasionally required to prove their expertise when selling subscriptions, for example, to men's activity magazines or professional farming magazines. Male customers repeatedly tested the female telemarketers' familiarity with the magazine and, if the customer noticed that the telemarketer was not an expert in the field, he would rarely subscribe to the magazine. However, if the female telemarketer was actually familiar with the magazine and therefore capable of presenting her expertise, men would be impressed.

*Mervi: I can't think of any other women who would've read [a certain men's hobby magazine] than myself. I read it myself. But the male customers they crack jokes like, do you really read it [the magazine] yourself? When I say yes, they don't know what to say. That one man was, I told him that in the previous [issue] there was the test on winter tires, that I had read it. Then he was like, if you've read it, then I can subscribe to it.*

In practice, magazine subscriptions were marketed in a rather gender-based way, but not categorically, which is illustrated by Mervi and her expertise in men's hobby

magazine. Mervi had definitely recognized that, as a woman, her familiarity with certain magazines targeted to men was rare. However, only one magazine, which was related to dieting, health and bodily appearance, was described as strictly gender specific and not suitable for male telemarketers to sell. This was because the target group of the magazine consisted almost exclusively of women, and I was told that it would have been inappropriate for a male telemarketer to hint that female customers were overweight. All the other magazine subscriptions were argued to be gender neutral or suitable for selling regardless of the telemarketers' gender. However, in practice this was rarely the case.

*Anne: Well, my guess is that most likely no man has ever sold [a pregnancy and baby magazine], at least not in our company. It could be, I don't know. Basically anyone can sell anything, but it could sound a bit weird if a rough male voice said something like 'So when are your due? [laughs] That here you have this good baby deal'. It could be a bit weird. When it is personal, it is like a women-only thing, pregnancy and all such things.*

To sum up, according to the interviews, gender relations were usually discussed in connection with the names and types of magazines, not so much in terms of the telemarketers' gender or the gender of the target group. Thus, a particular magazine offered a situational context for displaying emotions and practising femininity and masculinity. Different magazines required different gendered interaction, which was based on rather a stereotypical and bipolar notion of gender. However, these stereotypical notions of gender may occasionally have been transgressed within the interplay between the telemarketer and the customer. It seems that the male telemarketers were permitted to market women's hobby magazines without any expertise in the field and did not encounter any resentment from the female customers, while the male customers required of the female telemarketers familiarity with the content of the men's hobby magazine they were marketing and often went and tested them. By doing this, the customers hinted that the information in men's hobby magazines was general knowledge that everyone regardless of their gender should know, and the information in women's hobby magazine was mainly for women. In other words, the male telemarketers did not need to be interested in women's issues but the female telemarketers had to be familiar with men's affairs.

#### 4.2.4. The Social Community of Work

This section focuses on the social community of work in Purple and the ways in which it supported the formal work of the telemarketers. In addition, I argue, it provides a glimpse at the informal work relations and practices within the company. The social community of work in Purple was largely formed by the relations of the owner family, which characterized its organizational practices and atmosphere. The firm was ‘another home’ for the family, and they indeed made themselves at home there. One day during my fieldwork in Purple, Ms Syrjä kept coming and going, and, for example dropped by after her visit to the hairdresser. Meanwhile, her husband, Mr Syrjä, was performing handyman’s tasks in the company. Later on that day, everyone met for a drink of mulled wine, which I was also invited to join. All the employees, together with Ms and Mr Syrjä, had mulled wine with or without alcohol and some Christmas snacks while Ms and Mr Syrjä’s son, the managing director Janne, did all the official talking to the employees. My impression, however, was that it was his parents’, especially his mother’s presence, that was very important to the social community of the work.

These kinds of family relations have points of resemblance to previous research. In their ethnographical study of entrepreneurs, Attila Bruni and his colleagues (Bruni, Gherardi & Poggio 2005, 98–115) introduced Ms Primo, whose husband had started up a kitchen design and production enterprise managed by their son. Even if Ms Primo presented herself as a woman standing by the side of the male entrepreneur, she was described as taking charge of meetings, giving instructions, knowing everything better than anyone else and solving problems. Yet, nobody explicitly identified Ms Primo as being one of the organizational and entrepreneurial actors, even though everyone continuously met her, observed her and acknowledged her capability and authority.

I find several similarities between the presence and positions of Ms Syrjä and Ms Primo in the firms they were involved with. Both women were difficult to bring into the focus of research because they appeared and disappeared, and in the interviews they were talked about more than they themselves talked to the researchers. Ms Primo was constantly present in the firm’s premises and its everyday operations,

while Ms Syrjä dropped into Purple every now and then, even though officially she had stepped down from her position as head of the everyday business. However, she was frequently mentioned during the interviews and therefore in the employees' remarks. Furthermore, I find it difficult to define Ms Syrjä's role in Purple because of the somewhat mixed comments about her. This seems to concern Bruni and his colleagues' relationship with Ms Primo as well. Another interesting similarity between Ms Primo and Ms Syrjä is that they were both responsible for the decorative work in their firms, apparently because of the fact that they were women.

In the interviews, Ms Syrjä was described as an important authority who wanted to stay off stage, although she was the one who had all the power concerning the firm's affairs: *'When Ms Syrjä comes here she is like a lioness, like 'I am here now and when I say this, this is what we'll do'. She still has a lot of authority; we say that the big boss is coming. She usually comes in the mornings but seldom so that the salespeople see her.'* Quite contrary to this, Ms Syrjä's son, the managing director Janne, said that *'it should no longer be thought that my mother still has some influence.'* Yet, he admitted that the telemarketers who had been working in the company when his mother was the managing director and who continued to be her friends might have considered her more important in the running of the firm's operations than she actually was. I was told that Ms Syrjä and Janne had had several disagreements and quarrels about the ways in which the firm should have been led. However, Ms Syrjä told me that Janne was doing a great job as managing director because he had the *'gift of leadership.'* Again, like Ms Primo, Ms Syrjä exemplified the view according to which women are important authorities behind the scenes, but obscured by the men.

Interaction within the social community of work in Purple also included trips, Christmas parties and other events organized by the employer. The initiative and resources for these activities came from the management, and in this sense the events were organizational, although informal in nature. The sales manager Asta was the main organizer of all events, and she obviously enjoyed the task because she told me that *'I always like to organize such things.'* At the same time, Asta was very busy and even stressed out with all the responsibilities she had. *'This is a stressful job, really horrible,'* she said to me in her interview, although she added that she nevertheless liked her job. Moreover, she described her work as very time-

consuming and emotionally hard, especially when it included supporting the telemarketers in their domestic matters:

*Asta: When you come to this job you are, to tell you the truth, like a cesspit; when everything negative comes to me and I cannot transform myself into register material. So sometimes you get like, hell no, I'd like to come sometime, let's change places. I say a lot of times that you come to my spot here, come and listen to this. Nothing is ever good. So I go to make calls, I get to close the door behind me and make the calls alone. I'd like to do that sometime, so you wouldn't have to care about anyone else or think about what kind of results you get with what register material, you'd just get to make the call and if they aren't happy with it, so what.*

Thus, it is Asta's everyday work and especially her emotional responses to the telemarketers' troubles that stress her out, not the planning of the events. In other words, while the telemarketers found their work in Purple to be suitable for them in their current circumstances, their worries increased the workload of the sales managers and Asta, in particular. Both sales managers had their office doors open and they were willing to help the employees whenever they needed assistance or support. Accordingly, several interviewees told me about their personal arrangements with management, that is, in practice, with Asta.

*Ursula: Because I can come at four and stay until eight or come at nine and stay until one and come at three and leave at seven.*

*Tuija: Do you get to decide it yourself?*

*Ursula: Yes.*

*Tuija: Do you have to let them know beforehand or can you?*

*Ursula: No. I get to decide for myself when I come in.*

*Tuija: Well, you have great, like, flexible working hours.*

*Ursula: Yes, that's why this is so lovely. Sometimes Asta asks me whether I'll be coming in for the morning or the evening. But I don't have to tell [otherwise] when I'm coming in, unless I want to. I usually try to do mornings on two days and evenings on three. And that varies too that from half two onwards and then you go on until the evening.*

*Tuija: Well, can you sometimes decide not to come to work one day, and then stay for 8 hours the next day, or?*

*Ursula: Yes. I have a kind of a personal [arrangement]. (...) This is really lovely because my [life] situation is what it is. So I never know in the evening what the morning will be like.*

In this excerpt, Ursula expresses contentment with her flexible working hours. Such flexibility requires some extra work from the sales managers. Throughout her interview, Ursula talked about the women of her workplace and especially her female superiors with a lot of appreciation. Yet, Ursula, as some of the other women interviewed, repeated the notion that on the general level of work communities, women do not get along because they are envious and spiteful to each other and not willing to co-operate. It seems to me that there is a discrepancy between Ursula's experiences of her female colleagues and the way in which she describes women in work communities in general. The somewhat analogous opinion that workplaces with a female majority must suffer from quarrelling while men create a more easy-going atmosphere has also been found in earlier studies (Korvajärvi 2002a). The sales manager Asta shared this view and advocated a gender-mix of employees.

*Asta: And the work atmosphere is completely different when you have both genders. If you have women only, they are really jealous. It is a completely different atmosphere when there are men too. They just bring about a different atmosphere.*

*Tuija: Have you worked in a workplace where all employees were female?*

*Asta: Well, we've had here sometimes such a situation that there have been very few men, only women, so they are like that. Women are cruel, really cruel.*

By saying this, Asta makes a generalization that cruelty is characteristic of all women. This is not an exceptional way to speak about women in Finland but one of the culturally shared ones. It contradicts, however, another culturally shared view of women, namely the viewpoint that women are emotional and caring human beings. In the interviews conducted with Purple's employees, women's cruelty was associated with women's actions in their social community of work but not with their interaction with the customers. Therefore, the alleged cruelty did not prevent



the female telemarketers from being good, empathetic telemarketers or from interacting profitably with the customers.

The social community of work and practices related to it are not insignificant in regard to telemarketers' work with customers. It has been argued that call centres have different styles of coping with customers and that these styles of coping have an impact on workplace relations (Korczynski 2003). In Marek Korczynski's (2003) case study research on inbound call centres in Australia and the US, coping appeared as communal and informal and did not need to be specifically encouraged by management telling that customers always deserve empathy<sup>13</sup>. Thus, management sustained individual or peer support instead of hierarchical coping. In Purple, the community of collegial coping was not restrained but rather enabled or even encouraged by the management and the employer. For instance, the spatial arrangements were convenient for communal dealings during coffee breaks and other times when the employees and the management were together. Further, the fact that the flow of calls was not constant made it easier for the telemarketers to cope with irate customers. They could also take a break whenever they wanted to, in addition to the collective, statutory breaks. In fact, taking a break, a short or long one, was a frequently used means to have a rest and maintain working capacity, as Anne describes here:

*Sometimes you just cannot make a deal. Last week I had such a day. The clock struck six and I had no deals at all. It makes your hair stand on end and you feel like what an earth you are going to do now. And when you get that panicky feeling you can no longer get yourself into it [the selling mode]. When it was about 6.30 pm, I went to say that I'm quitting, I'm going home, I cannot take it any longer. Let's try again tomorrow. Because you know that when you cannot get a deal, so you just. [laughs] If you are banging away [the telephone] for four to five hours and nobody subscribes to anything, so you are quite a fakir if you can pick yourself up and make deals.*

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<sup>13</sup> This was the case in three of four Korczynski's case study organizations. In the fourth case study organization, the meaning of irate customers was rather different since the employees, and to some extent also the management, shared a culture of customer antipathy.

For telemarketers, selling was a process in which, on the one hand, success fed success and, on the other hand, the lack of success could cause a vicious circle of failure which was hard to break. The management of the site was well aware of that and therefore let the telemarketers cut themselves loose from this vicious circle by giving them half a day off. However, the managers told me that they intended to introduce a practice which would have the telemarketers working full hours. Apparently the telemarketers were not yet aware of this new practice.

The telemarketers' interaction with their co-workers during working hours was minimal, especially among those who worked in single offices. Nonetheless, informal interaction did occur, for example when the employees knocked at each other's doors to indicate that they were going out to have a smoke. In this way they did not interrupt each other's conversations with the customers but signalled that if the colleague in question wanted to have a smoke together with the others, now would be a good time to take a break. The statutory coffee and lunch breaks were quite short in Purple, and a couple of male telemarketers took longer breaks. One of them was Pasi who worked as self-employed subcontractor. I was told that Pasi was the only telemarketer who did not have a packed lunch with him but went to a neighbouring restaurant to have lunch. He also took an afternoon nap on the settee after lunch because, as he told me, it was difficult to reach the customers at that particular time of the day. Another male telemarketer who took extra breaks was Viljo, who from time to time wandered around the office with his coffee mug, telling jokes to the sales managers while they were working. Both Pasi and Viljo were profitable telemarketers even if they were not working all the time. At the same time, Pasi and Viljo stood out in the sense that they were able to take control of their time and space, and the social community of work as well as the management allowed this.

In short, the social community of work in Purple was relatively close and co-operative. This derived from the family-based ownership of the firm, together with its small staff turnover and recruitment based on acquaintanceships. Moreover, the social community was tied together by common activities. These activities, although informal in nature, were usually initiated by the call centre and organized by the two female sales managers. Along with these voluntary activities, the sales managers were responsible for the telemarketers' well-being at work, which in practice meant that the sales managers had to be flexible and tolerant towards the telemarketers.

Despite all the efforts the women made in the favour of the work community, men were said to create and maintain the good, balanced and peaceful ambience in the work organization. Thus, the mere presence of male employees was valued higher than any efforts made by the female sales managers to maintain employee well-being.

#### 4.2.5. Summary

I sum up the findings concerning the call centre Purple in what follows. The analysis indicates that many central themes concerning Purple were related to the self-directed way of organizing work in the firm. It could be said that what was peculiar to Purple was the strong emphasis the company placed on encouraging a sense of togetherness among its employees in the social community of work and communal interaction with the customers. Telemarketing work was communal in the sense that although in principle every telemarketer worked alone with the customers, they received a notable amount of support from their work organization and co-workers, as well as benefited from the mutual principles existing in the background. The telemarketers described their work as repetitious and sometimes emotionally draining. A striking feature of the work in the company was that it was done with wired and mobile phones without sophisticated technology or computers. Despite all this, the telemarketers seemed to be happy and to enjoy their work. In general, Purple appeared to offer quite a flexible and supportive workplace for the employees in terms of its everyday operations and practices.

Gender segregation in Purple was both horizontal and hierarchical. At the same time, however, the organizational hierarchy was relatively flat and because of this, power differences were small. For example, every employee, except the managing director, performed the same customer service work. As for the physical organization, the organizational hierarchy did not become noticeable in the ways in which the arrangements concerning working space or other symbols of power were made. The interior decoration of the office or the location of the managers' offices were not utilized to emphasize the managers' power. Their offices were located so that they were in the centre of everything and enabled them to see the others coming and going. However, the management did not use the central location of their offices

to restrict the employees' comings and goings but to ensure that everything was running smoothly. At the same time, the telemarketers found that the managers were easily approachable and ready to listen to questions, personal or work-related worries, or even to endure jokes and pranks. Decorating the office space in general was an issue that the employees and the owners understood to be of interest to women rather than men. Quite similarly, my analysis shows that other informal organizational interests, such as organizing parties, gatherings and events, were considered women's duties more often than not.

The cultural image of telemarketing magazine subscriptions is characterized by low wages and the definite majority of female employees. Such an image was largely accepted in Purple as part of the telemarketers' everyday work. It was also resisted, especially by the male telemarketers, who shared with me their heroic stories of how hard they worked and how they won customers over. Thus, the ethos among Purple's employees was that one had to be a good, profitable telemarketer which for the male telemarketers was more important than for their female colleagues. The telemarketers considered their wages to be gender-equal because they were based on commission. Therefore, they saw the wage system as irrelevant in relation to gender because every telemarketer was paid a commission according to her or his sales. Nevertheless, women and men tended to sell the subscriptions of different magazines to different clientele, which could lead to different commissions, but this was not seen to be causing any gender inequality. Furthermore, some of the female employees considered that women in general were jealous and cruel creatures and that male employees balanced the ambience of the work community. Usually, when the employees were directly asked about the differences between women and men as telemarketers, they curtly denied the differences. Afterwards, however, they often started to contemplate gender differences either in telemarketing or more broadly.

Control and supervision of call centre work has gained much attention in previous studies, and there is a lot of literature concerning the control of the employees. Many of the studies argue that call centre work is highly controlled (e.g. Fernie & Metcalf 1998; Hutchinson & Purcell 2000; Taylor & Bain 2001), but there have been attempts to broaden this one-sided picture by showing the possibilities and places for employee resistance (e.g. Belt, Richardson & Webster 2000; Frenkel et al. 1998; Korvajärvi 2004b). Less attention has been paid to well-motivated and

committed employees working in the call centres in which employee control is not continuous and systematic – but even in these kinds of call centres the employees are expected to make profit. Such call centres as Purple that follow the self-directed way of organizing work do not seem to attract researchers' interest as much as modern, highly controlled call centre workplaces.

The way in which Purple's operations were organized involved the use of labour based on the employees' skills and abilities gained elsewhere, mainly in their previous jobs and during their education. In practice, this means that in recruitment the job seekers' long work history and experience of life were valued. As far as gender was concerned, the management said aloud that certain, usually womanly competences and skills were desired of the recruits. Accordingly, middle-aged women with their past in customer service jobs were favoured instead of young recruits. However, at the same time, men were said to have good chances to be recruited when willing to work in such an unvalued and underpaid job which is culturally considered as women's work. It is not possible here to evaluate how these guidelines of the management were followed in practice but, in any case, such utterances indicate that there is hierarchy between women's and men's gender positions in recruitment. Moreover, recruiting via the acquaintanceships of managers and owners had been a prevalent usage in Purple.

As for interaction between the telemarketers and the customers, the telemarketers described that gendered interaction styles were based on heterosexualized interaction and homosocial interaction, although the management had not directly demanded the telemarketers to adjust their selling styles according to the customers' gender. Moreover, the telemarketers also had emotional autonomy which, at least to some extent, decreased some of the pressure to manage emotions. However, hiring former nurses because of their people skills, for example, indicates that the telemarketers in Purple were expected to display emotion management conceptualized as emotional labour (Hochschild (1983/2003)). Furthermore, the telemarketers occasionally poured out their troubles to the sales managers, who needed to manage their emotions and emotional responses in regard to the telemarketers. It could be said that, to a certain degree, the telemarketers' work contained emotional autonomy while the sales managers needed to display emotional management in order to perform their work as the superiors of the telemarketers.

In addition to emotional labour, the telemarketers' aesthetic labour, mainly the aesthetic of their voice at work, was managed by their superiors. The management of the company argued that, instead of sounding perfect, the telemarketers could use dialects or have an accent or speech defect, for instance, because such characteristics made their voices personal. The management paid attention to the telemarketers' visual appearance only in regard to its effect on how enthusiastic they sounded and, consequently, how they succeeded in making sales.

The working environment that Purple offered to its employees was relatively stable, although the relationships between the telemarketers and the managers, and among the telemarketers, were somewhat unvaried. Some of the old-timers said that there were certain tensions between the female founder of the firm and her son, the managing director of Purple. They did not find that these tensions negatively affected the telemarketers' everyday work but rather thought that they remained in the background. Moreover, Purple only had outbound telemarketing assignments of only one kind of product, which added to the invariability of the work content. On the basis of the analysis, I would also argue that gender and heterosexuality were rather subtle or even non-existent in the mutual relationships of the employees and thus less significant than in customer relationships.

The magazines telemarketed in Purple as such had a gendered content and character, and therefore it could be said that they were gendered products. This dictated who the readers of a magazine were and, consequently, the target group of subscription marketing. Moreover, together with the gender of the telemarketer, this gendered nature of magazines gives us a hint of the selling style of subscriptions adopted by the telemarketers. In other words, it seems that the product itself, together with the customers, played a great role in defining the gendered content of the phone calls and sales situations. Thus, the low level of supervision and control from the employer's side was compensated for by the boundaries and limitations set by the customers. In general, then, in Purple's daily operations, gender was most meaningful in interactional situations between the telemarketers and the customers.

### 4.3 Green: Varying Assignments, Floating Employees

The purpose of this section is to present and discuss gender practices of the workplace Green. The section follows the same format as the preceding section on Purple but, given the fact that some of the central practices of Green differ from those in Purple, the contents of the two sections are markedly different. This section proceeds thematically, looking first at the interior of the office and the basic work of the customer service agents. The second part considers the gendered organizational hierarchy and especially the gender of the management and the employees' views on that. The third one discusses recruitment practices, along with staff turnover and commitment, as well as employee control and different forms of rewards. The fourth part examines the agents' on-line practices with the customers, and the final part analyses the agents' opportunities for informal interaction and the social community of work in general. Gender is the main point that directs the analysis within all these themes. Thus, the storyline in this section starts with the concrete and structural surroundings of the work organization, and then continues with the mundane practices concerning the employees and their work. After that, the focus shifts to more interactional practices with the customers, and finally, within the social community of work.

Green was an office of an international call centre network with about 150 employees. The office was located in southern Finland in the centre of a city which is among the ten largest cities in Finland. It operated in a fairly large office building that also housed other firms. A large neon sign with the firm's name on it was hanging outside. In other respects, the firm was rather unnoticeable from the outside. As in Purple, the front door of Green's office was locked and the visitors had to ring the doorbell to get in.

On entering the office of Green, the first thing one faced in the lobby was a wide reception desk. Unlike in Purple and Blue, the desk indicated that in Green the visitors were expected and taken into consideration in the office design. I was told it was customary that delegates of the corporate clients paid regular visits to Green. Behind the reception desk was a place called a 'traffic intersection' with workstations of two employees. The employees who worked there performed various kinds of back-office tasks, secretarial work, and received visitors.

In the lobby, next to the traffic intersection, there were three meeting rooms where I conducted most of the interviews. The meeting rooms were named in a local dialect. These names were the only indication of locality that I noticed at Green. During my earlier visits in 2003, the meeting rooms were in the back of the open-plan office, and I walked there through the work space. This was not supposed to be done without an escort because the call centre emphasized the confidentiality of the work of its customer service agents. Green continued to follow the policy of not letting anyone except the employees to walk unaccompanied in the working area of the agents, especially the representatives of the client companies who could be each other's competitors. In the lobby, there was also a waiting area with one table and a few chairs. The view from the waiting area to the open-plan office was blocked by a row of lockers. The workstations of the agents and the team leaders were in the middle of the open-plan office space, arranged in groups of six called 'nuts', as in hexagonal nuts and bolts. The entire space was filled with the humming noise of people talking on the phone.

The work of the customer service agents involved taking inbound calls or making outbound calls, and some of them even initiated and received calls in turns. According to one of Green's managers, the majority of the assignments involved inbound calling, and the proportion of inbound assignments was still increasing. In this respect, Green resembles many UK call centres presented in earlier studies. The inbound calls consisted of various helpdesk tasks, technical support and taking orders, while outbound calls were mainly to market and sell different products and services. The variety of the assignments in Green is the aspect that recurs throughout the research material, which means that the employees' work can be generalized only to a certain extent.

To concretize the everyday work of the agents in Green, I have constructed a fictitious example of lines that an agent could say to a customer during a phone call:

*'Media Marketing, Jane Bloggs'*

*'Good morning.'*

*'Yes, an order of orthopaedic slippers. And the size of the slippers you'd like to order?'*

*'Seven. And the colour?'*

*'Dark fuchsia. Anything else?'*



*'No? Okay, could you give me your name, postal address, and the number of your credit card?'*

*'Thank you. So you have ordered one pair of dark fuchsia orthopaedic slippers size seven. The slippers will be delivered to the address [repeats the address]. And the credit card number [repeats the number] will be charged 29.95 euros. Is that correct?'*

*'This order will be placed immediately and your order will be delivered in three working days. Thank you for ordering from Media Marketing. My name is Jane Bloggs, have a nice day.'*

The customer service work was performed by means of advanced integration of computer and telephone technology. The inbound calls from the customers were funnelled to a non-occupied agent who could at the same time see on the computer screen which corporate client's greeting to use. The software did not connect the agents to the outbound calls with no answers or busy signals but only to the calls that were answered. As a result, the agents did not need to wait for someone to answer the phone calls; only the phone calls that were answered were connected in succession to their headsets and computer displays. However, the computer software could not tell apart the answering machines, voice mails and real-time answers of customers, and, therefore, the agents had to cut some of the calls themselves.

While working, the agents sat in front of their computer screens and keyboards with a headset and a microphone on. The agents did not only talk with the customers, but also typically used a computer keyboard and mouse at the same time. Moving around was restricted by the wire of the headset but also by acoustics. For acoustical comfort, there were low partitions between workstations designed to absorb the speaking voice so that the agents would not disturb one another. If an agent stood up, for example, her or his speaking voice travelled over the partition and disturbed the other agents. Sitting down when working diminished the employees' possibilities to vary their working positions. Similarly, one of the company practices in Green was that the agents did not have their 'own', steady workstations. Therefore, the agents who worked in several assignments simultaneously might have had to change from one assignment's workstation to another several times in one day. (Koivunen 2006) Some of the agents were only involved in one assignment, but, in the interviews, several agents told me that they

were involved in several assignments and therefore could suddenly be transferred to a more urgent assignment, if needed. The duration of one assignment varied from a few hours to several years. In some assignments, the client's whole customer service was outsourced, which in practice meant that the customers contacted the agents not only by phone but also by e-mail and regular mail.

The team leaders were the agents' immediate superiors who worked beside them, while the managers' offices with transparent glass doors were located above the open plan working area. The open area did not allow any privacy, or loudness, or unhidden expressions of emotions, for example. An open plan office like this is said to offer an excellent opportunity for supervision (Hofbauer 2000, 174–175; Koivunen 2004, 56–58), and yet, in the call centre literature, electronic surveillance has gained more attention than surveillance with gaze (e.g. Bain & Taylor 2000; Fernie & Metcalf 1998). In Green, it was said that the transparent doors to the managers' offices made the managers more approachable but the location of their offices upstairs did not support this. The glass doors enabled the managers to see the whole working area below their offices with only one glance. It would have been well founded to divide the large working area into smaller sectors with silencing screens in order to cut down the noise, but this would have made it more difficult to visually supervise the area with gaze. However, I was not told whether or not such control with gaze was practised intentionally.

The team leaders trained, supported and counselled the agents, gave them feedback and delivered reports to the corporate clients. Monitoring the phone calls was a crucial part of the team leaders' work. Every call was recorded and the team leaders also listened in on the calls in real time. In principle, the agents did not know when their calls were listened to, but they did know that the calls were recorded and could be listened to in real time or at a later stage. Some of the agents interviewed told me that the advantages of surveillance were more important than the slight discomfort it caused them. First, the recording of the calls supported the agents in case the customer complained and offered a different version of the telephone conversation than the agent. Second, real time surveillance was used to give the agents immediate feedback to improve their performance. In other words, with the aid of surveillance, the agents could improve their performance and increase their bonuses. Generally, it could be said that surveillance did not evoke any strong

emotions among the interviewees but it was merely stated as an existing fact. I will return to employee control in Green later.

Green seemed to be a fairly typical call centre office when compared to the call centres presented in the literature of the field. It was a modern office with simplified interior decoration and technology with predictive call distribution and other computer programmes. What there was not, however, was the display board on the wall which would announce how many calls have been processed, how many were currently in progress and how many were waiting to be dealt with. Nevertheless, the team leaders could see such information on their computer displays. Presumably this was because Green was a subcontractor firm with many assignments, both inbound and outbound, which could not be squeezed onto one display board or exposed to visitors.

In conclusion, the office space in general offered the setting for formal and informal activities. In Green, the space was organized for formal activity and, at the same time, it prevented informal activity and interaction. The workers in Green had more opportunities to interact with each other while working than those in Purple, because the agents and the team leaders were working in the same large space instead of single or double offices. It seems that control in Green was organized through individual persons more than through electronic equipment because there were no display boards on the wall indicating the employees' output, for example. However, to participate in modern society is to be under electronic surveillance (Lyon 1994), which was also utilized in Green even if not to the same extent as in some UK call centres (e.g. Kinnie, Hutchinson & Purcell 2000; Knights & Odih 2002; Taylor et al. 2002). Moreover, the agents in Green could move from one assignment to another and, by doing this, change the content of their work even though its form remained unchanged. This is in line with earlier findings which point out that the range of skills the call centre employees use and are required to have in their work varies between industry sectors (Belt, Richardson & Webster 2000). Furthermore, the changes made the work less monotonous, repetitive and tiring than in some in-house call centres.

### 4.3.1. Gender in the Organizational Hierarchy and Management

This section concentrates on Green's organizational structure and hierarchy. Here I go deeper into the gender-related practices of promotion and the ways in which female and male managers and managerial positions in general are described and referred to. I discuss call centres as workplaces accessible for female managers and analyse their opportunities to advance in their career. When asked, the agents in Green found the company's organizational hierarchy to be rather steep in terms of physical and interactional distances between the agents and the managers. The agents did not necessarily know all the managers whose offices were on the second floor and who stayed fairly remote to the agents' and their daily work. Although the agents were working in the same large space, they were not familiar with each other either. Many of the agents were acquainted only with the members and supervisors of their own team, and occasionally with other employees with whom they had interacted. This was a huge difference when compared to Purple where the telemarketers worked in their own offices but still knew each other. In Purple, however, there were far fewer employees than in Green.

One reason for why co-workers did not know each other well in Green could be its high staff turnover, as one of the agents pointed out. The reason why the agents did not know the managers could be because there had been several organizational changes concerning not only the top management but also the middle management. Notably, for the first time in the history of the call centre, there was a female CEO in the office. At the time of my fieldwork, she had been working at Green only for about six months, and therefore many of the interviewees did not know her and could not say whether or not the change of the CEO had affected the work organization. However, I asked one of the managers about the significance of the CEO's gender, and her answer was exceptionally outspoken.

*Tuija: Do you notice in it in any way or could you say that you can notice somehow that she [the CEO] is a woman and would a woman do some things differently?*

*Ella: Yes she would.*

*Tuija: Could you tell me more about that, in what way?*

*Ella: Well, overall I am the first woman in this company, in the history of this company in this role. All my predecessors have been men and when I came here all the other managers were men. And at the moment this has turned completely upside down, now only the IT manager is a man and all the other management personnel are women. And how this can be seen in my mind, well, women do much more work, they try much harder, they have to do a lot more to earn their position, their role and that the other management or the management of the corporation think they are able to fulfil that role. You cannot talk about it on the same day that how much more women than men have to invest in themselves and show their capability. Salaries come to men much easier and they have been able to stay in their positions with a lot less effort. This is really a fact. (...) Men are lazy. They don't do, they think that this thing works and this position and role comes to them for granted. And when you talk nicely and talk a lot and with big gestures so that's it, you don't have to show it through your actions and earn your job. Yes, I have observed these men, they are good at talking, they are very convincing and suave and verbal, you cannot blame them for that. But at the point where you have to start acting and doing something concrete, everything has just remained undone. Or then they concentrate on wrong, inessential things and I mean that their thoughts can be somewhere else than in work.*

My interpretation is that Ella used my question about the gender of the CEO as an excuse to talk about her experiences and to reflect on her track in the work organization in comparison with that of the male managers. Ella sounded quite fed up with the male managers, and perhaps there was also a hint of bitterness in her relatively harsh answer. In general, this is not a very typical way to speak about gender in Finland where gender-neutral discourses and other 'politically correct' gender discourses are common (Korvajärvi 2002a; Lepistö-Johansson 2007, 191; Meriläinen 2000, 429). Despite that, some remarks about the gender difference are made by women. Examples of these could be 'women need to be more competent than men' or 'men don't question themselves as much as women' (Pesonen, Tienari & Vanhala 2009, 335–336) or that 'men are lazier than women' (Korvajärvi 1998, 70). Furthermore, Korvajärvi (1998, 115) provides a description of a female marketing manager in an insurance company, Iris, who had learned to her surprise that a unit she had planned was not to be headed by herself but by a man. Yet, Iris

considered this as *'the destiny of us women'* and told the interviewer that *'I'm not bitter.'* In contrast to Iris, Ella seems to be more frank with her words, blaming men for being lazy, getting their position too easily and managing things badly.

Iris had definitely hit the 'glass ceiling' in her work, as perhaps had Ella too in hers. The concept of glass ceiling refers to the invisible barriers that prevent women's advancement in work organizations (Maume 1999; Padavic and Reskin 2002). However, as a metaphor, glass ceiling is more static than dynamic and does not address the agency or social processes of women and men, which therefore makes it rather a passive and deterministic metaphor. This is so even though the glass ceiling could be broken – which may be dangerous, metaphorically speaking. Moreover, the low representation of women in top management may create an appearance of a glass ceiling, although problems and gender discrimination may occur on all levels of organizational hierarchy, on top of the ceiling but also below it. (Baxter & Wright 2000; Husu 2001, 44–45)

It has been pointed out by Liisa Husu (2001, 44) that the empirical base of the glass ceiling as a structural concept has been challenged (Baxter & Wright 2000; Britton & Williams 2000; Ferree & Purkayastha 2000; Wright & Baxter 2000). However, in the case study of eleven call centres in the UK and Ireland, Vicky Belt (2002) noticed evidence of a glass ceiling in operation. She argues that although reaching a managerial position is theoretically a career goal for all call centre employees, in practice career progression for most women halts at the team leader level. Belt found several reasons for this, including the general lack of management opportunities in flat call centre hierarchies, the absence of appropriate management training for team leaders, the tendency to recruit external candidates for managerial roles, and, finally, the challenge of combining family life with a managerial career.

As for Green's manager Ella, she did not say directly that she had hit or broken the glass ceiling, but my interpretation is that she had cracked it. On the basis of her interview and the above excerpt, I assume that Ella had fought her way in the organization hierarchy to her present position. She had also cleared the way for the CEO Sari, who had broken the remaining glass ceiling by being appointed as the CEO. In Finland, there are still only a few women working in the top positions of businesses (Vanhala & Pesonen 2008, 6–9). When I asked her about that, the CEO recalled only one woman other than herself who was in charge of a subcontractor

call centre firm, although she said that it was rather typical to have a woman in charge of an in-house customer service unit.

The CEO Sari saw her job as natural continuation of her career in another, quite technically oriented field of work. She had sought for the job in Green for family reasons; her child was then less than one year old and she needed to have a job in the region. Before she was hired, Green had been operating for several months without a CEO. Like the call centre manager Ella, the CEO Sari described having her '*background in engineering.*' This referred not only to her work experience but also to her education. Sari's own view was that she had had and still had '*the right chemistry*' with the chair of Green's board, which allowed them to get along fairly well, thus helping her enter the firm. She did not explain this any further and I did not ask what this right chemistry was and why it was needed.

The CEO Sari emphasized the technological side in her career background and her logical thinking, besides other features usually considered masculine, in her family background. She also told me that she had launched several employee-friendly social practices in Green, such as summer gifts and Christmas parties. Moreover, many of the interviewees said that openness and general sharing of information had increased under her management. The CEO Sari crystallized her job as follows: '*This job is three things. It is people, it is processes and it is technology*' and, according to her, she was equally familiar with all these three things. This is congruent with an earlier finding according to which female bank managers construct a many-sided picture of themselves in their interviews (Meriläinen 2000). However, I was given the impression that the CEO emphasized her familiarity with technology more than her familiarity with people and processes. Technology is culturally coded as masculine, and it has been noted that men as well as women describe a good manager as being endowed with traits considered masculine rather than feminine (Wajcman 1998).

What is more, the cultural view of managers is masculine and manly, and men have been traditionally seen as better suited to executive positions than women (Lepistö-Johansson 2009, 122–124; Wajcman 1998). Overall, the agents and the team leaders commented on the CEO's gender very sparingly although I specifically asked them for their comments. None of the interviewees considered a woman unsuitable for the CEO's post, or for any other position in the management. On the

contrary, one of the female agents considered call centre business especially suitable to female managers. I asked her why, and she expressed her opinion as follows:

*Maarit: Well, because this is about doing and maintaining personal contacts as a job, so I think that even if men do have such great pipe brains, they do look at the technical side of things, that this is so and this is how many deals we should make, and so on. Surely you measure it a bit differently that they do not think so much of how much there is, that how much such social contact, even just in the work community. (...) But in general I would say that a female manager would pay attention to these certain things [in customer contacts] and inside the work community more than a male manager. As a field this is the kind that even if we spend a lot of time with different machines and gadgets, but women can still deal with them as well as men.*

Maarit's opinion represents a cultural dichotomy that follows a natural scientific discourse about the difference between the brains of men and women, which is a relatively common and recognizable way of speech in mundane conversations. According to this division, men cannot process nor do several tasks at the same time while women can. For example, women can simultaneously prepare dinner, look after children and watch TV, whereas men can manage these tasks only one after the other. This alleged gender difference is usually explained with different kinds of brains – men's brains are described to be like a pipe and women's brains like a bird's nest<sup>14</sup> – and usually no emphasis is laid on the cultural and social aspects of the division. A case in point could be that men may have the privilege to focus on one task at the time, whereas women simply need to multitask in order to get things done. Moreover, Maarit repeated the dichotomic view that men are more technically oriented, concerned with making profit and measuring things, while women are more gifted in social skills and social interaction. Maarit did not explain, however, whether or not she considered this dichotomy is caused because of the difference in female and male brains or whether it occurs despite the alleged brain difference.

In the excerpt, Maarit at least implicitly refers to the call centre business as being suitable for women. Accordingly, Belt, Richardson and Webster (2000, 377–378)

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<sup>14</sup> In Finnish, men's pipe brains and women's bird's nest brains are called *putkiaivot* and *tippaleipäivot*, which cannot be translated verbatim.



found that their female interviewees tended to view call centres as women-friendly environments. One reason for this is the rapid rate of growth of the call centres and the high rates of staff turnover in some workplaces. This appeared to create opportunities for promotion for women that do not exist in more mature industries and work organizations. To some extent, this was also the case in Green where some of the team leaders had been promoted to supervisors after working as agents for only a couple of weeks, and where it was still possible for women and men to be promoted to middle managers and perhaps even to top managers in just a couple of years. In fact, men's opportunities to progress in their career in Green was questioned by one male agent, Tapani, who quite directly suggested that in Green women were promoted over men's heads.

*Tapani: Because this is a female-majority workplace, they quite often hire women into managerial positions. And this will probably continue to be so, but it doesn't matter [to me]. If you were thinking of having a career here for the rest of your life, then it wouldn't perhaps make so much sense. Well, you could advance in your career, but it would perhaps take longer than if you were a woman. I don't know.*

*Tuija: So you think women would advance faster?*

*Tapani: Based on the picture I've [got], so yes. Because all the people who have better jobs here, they are women. And our CEO is a woman.*

Tapani explained that the company had mostly female managers because, in his opinion, women favour women in regard to promotions in Green. This is rather a strong statement concerning the gender pattern in the Finnish work organization. It is expressed every now and then as a counter-argument for the views that women do not have equal opportunities in work life compared to men. If the women managers in Green really did favour women, as Tapani suggested, they would have acted against the gender system in which men and masculinity are hierarchically valued above women and femininity. This alleged favouritism also contradicts the 'glass escalator' metaphor, a phenomenon in which men's career proceeds relatively quickly and easily. Accordingly, it has been found that the more women there are in an occupation, the greater the men's – especially white men's – chances of moving into managerial positions (Maume 1999; Padavic and Reskin 2002, 99–100).

On every level of Green's organizational hierarchy, in every unit and almost every assignment, the number of female employees was larger than or about the same as that of male employees. This was also the case in the IT unit and the work assignments considered technical in nature, such as helpdesk assignments of various appliances. The IT unit had four employees, two women and two men, and a male manager. Previously, in 2001, there had been six employees but, unfortunately, their gender distribution is not explicated in the interviews. The IT support called Jouko answered my question about the employees' gender in the IT unit as follows.

*Tuija: Then I am interested in gender issues. Are there any women working in the IT department at all?*

*Jouko: There is one woman and another is on maternity leave. About half are women. So I would guess that it's the most equal department in our company.*

When posing the above question, I had the presumption that there were no women working in the IT unit. Perhaps I reiterated the culturally shared view that women are not experts but users of technology (Korvajärvi 2004b; Vehviläinen 1999). Contrary to my presumption, Jouni considered the IT unit to be the most gender-equal unit in the firm in terms of gender distribution. However, he did not tell (and I did not ask) whether or not the work assignments in the IT unit were distributed according to the employees' gender, but previously he had made a sketchy comment according to which *'everybody does everything'* in the IT unit. In the excerpt above, Jouni referred to the gender equality as based on the number of women and men in the IT unit, an utterance which may have been triggered by my clumsy question about whether there were female employees at all. After that, I asked him whether that was the prevailing situation in gender composition in IT units or a rare exception.

*Tuija: I was just going to ask, isn't this quite rare that here you have women on the IT side, that isn't it, have I understood correctly that usually it's men's ...*

*Jouko: Yes, but usually it depends on how big the IT department is, but there have always been, you could say that there are women, but they are a very clear minority. I have been in such organizations that the greatest imbalance has been,*

*that there were over 20 people in my own department and only one woman. That was quite big, then. You could almost say that there has always been one [woman].*

After that I still carried on asking whether it was rare to have women working in IT units and Jouni, at least partly, confirmed this. The interview proceeded and I continued to talk about gender and asked him how the women employees had settled into the IT unit. Jouni answered as follows:

*Maybe it is the character that has brought these people into this field, so maybe it is like, I cannot say now that masculine, but in a way that, how should I describe it, the thinking is that such, more technical or such like, what you can perhaps call a more masculine thinking. I have never had bad experiences that I wouldn't fit in or, usually they are very... Both work-wise and socially I have said the same thing: that we have a real nice group of people, no matter what gender; why not say the same about the whole company.*

The last part of his utterance is quite unclear but, according to my interpretation, Jouko said that the IT unit was a very agreeable work unit in the firm. However, he seemed to have difficulties to find the right words and to describe the special characteristics of the women working in the IT unit. One option is that he referred to disagreements between some female managers; other interviewees had mentioned that there were or had been a few disagreements. They never mentioned what the actual cause or the content of the quarrels were but merely explained them with women's gender and, consequently, with biological determinism. These disagreements were talked about as being particularly women's rows in such utterances as: '*women take things more personally, their professional perspective is not strong enough*'<sup>15</sup>, and '*men solve things by going to watch a hockey game and they pat each other's shoulders and things are okay, but with women knives and daggers fly and people talk behind each other's backs.*' Quite similarly, a study of a Finnish bank found that women may interpret an issue that has been discussed on a general level so personally offending that finally it cannot be discussed at all (Korvajärvi 2004c, 193). These utterances very strongly contradict the view that

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<sup>15</sup> Quite similarly, in Päivi Korvajärvi's (1998) study, one male employee said that '*women sometimes mix personal, private matters with their job*'.

women have good social skills and are good with people. Alternatively, the view implies that women do not want to be in good terms with their female co-workers, although they may be in good terms with their customers.

In sum, the vertical gender segregation in Green was vanishing but the assumptions concerning the segregation and its consequences to the employees were not necessarily very liberal. The female CEO who mainly talked about technology and emphasized her relation to it was also married with children and thus had care responsibilities which she was able to manage well, unlike the women in Belt and her colleagues' (2000, 379–380; Belt 2002, 61) study in which women had difficulties in reconciling the demands of a managerial career with family life. Moreover, women were hired to work in Green's IT unit where they were accepted as competent employees. This is in line with the findings that outsourced call centres in particular offer women opportunities for swift promotions and that a considerable number of women are developing careers in call centres (Belt 2002), a claim which was supported by some interviewees in Green. However, women were not seen to be as able to keep their personal lives out of the office and to be as professional as they should have been, and this was alleged to be evident in women's sour relationships with each other.

#### 4.3.2. Recruiting People in Transition

Below I examine the recruiting practices and, moreover, the employee turnover and work commitment in Green. In doing so, I identify the kind of workforce that Green preferred and actually hired, and the means to recruit it and commit it to the call centre. In order to recruit new agents, Green advertised in the local newspapers, the local radio and on the Internet. Green's recruiters also co-operated with the local educational institutions and participated in the career fairs. According to the CEO Sari, the region suited Green's needs in the sense that it had several educational institutions and, consequently, good opportunities to recruit students. Moreover, she said that the population in the city was large enough to meet Green's recruitment needs. In contrast to Purple, Green recruited and actively sought student workforce from the educational institutions. Furthermore, compared to Purple, Green recruited in a fairly massive scale.

I was told that the most common way to apply for a job at Green was to send in a job application through its website. Whether contacting the firm via the Internet or in other ways, the applicant first filled out the application form. Then the person in charge of recruitment called the job applicant considered a potential employee. Thus, the first job interview was done by phone. In this way the recruiter found out whether the job seekers' phone behaviour was polite and the voice suitable for the job. If so, the job applicant was asked to come over for a face-to-face interview.

I was also told that there had been a recruitment campaign named 'Wanted' in Green. During the campaign, an employee who presented and recommended the job applicant to the call centre received a bonus if the applicant was hired and stayed on in Green at least for one hundred days. According to the interviewees, several employees were recruited via acquaintances or even via family members during the campaign. In this respect, the means to recruit was quite similar in both Green and Purple. Roberto Fernandez and his colleagues (2000) have studied the hiring of new customer service agents via employee referrals at a phone centre. They claim that social networks are deeply embedded in an organizational routine commonly used on the employer's side of the labour market, namely the practice of hiring new employees via employee referrals. By its very nature, hiring via referrals is a process that flows through the employees' social networks for the employers' own purposes. Hiring via referrals, in which monetary bonuses are paid to employees for successful referrals, is a well-organized practice that makes use of the employees' social ties to provide economic benefits to the hiring company. (Fernandez, Castilla & Moore 2000) In Green's hiring campaign, the economic benefits were also distributed to the employees.

According to the agents interviewed, they were required to have communication skills, basic computer skills and preferably some language skills before they were hired as customer service agents. One of the newcomers in Green said that she had been in an aptitude test in her job interview but she did not know on why she was the only one of the applicants who had to do the test. Usually, there were individual interviews for job applicants or group interviews of four to twenty persons. The applicants were asked to speak Finnish, Swedish and English during the interview to demonstrate their language skills. The recruiter phoned the successful applicants after the job interview and told them they had the job if they still wanted it. Several agents, mainly women, assumed that their earlier work experience in different kinds

of customer service occupations had had a positive effect on their recruitment in Green. Yet, some of the agents were students who just needed a job and did not necessarily have experience in customer service jobs. When recruiting, therefore, the employer did not have very strict requirements for the range of skills every job seeker should have, but the requirements varied according to the job seeker and the assignment in question.

One agent, Minttu, told me that in her job interview she was asked in detail what she knew about the call centre, whether she had friends or acquaintances working there and whether she knew what assignments were ongoing there. Minttu considered this a bit strange and assumed that it could have had something to do with the fact that the firm concealed the assignments. It has been suggested that job interviews are situations in which job seekers must demonstrate that they are impressed with the corporate culture and identify with its values (Brannan & Hawkins 2007). Testing Minttu's attitude towards Green and its concealment policy may have been one reason for posing the above questions during her job interview.

According to the CEO Sari, there were a dozen temporary employees hired via a temporary employment agency in Green at the time of the interviews. Although Green used temporary workers, it also recruited permanent employees. Moreover, Green had earlier hired fixed-term agents for certain projects, but this had become an issue with the union. Later on, temporary employees from several different agencies were hired to even out the differences in the employment need, to '*even out the rushes.*' Thus, temporary employees were used as a means to increase the flexibility of labour use rather than to outsource the recruitment process.

### ***Employee Turnover and Commitment***

In Green, the employee turnover was so high that one full-time employee was performing tasks only related to employee recruitment. According to the CEO Sari, the monthly turnover rate was about 10 per cent on average, and it was higher among students working as part-time agents than as full-time agents. The CEO did not find this merely disadvantageous. Instead, she said, Green needed part-time student employees and, with student employees, the relatively high turnover was unavoidable. She indicated that there had been a slight change in recruitment policy and that although the call centre had started to place emphasis on full-time

temporary employees instead of part-time employees, part-time agents were still needed to work in the evening shift. And, she continued, the turnover rate was not especially high if compared to the turnover rates of some other call centres. In fact, the turnover rate was perhaps high in comparison to other industries, but not particularly high within the call centre business. The turnover rates from Finland are not available but, in the UK, for example, the call centre turnover rates in 1997 were estimated to range from 4 to 30 per cent a year (Odih & Knights 2007, 124), in the Australian call centre business the turnover rate was 18 per cent per year (Lewig & Dollard 2003, 367), and in Switzerland it ranged from 8 to 50 per cent a year (Baumgartner, Good & Udris 2002, cited in Grebner et al. 2003, 343). Further, the CEO said that the firm had succeeded in committing their employees to their workplace if they did not want to resign in order to work in another but similar firm or in the same kind of assignments but in some completely different job.

Consequently, the call centre had adjusted itself to the turnover rate of the employees. However, the turnover had its consequences for the informal organization and social relations. In the interviews, several agents described how people were dispirited when their co-workers just disappeared.

*Ari: If there is too much turnover it really sucks. It is always like the whole gang becomes a bit insecure, like did those people decide to leave themselves or did they want to leave or what. Because nobody really talks about these things at all. If someone leaves, you just see that okay, there's an empty spot, that did she or he leave or what happened.*

As Ari points out, the disappearance of co-workers leaves others to suspect that the leaver was fired or wanted to quit and to wonder what was in the background of it. The employees who were recruited by employee referral are more likely to stay with the company when their referrer also stays in the company (Fernandez, Castilla & Moore 2000, 1351). So, it seems that to some extent the social ties connect the employees to the firm, and constant breakages in these ties cause uncertainty in other employees.

The means used in Green to increase the employees' commitment to work were diverse. First of all, employee commitment can be strengthened from the very beginning, and in fact, the job interview seems to be a major opportunity for this.

The provision of realistic job previews describing both the positive and negative aspects of the job for the recruits increases commitment. Therefore, the employees who are given a correct image about the content of work in question are more committed to their jobs than the employees who are misinformed and consequently get disappointed. (Meyer & Allen 1997, 69–71; Sturges & Guest 2001) In Green, where the new employees were not all familiar with the work, this was crucial, even if it is difficult to know whether one likes or dislikes the job before trying it out in practice. Moreover, the CEO's idea and new policy was to reward the employees for staying on in Green. Her plan was to give design vases for the loyal employees: after one year, they were to get a small vase; after five years, they were to get a middle-sized vase; and, finally, the largest one was to be given to the employees who had been working in Green for ten years or more. In addition, the CEO was determined that after a gap of several years, the company would resume its tradition of throwing Christmas parties to the employees. According to her, it simply was a must because the Christmas party was such an important part of the Finnish work culture.

Despite all these efforts to strengthen employee commitment in Green, none of the interviewees expressed strong attachment to the employer, on the contrary. In comparison with Purple's agents, Green's agents were less clearly and strongly committed, as Vilma spontaneously brought up in her interview:

*This is a strange situation for me. I wonder what company I'm working for; the company that commissioned me or Green. And it is quite clear to me that I think that I work for the commissioning company, not for Green, although they're the ones who pay me. We have now received tickets to cinema from the commissioning company, and they say they're going to take us out to eat, for example. So in a way now it's the commissioning company that's taking care of us. It's just that I think that I rather work for the commissioning company than for Green. I don't think of myself as one of the Greens.*

When asked, Vilma added that her situation does not have an effect on her everyday work. The excerpt indicates that the corporate clients were also making efforts to strengthen the agents' commitment to their assignments by rewarding them and caring about them.



It was common in Green that the corporate clients organized training in the products and services they had outsourced. The length of training depended on the client's assignment and usually varied from half an hour up to six weeks. In general, the agents were dealing quite extensively with the representatives of the corporate clients, and, in this respect, Vilma's bewilderment was not surprising. The training they provided was another practice that strengthened the employees' commitment to the call centre. Because the turnover rate among the part-time employees was higher than among the full-time employees, the part-time employees were working more often in selling and marketing assignments than in customer service. There was an economical reason behind this arrangement. The training period in selling and marketing assignments was shorter than in customer service, and because it was more probable for a part-time employee to resign than for a full-time employee, these selling and marketing assignments with low training expenses were given to the part-time agents. Interestingly, one agent mentioned that despite their higher turnover and lower training level, the part-time employees were also very committed to their work because they had fewer working hours and lighter workloads.

To summarize, Green used several channels to recruit new employees. In contrast to Purple, recruitment in Green was almost a constant practice which was discussed without gendered terms, although the agents were selected to gender-segregated work assignments. I suggest that this continuity in hiring made it both mundane and professional, which, at the same time, hid its gendered nature. Moreover, hiring new employees was not the only purpose of job advertising and job interviews even though it could have been. They were also used to trumpet about the call centre business in general, influence people's attitudes and increase their awareness of it. Employee turnover in Green was high in comparison to that in Purple but relatively similar to other call centres in the literature. When compared to Korvajärvi's (2004a; 2004b) study on a Finnish call centre, Green's employees had a different view on call centre work in general. The employees in Green were not as excited, future-oriented and sure about the continuity of their jobs as the call centre employees in Korvajärvi's (2004a, 300) research who considered their workplaces as '*trendy*' and '*hot topic*'. In Green, several quite mundane practices aimed to commit the employees to the work organization. The staff turnover nevertheless

remained high because Green employed so many students and its total number of employees was high.

### 4.3.3. Control, Feedback and Rewards

I now turn to a more detailed consideration of various practices used to control the agents' work, to give them feedback and reward them for their work performance. In general, it could be said that the terms of work in Green were not as flexible as those in Purple, but more regulated and supervised. In a similar vein, compared to Purple, the arrangements concerning working hours in Green were not very personal. However, some personal arrangements were possible, as one agent, Eila, explained right after she denied that possibility:

*Here we don't at all have the possibility to check that [who has the possibility to work]. If there's overtime, like a certain project, for example, they ask if you want to come in to work or not. Like they don't make anyone come. Only if it's one of the holidays like Christmas then there has to be someone doing customer service here. So if nobody volunteers then they toss the coin because nobody really wants to come in at Christmas. But they don't check whether you have family or not. Of course, if you have a situation that the coaches know about, or the people who book the shifts know that, for example, you live so far away that it's not possible for you to come in, they don't make you come in. For example, if you don't have transport connections to start the first thing in the morning at eight, they give you the kind of working hours so that you come in at ten o'clock. So in that sense [...] And you can change the working hours yourself if you have to be somewhere, so you can be absent for a few hours and then do the few hours in on another day and so on. So, anyway, in that sense it's flexible.*

The various practices Eila described here were quite practical: nobody was forced to come to work. I was told that sometimes the agents had difficulties in arranging a day off when they needed it. However, this was not a commonly shared experience. For example, Tanja thought that the employer and the job in general were flexible and she described how she had been allowed to take her dog to a sudden vet

appointment in the middle of her work shift. Nevertheless, in contrast to Purple where the telemarketers were allowed to decide their own working days and working time, Green seemed to have different work arrangements. This was justified with the fact that in some projects there had to be as many agents working as was agreed with the corporate clients. Moreover, every agent had to have access to a workstation and, therefore, the number of agents working could not exceed that of the workstations.

Employee control in Green took place through computers, but also through other kinds of monitoring, including visual control via supervisors' gaze. Control was both electronic and manual, and it was directed to both the agents' working hours and productivity, at least in some projects, as Eila explained to the disbelieving interviewer in the next, rather long excerpt:

*Eila: We have to, each time we come in to work, we need to sign in. And then if there are some special occasions, you have to mark in the daily report that how much you [have], for example, made phone calls about the project, or what else you have done or been in training. And then there are all these things: you have to sign in on the computer and sign out when you take a coffee or lunch break, you need to sign back in. And every hour you have to write on the board all the contacts and deals you have made. And then if you want to...*

*Tuija: On the board, on something like...*

*Eila: Yes, like on a flip chart.*

*Tuija: So everyone for themselves.*

*Eija: Yes, everyone marks themselves the hourly results from the project. And then if you want to be absent they are really strict, for each absence you need to have a permission in advance and have it signed. So they are all rather strict in that sense.*

*Tuija: I want to go back to the flip chart thing. So does this mean for example that everyone comes on the hour to write on the chart?*

*Eila: Yes, on the hour. For example, when you get a deal we have to mark it on the chart that now we have a new deal, like in numbers. And then on the hour we mark all the results, contacts and deals. And then the coach calculates every hour all the results, how many contacts in an hour, how many deals have been made. But then of course everything needs to be signed on the computer.*

*Tuija: Why do you have to mark them on the flip chart?*

*Eila: I don't know. In a way they go on the computer, but sometimes the results don't tally, so that's one reason.*

Eila did not know exactly why the flip chart was used but she assumed that at least one of the reasons was that the computer programme they used was not very reliable. It sounds to me, though, that, in addition, there were elements of control exerted over the agents in this practice which mixed encouragement with group pressure. Otherwise the procedure of reporting contacts and done deals could have been done in a more inconspicuous manner. However, the comments of the employees in Green were not irritated as, for example, in the study by Korczynski and his colleagues (2000) on an Australian call centre where measurement and monitoring of work and outputs were pervasive and where one of the employees remarked that *'you get measured on how many times you scratch your shoulder.'* Instead, the employees in Green saw control and performance measurement as an integral part of their work.

In Green, as in many call centres, at least some of the phone calls were listened to in real time and used afterwards in training. These calls were used for giving general feedback, and, if necessary, also personal feedback. Moreover, in some assignments, one employee regularly listened to all the phone calls that had resulted in a deal. Furthermore, a proportion of all phone calls were regularly sent to the corporate clients who listened to the calls and in this way took part in the process of controlling the agents' performance.

When I asked the agents whether they had received positive feedback from their work, most of them answered that they had. However, there were also exceptions, such as Vilma who said that: *'Well, not as such. I happened to hear from my team leader once that 'You have been commended, I've seen such an e-mail'. So, to this day, I haven't heard of such an e-mail message that I would have been commended.'* Thus, although positive feedback was a common means to maintain a positive and pleasant atmosphere, all the positive and encouraging comments did not necessarily reach the agents' ears. Instead, there were differences between the assignments and between the supervisors' personal styles to strengthen the positive atmosphere. As Purple, Green also arranged competitions and campaigns to boost the agents' productivity and motivation, which also affected the atmosphere. The gift tokens

that were given as prizes to the winners of the competitions and campaigns could be regarded as extra compensation beyond the agents' regular wages.

### ***Wages***

The employees in Green had fixed hourly wages, which were set by the collective agreement. Some of the agents were also paid commissions depending on the assignment they were working in and the tasks they were doing. The range of different commissions made it difficult to compare the agents' earnings to one another and understand how their payslips were totted up. In addition to fixed hourly wages, there were two ways to get a commission. The first one was to take a certain number of calls per hour in inbound assignments or to make a certain number of deals in outbound assignments. The second way was to make customers change their mind about giving a notice of termination of the service. In general, the commission system was rather unclear to some of the agents, especially if they had recently changed from one assignment to another. The agents were apparently not very satisfied with the situation, as Vilma explained:

*Well, for example, we have a bonus system that is based on a certain number of calls. We have now got our total number of calls from February but we have not been given the figures of how many contacts I've made in an hour, I've had to ask what the calculations are based on, what hours I use and how. And I've told my own team leader that hey, these are such things that if the bonuses are based on the numbers of calls and contacts, you should bring the figures to us too so that we won't have to ask for them all the time. (...) And someone should calculate it for me so that I won't have to. And then ask again, that hey, how am I supposed to calculate this? 'Well, we don't know really.' If that's the basis for bonuses then it [the information] should come, like, from the company.*

Vilma's concern seemed to be common knowledge in Green because the CEO Sari also mentioned that the commission and wage systems in general were rather complicated to understand. She herself admitted not understanding them completely either and therefore they had to be changed. However, she did not explain how this

could be done. Although Vilma expressed her dissatisfaction with the bonus system, she also said that the bonuses were not that important to her:

*We have certain defined bonus money and other things, but in order to reach meaningful sums and for them to have an effect, you would need to work really, really fast. I have decided that I don't need one cent more per hour at the expense that the customer will call a second time. (...) I've figured that the call can last a bit longer so that the customer is happy and won't call again in three hours' time. Because it's not in anyone's interest that the customer calls again.*

Accordingly, several other agents said that they paid more attention to the quality of service they offered than to their commission because the commission in inbound assignments was, after all, quite small. In the inbound assignments, the commission depended on the number of phone calls the agents answered per hour but, as Vilma said, she preferred to talk with the customer as long as it took to solve their problems. If the agents were too hasty, the customer called back after a few hours, which was a sign of poor service. In some assignments, there was a log in which the agents wrote down the customers' contacts and the operations already done. If the customer kept calling back, the agent could see the log and the actions already proposed. Moreover, several agents described a good co-worker as someone who deals with the customer's problems properly because if not, the customer will call back and take up somebody's time again. To put it differently, a good co-worker was not described in terms of her or his characteristics or actions within the social community of work but in terms of customers. This emphasizes the view that the agents worked together and in unison although they interacted individually with every customer.

When I asked whether the agents knew each other's wages, they answered that on a general level they did, except for the temporary employees' wages. The temporary employees had, according to one interviewee, hourly wages which were better than the hourly wages of the permanent agents. On the whole, the temporary employees did not get any commission, they worked long hours and, on average, their pay was better than that of Green's agents. This left the temporary agency employees and Green's employees in a rather uneven position in terms of their working hours and rewards.

Furthermore, I inquired why there were not many male agents working in Green, and the common answer to the question was because of the low wages. This was also stated by the male agents themselves, who found the wage level to be too low for men. Yet they did not explain why they themselves were working in Green. Only one of the male agents referred to this contradiction by saying that he did not have to subsist on his wages. Thus, in Green there was this unquestioned view that men need, or at least have, better wages than women. This view is in line with the dual-earner family model and the idea of family wages. According to these, people are supposed to be organized into heterosexual, male-headed nuclear families which are principally supported by the man's salary (Fraser 1994, 591). Yet, my interviewees in Green did not make any distinction between singles and couples in relation to wages. Moreover, they related the sum of wages to hard work, for example, one of the employees saying that men do not want to do that kind of workload with such low wages. These comments were brought up without any demonstration of irritability, as if the gender wage cap favouring men was an ordinary and uninteresting issue. Moreover, the view previously presented that the arrival of more men would help to push up all wages (Korvajärvi 1998, 66, 90) was not mentioned in Green.

Some of the employees were happy with their wages, others were not, but the wages in general did not arouse any turmoil in the employees. In her interview, one of the managers wondered how Green will get Finnish-speaking employees in the future if the job continues to be so underpaid. This comment gives a hint of the racial hierarchy which operates alongside the gender hierarchy. In the racial hierarchy, people who speak the local language fluently, in this case Finnish, are valued higher and allowed to have better work positions than immigrants with a foreign accent.

Previously, there had been a few weeks' temporary dismissal in Green, which momentarily cut the wages of employees. This added to the uncertainty of the agents, a couple of them being distressed because of dismissals might happen again. The CEO Sari said that there would be a change in the way the firm operated by ensuring that the assignment cycle would become faster than before. Therefore, the agents were also likely to get assignments the following day even if they might not know long beforehand when and what. Consequently, the firm could not give the employees any promises or guarantees about the future. In general, the temporary

dismissal had had an impact on the agents' trust in their employer. Also, the previous summer had been bad for business. Because of that, the agents in in-bound assignments had had a meeting in which the employer had told and assured them that there would be assignments and they would have their jobs also in the future.

In conclusion, employee control and feedback were discussed without references to gender in Green. Employee control was non-systematic and not an end in itself in comparison with earlier findings on call centres. However, these control practices varied depending on work assignments. Instead of control, emphasis was placed on the amiable atmosphere and positive feedback. The wages in Green did not cause any specific dissatisfaction although they were generally considered to be too low for attracting men's interest in the work. In other words, wages were seen to be the reason why more men were not working in Green, as if to say that, for men, it was not worth working in such a hard work environment if the wages were not good. Also, the employees were confused about the way their personal wages were calculated and about the different forms of bonuses.

#### 4.3.4. On-line Practices

This section addresses the different practices the agents used in interaction with the customers on the phone. It is common in call centres that the agents are not only told in general terms what kinds of roles they are expected to play on the phone, but also given detailed rules for the enactment of that role. This is what Deborah Cameron (2000, 98) calls 'codification'. One example of codification is to give a fully specified script to agents. There was codification in the form of the scripts in Green, although the agents also interacted spontaneously with the customers. In many assignments, the scripts were not strict but the agents were allowed – to a certain extent – to speak rather freely and improvise. For some assignments, the corporate client prepared the script. The script for other assignments was either written by Green's managers or in collaboration with the client. The script was then tried out in practice and revised on the basis of how the customers received it. When the small details of the agents' speech were codified, written down and enforced as norms, it was an example, albeit a relatively small one, of control over the agents' performance being increased and the agents' own autonomy being decreased



(Cameron 2000, 98). The making and revising of script seemed like gender-neutral practices but the script framed the interaction between the agents and the customers, whose gender in turn affected the interaction.

Another point at which the codification of the detailed rules actualized was the recruitment of the agents. This was often arranged according to the clients' requests. The client may have wanted to decide over the voices and voice-based images they wished to be represented with, as the call centre manager Ella said:

*We have a lot of clients who give certain criteria concerning what kind of person they want, what kind of voice, and which gender. These days they give a rather strict profile of what we should be like. Not a long ago we had a client who did not accept any callers outright but he wanted each caller to call him first and he then asked certain things of the callers by phone. At the same time he heard what kinds of voices the callers had. Does he want that his company is represented by that kind of voices, what kind of image and idea of the company is conveyed to the clients through the voice? In others words, he picked the voices that he wanted and, as a result, not everybody got into the campaign because the client did not accept their voices.*

Here codification was focused on the agents' display of aesthetic labour with their voice. Although the call centre recruited and hired the employees, the corporate clients selected the suitable voices for their assignments. The selecting and voice profiling processes could be very detailed. For instance, voices had to be associated with a certain gender, age, life style, hobbies, and so on. Even if the employees' embodied attributes defined their job assignments, no one was necessarily excluded because different job assignments required different kinds of voices. Depending on their products, the corporate clients could expect, for instance, a youthful and sporty voice. Some clients would prefer an adult, more grown-up voice with recognized experience of life, all-round education and the capability to have more than a shallow conversation. This kind of voice was described as trustworthy and convincing. (Koivunen 2006) The agents' should sound amiable and create a visualization of a certain appearance. I asked the call centre manager Ella to elaborate this voice profiling in relation to the agents' gender:

*Tuija: How does gender come into the picture in these cases in which some clients with products prefer men or women?*

*Ella: Yes, and often in cars or some such technical things they hope to have men, engineers, they want to have engineers who have their educational background in technology. And we always think here that how many engineers we can reach, who would like to come and do this phone work here? How many graduated engineers volunteer?*

*Tuija: Are there occasions where women are required? Or where women are preferred?*

*Ella: Well, we have had situations that have to do with health care, for example these pads and those that are used for incontinence. When we phone about women's troubles or send some kind of samples from here. (...) So in these cases it is always a woman who answers such calls. And we have had no problem with this as we have health care people who have their educational background in nursing so they can give an even more detailed answer. But such areas where they [the clients] would have required either a woman or a man don't directly come to my mind, so generally both are okay. And then sometimes they have wanted to have either women or men because they want to make comparisons to see whether there is a difference in the result if the person approaching is a woman or a man in how the clientele takes it.*

In a somewhat similar manner, another manager, Anu, referred to civil engineering students: *'I make suggestions that it would be good to have maybe evening agents and civil engineering students from the [educational institution of technology].'* Here Anu did not explicitly refer to gender but considering the fact that in Finland education is strongly segregated, for instance, about 80 per cent of the students in technology and natural sciences are men (Women and Men in Finland 2009), it is obvious that gender is implicitly present in her comment on profiling the agents.

The employees thought a manly voice was suitable for certain projects and marketing certain products, but, in addition, they seemed to find good manly voices in general desirable, as Maarit explains: *'In many projects it would be really good to have men, to have such good male voices, they are always convincing even if they were selling sand in paper bags in Sahara next to a dune. And the male voice is*

*good, clear articulation, calm, polite, convincing, it can sell anything.* Several interviewees shared Maarit's view that good male voices were welcome to Green. At the same time, good women's voices were described as *'motherly.'* It appears to me that being motherly was the only position for female agents in which they could simultaneously have both credibility and authority in a positive sense.

Although good male voices were welcomed, call centre work was considered women's work. This cultural view was recognized and repeated by many employees, and even the locality of the cultural view was acknowledged in utterances like *'It is a question of culture. It has been women's work since the Switchboard Sallies [telephone operators]. In some other countries it is different.'* Moreover, one female employee said in an unquestionable manner that there were not many men working in the call centre business because *'it is not a manly business.'* This utterance represents the view that men work in manly industries and women in womanly industries, the view that follows the existing horizontal gender segregation in society at large. In other words, there is a difference between businesses and jobs that are considered suitable for men and businesses and jobs that are seen as suitable for women. Furthermore, the customers' point of view was also expressed to justify the distribution of work assignments according to the gender of the employees.

*Ella: It is difficult for an older man to ring the technical support where a young girl in her twenties is helping and giving advice that 'now you should stick that wire on that side and do this and that and then try again.'* You can really hear in his voice how he would like to say that *I won't talk to you, that by the way girls don't give me advice, that I know much more about this thing. And you also notice that they have the habit of taking the conversation into some other area that is more difficult or demanding and that they know more of. They want to show off their knowledge or they want to show off in front of the girl, that look, girl, I know these things better, like, that now I have made you speechless or something.*

A similar view is crystallized in the utterance *'It is easier to deal with the customers if you're a man. The customers do not necessarily listen to women.'* The view resembles that of Ella above but it is from the point of view of an agent. Moreover, I was also told by agents that *'it is easier for women to make social*

*contacts.*' Such utterances indicate that gender was relevant in the interaction between the agents and the customers, although in Green it was not described in such detail as in Purple.

Although the technology that was used in Green was rather different from the one in Purple, it had not put an end to the typical waiting that also characterised the working days of the majority of the telemarketers in Purple. When there were no incoming calls in inbound assignments, the agents just had to wait for the phone to ring. Accordingly, in outbound assignments, they also had to wait for the calls, particularly because of the technology. It was mentioned that when the clients' data base, what is called '*tape*' was about to end, there was a pause between the calls that could last for as long as ten minutes. In general, however, the outbound assignments contained less waiting than the inbound assignments. The agents said that they spent their waiting time by entertaining themselves with various means. They could read books and magazines or watch films on the television. I was told that surfing on the Internet was forbidden because of some past malpractice, but as one agent said, the team leaders did not necessarily say anything even if they saw someone quickly checking her or his e-mail messages.

In inbound call centres, hanging up is typically not allowed, but instead, workers are required to politely subject themselves to the customers' bad behaviour (Buchanan & Koch-Schulte 2000, 50; Korczynski 2003). This was also the practice in Green. One agent, Maarit, compared dealing with an irate customer to Christian social work done by the church: '*We say that today's charitable work has been done when someone has been able to vent [their bad feelings]. Where [else] could they have done that?*' Maintaining this attitude allowed her to distance herself emotionally from shouting and abusive customers. I asked the agents how they usually coped with an angry customer on the other end of the phone line, and this is what Tanja replied: '*If there really [is] someone who is raging and complaining, then I just switch on the mute button (...) and say 'right, exactly, quite, quite, I agree.'* In that way you get to talk back to the customer but in a way that she or he doesn't hear.' According to the interviews, the mute button was quite commonly used when coping with irate customers. The use of the mute button to hide agents' critical, sarcastic or satirical commentary on customers was also found in US call centres, where agents were able to display themselves as disciplined workers to the

surveillance apparatuses of the employer despite their inappropriate comments to customers (Winiński & Wigman 2007, 126–127).

According to a common discourse among the agents, women were the most troublesome customers, especially towards female agents. Vilma referred to this discourse when she said: *'I've had the experience many times in work life that women are the most difficult customers. Men yell what they yell, and they can be quite mean, but then they calm down afterwards. But when a woman gets mad they don't calm down.'* However, later on during her interview, Vilma described the typical troublesome customer as a man who does not read his bills or instructions properly but prefers to talk to somebody who explains them to him. In his study, Marek Korczynski (2003, 67) noted that call centre employees found male customers more likely than female customers to be abusive. According to Korczynski, the agents also suggested that female employees were more likely to be on the receiving end of the anger and the abuse, and, furthermore, more women than the proportion of the male employees interviewed reported abuse as a serious issue. Although the abuse was not that harsh in Green, the gendered principle of it was similar.

In addition to irate customers, another challenge was presented by customers who could not speak Finnish. When a non-Finnish-speaking customer called, it was most important for the agent just to start communicating with the customer by any means possible, as Ari explained:

*It's like that with Swedish that up to a point you [can do it]. It's difficult that technological vocabulary in Swedish, for me in any case. We have the glossaries of technology there and all, but that you can have a natural conversation about technical problems. I'm not that good at Swedish. In English I can talk about anything, of course, but in Swedish it's rather little what I can do. (...) The best are [the calls] during which you have to speak Swedish, Finnish and English all mixed up. Especially in customer service, you can get anything funny sounding in there. Three languages in a sentence. As long as you can understand the problem, that's the main thing. That you can sort out the problem.*

The point in such situations as Ari describes above was not to concentrate on the script, aesthetic voice or performance or even the clients' expectations, but simply

on solving the customers' problems. When this is compared to language training given to the call centre workers in India (e.g. Noronha & D'Cruz 2009, 86; Mirchandani 2008), the difference is substantial. Due to the offshoring of call centres, Indian workers are not only required to speak perfect English but also use such an accent that will not reveal their Indian origin to the customers. Moreover, what multi-lingual agents are often required of is the use of a complex set of skills and abilities involving very strict concentration on the task at hand (Belt, Richardson & Webster 2000, 375–376). As Swedish is one of Finland's two official languages, Swedish-speaking Finns are supposed to receive service in their first language. But as Ari described above, this is not always the case.

Not all call centre work is similar but the content of the work is related to the type of assignment one works with. Earlier studies discuss this many-sidedness by referring to a dichotomization of call centre work's quantitative and qualitative characteristics (e.g. Taylor & Bain 2001; Taylor et al. 2002). Quantitative measurement and qualitative assessment are not necessarily exclusive, nor are they located at polar opposites but represent a continuum. At the one end of the continuum are simple, straightforward calls which require standard agent responses to customer requests and which may be well scripted. These calls are invariably subject to tight call-handling times and control mechanisms based on strict statistical criteria. At the other end are calls where the nature of customer interaction is more complex and agents have to respond more flexibly. Call times are more relaxed, and while temporal measurements might still apply, other criteria, emphasizing the quality of the agents' service to the customers, are given higher priority. (Taylor et al. 2002) In the case of the multi-lingual agents who were working at the helpdesk in Green, the emphasis seemed to be on the quality of the service, not so much on the standardization of communication and the measurement of the length of the calls, as can be understood in Ari's utterance.

In sum, the agents' voices were important tools in their everyday work, which needed to be compatible with the assignments they were working in. Some of the agents told me that men with assertive voices would be good agents and very welcome to Green. In other words, customer service work in Green was considered to be women's work but, at the same time, it was argued that men with manly voices would be good at it. This view seems to be somewhat similar to that of the recruiter in Purple, who preferred male job seekers because of their gender. In call centre

jobs, the skills that are typically related to female employees, that is, so called feminine skills, are often found necessary. And yet, because of their gender, men are said to be more wanted for call centre jobs than most of the women. This emphasis on feminine skills is part of the phenomenon that has been called feminization of labour (Adkins 2001; Buchanan & Koch-Shulte 2000; Jokinen 2005, 82–83). It refers to a trend in which men are rewarded for having feminine skills, appearance and style in work but in which women are self-evidently required to possess the same things. This is yet another hierarchization in which women and femininity are considered less valuable than men and – in this case – feminine skills.

#### 4.3.5. Informal Practices and the Social Community of Work

In the following, I shift the focus and turn to take a closer look at the informal practices in Green. Informal practices usually refer to daily acts of co-operation, helpfulness, gestures of goodwill and other instances and acts at the workplace that are typically voluntary and provide the necessary resources for maintaining and increasing employee well-being and the workplace atmosphere. Informal practices go beyond the formal requirements by management; they are not easily enforced by the threat of sanctions nor easily governed. (Smith, Organ & Near 1983) I concentrate in this section on the gendered nature of the agents' mutual communication used for their own sociability and for the fluency of customer service work. Thus, although only a small slice of the informal organization is under scrutiny here, it gives us a glimpse of how gender organizes each work community and its interaction.

Call centre work is all about communication with customers but it also allows communication with colleagues during working hours. Although the call centre agents in Green basically worked alone with their customers, they found the social community of work crucial. They described their work as autonomous and '*lonely toil*'. However, when I asked about the informal relationships at work, several interviewees said that they talk more with their female colleagues because it was easy to speak with women. Once again, this emphasizes the assumption that women in general are more social than men.

The central role of the work community became especially apparent when problems occurred. For example, the agents had to ask for help when customers asked something the agents did not know, or when there were problems with the computer. In the rapidly changing situations of call centre work, the team leaders simply could not be present and available for the agents all the time to solve their problems. Therefore, it was easier and made more sense to consult someone who was sitting nearby. This was convenient because the agents' workstations were arranged in groups of six, and employees who were working in the same project were placed close to one another.

*Ari: It's so funny that if you don't have a call coming in, you can listen to what happens next door. And in particular the asides are always like 'God, what an awful customer.' And then you see what the customer wanted this time. This kind of social contact is terribly important in my mind.*

*Tuija: So in the end you do the work together in a way?*

*Ari: Yeah, well, yes. We sit in those [hexagonal] nuts, as we call them, so it's easy to make a comment to your neighbour there. All the time someone is looking and yelling and asking something. If you have a problem, you always ask the one nearest to you and about all such things if they happen to know, and otherwise too.*

The middle management's interest in informal practices was apparent. The task of the team leaders was to supervise and ensure a smooth running of everyday work in the call centre, a task which was made much easier by the social community of work. The team leaders encouraged the agents to consult one another and other team leaders in problematic work situations, because it was an effective way time-wise to solve problems. The agents also heard each other talking on the phone, as Ari explained above, and they could correct if a colleague gave wrong information to the customer. In this way the work community reduced the need for supervision, prevented the agents from making mistakes and probably also avoided negative customer feedback.

The senior employees who had been working in Green for several years and accumulated a great deal of tacit knowledge from several projects were consulted quite often. The male agents and the team leaders were consulted especially in issues related to technology. As one team leader explained, if you consulted a



woman, she gave you great answers and tips on every issue, except in relation to technology.

*Ville: We have more men in our projects on the IT side. Women are then sort of in other kinds of projects, but altogether there are more women. And on everything else except for technology they give much better advice and other things. Men are maybe a bit more technological.*

There are cultural assumptions about what kinds of knowledge and practices are 'natural' to women and men in work organizations (Acker 1992). In call centres, one division exists between technical support, including technical knowledge, qualifications and experience as well as an interest in computers, and customer service, including social skills of listening to and empathizing with customers. (Belt, Richardson & Webster 2002) Technology is associated with men more than women. This is although in Green, for example, there were more female agents than male agents working in some technology projects. Accordingly, in his interview, Ville pointed out that the topics of informal discussions were gendered according to one's interest in information technology. He said that there were a couple of men whose hobbies were information technology, computer games and tuning up computers. Thus, all those who had such hobbies were men, but not all men were interested in information technology and computers. For example, one of the team leaders – a student of humanities – explained that the other employees turned to him when there were problems with computers.

*Henrik: I've noticed that if an agent has a problem with the computer, so maybe they prefer to come to me for advice. For some reason they think that I know computer things better than if they were to go to some woman and ask her. Although it could be the other way round, that the women know more than I do.*

Here Henrik explains that he was asked for advice with computers even though he was not very good at technology. This implies that the assumed technical skills were associated with his gender, not with his interests in technology, his work experience or his education in the humanities.

In contrast to technical skills, the organizational ‘housekeeping’ is usually associated with women and expected to be done by women (Kleinman 2007, 41). In Green, a couple of women took care of such tasks as making coffee for the statutory breaks and loading the dishwasher afterwards. They assorted the rubbish for recycling and attended to the lockers and coffee rooms. They also took the responsibility for arranging leisure time social events and exercise. All these were practices that could have been organized in a different manner, for example, in shifts between all the agents regardless of gender. Instead, these senior agents were expressing a kind of organizational motherhood at work by doing these voluntary tasks. In other words, the predominant atmosphere at the workplace encouraged these women to act in accordance to gendered expectations. These informal practices thus conformed to stereotypes of women as caring, sociable and skilled at household tasks.

As pointed out in the previous section, men were welcomed to Green as assertive agents who had amiable voices. In addition, men were more or less welcomed to the social community of work. None of the interviewees indicated that men were unwelcome to their work community, but their presence was seen as neither irrelevant nor desired. This reflects the larger notion of gender found in several earlier studies according to which, on the one hand, gender is considered irrelevant (Eriksson & Eriksson 2003; Korvajärvi 2002b; Korvajärvi 2004c, 178–179; Lepistö-Johansson 2009, 161) and, on the other hand, gender-mix is considered good for work (Eriksson & Eriksson 2003; Korvajärvi 1998, 66; Korvajärvi 2004c, 179, 193). Here is one example of a woman who preferred to have more male colleagues:

*Tuija: Well, in your opinion, would your work community benefit in some way if there were more men?*

*Maarit: Surely it would. It would surely, like in any strongly female-dominated [workplace]. Like we have seen in day care centres and care work that when there are more men, it somehow makes it more balanced. Unfortunately, it is so that if a man says something about the drawbacks, maybe they start changing things more easily than they would if only women complained, because women complain about everything. Like in general that the attitude is surly in every workplace where there are a lot of women, that they always are at weakest in terms of developing their own thing. Yes, it would be really good.*

Maarit implied that men would adjust the balance a female-majority workplace. This view refers to a 'balance' between female and male employees, who were considered to be different from each other and to complete each other. Moreover, Maarit argued that men were more credible than women. However, there were also employees who found positive aspects in having a female-majority work community.

*Vilma: I don't think that the workplace spirit is necessarily bad even if it had completely female workforce, it is a question of individuals, let's put it that way. A mixed community would be ideal. I would say that it's rather the age distribution than the gender distribution that is more crucial. (...) I don't know whether it is good or bad that there are a lot of women. Okay, one always hears about female communities but in my experience it's not the decisive factor that there are only women. (...) Yes, there's a clear difference, somehow the feeling is different when there are boys also. And it's just a fact that the technical side is easier for them.*

In the excerpt above, Vilma indicates that she recognized the typical way of talking about female-majority work communities that has also been found in earlier research. According to this view, work communities with a majority of women employees suffer from a bad atmosphere, gossiping and quarrelling (Korvajärvi 2002a; 2004c) or women are envious harridans (Gherardi & Poggio 2007, 89–91). However, Vilma did not totally agree with this view but considered gender-mix to be idealistic. Although she did not consider women's work community bad, she found 'boys' to be handy colleagues because they were good at technology.

In addition, Vilma found the age of her co-workers to be more of a crucial issue than their gender in regard to work community. Age as a central factor was also brought up by other interviewees who saw it as a basis for informal sub-groups. For example, one of the old-timers described the division based on age as '*the kindergarten department and the rest of us.*' The old-timers kept in touch even after some of them had moved to other workplaces, for instance, by meeting for annual dinners. For them, this was a voluntary activity. There were also activities organized by the employer: for example, all employees could take part in the annual running event, go to the gym, and receive discount coupons to a public swimming pool.

To sum up, the informal practices in Green were gender-segregated in accordance with culturally shared assumptions about gender differences. Moreover, there was not much space or time for informal practices in the call centre, which was dictated by the management and strongly related to job assignments. Accordingly, there was much less space for informal practices in Green than in Purple because the agents were bound to their workstations, their working hours and breaks were monitored, and the atmosphere was not as easy-going as it was in Purple. In other words, the informal practices, when they occurred, were encouraged by the management and were, in this respect, hardly separable from the formal practices. The aim of the informal practices was not to change the prevailing circumstances, and from that point of view, they neither empowered nor resisted the working conditions or the management. Instead, they were a means to create harmony and agreement among the employees and the management.

#### 4.3.6. Summary

The purpose of this section is to summarize the main findings gained in Green. On the basis of the analysis, it could be argued that Green is best portrayed by its relatively large size, constant organizational changes and comparatively high turnover of personnel. In other words, Green seems to be a professional call centre which resembles in many ways the call centres presented in earlier research. In addition to the characteristics above, the common features between Green and typical call centres include the recruitment of students, employee surveillance, and the use of technology. Another feature depicting the size and operations of Green is its many different and varying assignments. In some of the assignments, its corporate clients participated in the labour use and supervision by selecting the agents who would work in their assignments and by monitoring their phone calls, although the agents who worked in Green were primarily recruited by its own recruiters. Furthermore, in its use of labour, Green emphasized employees who were in some way in a transitional phase in their lives: for example, students or unemployed people in between jobs. Thus, while the operations of the call centre were large-scale and professional, most of its employees, especially the agents, had usually ended up in the firm quite randomly.

The physical organization was arranged in such a way that the employees worked in an open-plan office, which enabled them to co-operate with their colleagues. The significance of the closest colleagues was particularly evident in problematic situations with customers because it was effortless to ask for advice from someone sitting close by. At the same time, the open-plan office enabled the supervisors to control and supervise the agents' work with just a gaze. The sophisticated technology in use made electronic surveillance possible, and it was used in the firm. Moreover, Green was a relatively restricted workplace in the sense that the employees' personal arrangements related to their working hours were possible only to a limited extent, which may have caused difficulties for those who had care responsibilities. Also, the statutory breaks were highly controlled. In general, the agents' performances were controlled and measured to a considerable extent, with the aim of ensuring the quality of work and making of profit for the call centre.

The organizational hierarchy in Green was rather steep in terms of existing power differences between the personnel groups. The hierarchicality of the work organization and the significant size of the office had led to a situation in which the CEO and some other managers remained relatively remote to the agents, all of whom they did not know by name. Because of the many posts in the middle and top management in the work organization, the employees had many opportunities for promotion if they were interested in moving on in the organizational hierarchy. As far as the gender divisions of labour are concerned, it could be argued that segregation in Green was more horizontal than hierarchical. The work assignments and products were gendered, but factually there were more women, or women and men in equal numbers, working on every level of the organizational hierarchy and in almost every assignment. Thus, the body count of the employees suggests that Green was a gender-equal organization and that gender was apparently not directly articulated as being relevant in recruitment or labour use.

The explanations the employees presented as causing gender segregation in Green were based on several differences between women and men. The reason for men not working in a service job was said to lie in wages. It was argued that men had to be paid better than women even if they were not family providers, breadwinners or had no family in the first place. Thus, better pay was related to their gender, not to their expenses or circumstances in life. The employees brought up the cultural view of women and men having different kinds of brains and therefore

acting differently. The employees argued that the expectations put on both women and men had to be differentiated because of their dissimilar brains. Thus, the difference in female and male brains was the employees' general explanation to whatever gender difference.

There were several informal practices in Green which were also gender-segregated. Certain tasks related to organizational housekeeping, including making coffee for breaks, loading the dishwasher, and recycling the rubbish were expected to be done by a couple of middle-aged female agents, who also were responsible for organizing leisure time social events and exercise. The first female CEO had introduced several practices which can be regarded as informal in nature, such as the Christmas party and summer gifts for senior employees. Furthermore, the employees found that it was easy to talk to their female colleagues and ask them for help. Issues related to technology, however, were talked about with male colleagues. Thus, the informal skills of the employees were also divided along the gender lines.

As for the agents' interaction with the customers, the employees expressed several contradictory views on it. First, they said that the customers did not listen to the female agents. At the same time, the agents stated that it was easier for women than men to make social contacts with customers. Second, the view that female customers were the most difficult ones, especially towards female agents, contradicted the view that male customers were the worst customers. The third contradiction concerns the female workers who were seen as having good social skills and being empathetic, yet, they were also thought to have had personal rows and disagreements with other female employees and unable to handle their disagreements professionally enough. Such an emphasis on the negative characteristics of female employees justified a wish that there were more male employees in the work organization and work community. Accordingly, it was striking how consistently men were talked about in a more positive tone and terms than women were, and more desirable characteristics were attached to men than to women. In the social community of work, gender on the general level was considered to be an irrelevant topic but, at the same time, male employees seemed to be more welcome than women employees. The employees expressed an argument that there needed to be a balance between female and male employees at work. What is more, many employees welcomed men with good manly voices to Green as agents. They said that a good male voice can sell almost anything but did not

elaborate on the exact characteristics of this good male voice. The employees described a good female voice as being motherly, but did not bring up any additional positive adjectives attached to a good female voice.

Interestingly, the employees did not justify the need for male employees with heterosexualizing comments among the co-workers or with the customers. As a matter of fact, there was only one agent's utterance that could be interpreted as hinting towards heterosexual relationships. Thus, heterosexualized labour in Green was rare or not openly reflected upon. Quite similarly, the employees offered very few direct descriptions of emotion management called emotional labour (Hochschild 1983/2003) although there were plenty of indirect descriptions of it. This is rather surprising in light of earlier studies on call centres, which pinpoint the demands of emotional labour (e.g. Holman, Chissick & Totterdell 2002; Korczynski 2003; Lewig & Dollard 2003). In contrast to emotional labour, the aesthetics of voice was mentioned by the employees, who described the ways in which certain voices were preferred by the corporate clients in their assignments. According to them, the voice profiles could be quite detailed and, moreover, voices had to carry and express many characteristics favourable to the product or service they represented. One of these characteristics was gender.

The employees of Green expressed a cultural understanding of gender, according to which women are suitable managers for call centres. This assumption may have derived from the view that call centre work is women's work and from the fact that, in 2008, a total of 63 per cent of female employees had a woman as their immediate boss, while only 13 per cent of male employees had a woman as their immediate boss in Finland (Naiset ja miehet Suomessa 2009, 58). In other words, gender segregation differentiates the workplaces of women and men in such a way that women work in certain fields and may also be other women's bosses, while men work in other fields and mostly manage either female or male employees or both. Because of the hierarchical gender segregation, female call centre managers possibly hit the glass ceiling. In Green, the glass ceiling had been shattered because there was a female CEO for the first time in the firm's history. Thus, there had been numerical feminization in the management of the organization. Consequently, gender did not seem to arouse any strong arguments or turmoil among the agents who were mostly women, but it was more vividly reflected by the management who were mostly women.

## 4.4 Blue: Homosocial Networking in Northern Finland

In the following, I present and discuss the organizational practices of the workplace referred to as Blue. The analysis follows the same format as the preceding analyses of Purple and Green but, given the fact that the central practices of Blue differ from those in Purple and Green, the contents of the analyses also differ to some extent. The section starts with a short contextualization of northern Finland as a business environment and with an illustration of Blue's office space as a setting of mundane call centre work. The focus then moves onto the male managers on top of the organizational hierarchy, especially their mutual relationship. In addition, the discussion includes two team leaders, one woman and one man, in order to juxtapose their positions, views and relations with the top management. The section that follows presents the recruitment practices in Blue, and, in doing so, examines its northern location and its consequences for the workforce. The discussion on Blue continues with issues related to remunerations, including wages, commissions and other bonuses, and to the employees' commitment to their work and the organization. The final section studies the employees' relations with the customers and their informal relations with one another, which, for their part, form the social setting in Blue. The storyline in this section starts from the concrete and structural context of the organization and then moves via managers' relationships to interaction between the agents and the customers, as well as between the agents themselves.

Unlike Purple and Green, Blue was located in rural Finland. In general, rural municipalities represent more than 90 per cent of the country's surface area. Furthermore, rural areas are divided into three types. First, in *rural municipalities close to urban areas*, residents are able to work in neighbouring towns, and agricultural and other entrepreneurs have access to diverse local market. Second, *rural heartland municipalities* are mostly engaged in primary production, and the majority of villages are viable. Third, in *sparsely populated rural municipalities*, the young are moving away, the elderly population is growing, services are declining, agriculture is in the decrease, new jobs are too few to compensate for the loss of traditional jobs, and the economic capacity of municipalities cannot cope with the change. (Rural Policy Committee 2007) The environment in which Blue operated



could therefore be characterized as one of the sparsely populated rural areas in northern Finland.

For a business, southern Finland is not a specific region in the same sense as northern Finland. Choosing to locate one's business in the northern part of the country probably requires justification as well as careful consideration. The location of a call centre office such as Blue is therefore more striking in northern than southern Finland. Moreover, the northerly location means different things to people who actually live in the north and to me, a researcher from southern Finland. From the southern standpoint, the majority of acreage of Finland is in the north, also the towns and areas that northern people would consider to be part of central Finland. I am well aware that by concentrating on the special features characterizing northern Finland, I reproduce the view that it is a 'region' in a more special sense than the other regions in Finland. However, I do not want to ignore the view because it was also expressed in my research material.

Blue was located in a town with less than 20 000 inhabitants. The region suffered from problems resulting from out-migration to population centres that remigration cannot compensate: from a low birth and high mortality rate, that is to say, population decline. According to surveys mapping the attitudes concerning remigration to the area, the major obstacle was lack of jobs. Agriculture, especially dairy farming, was a common source of livelihood in the countryside but not in population centres. Tourism and timber industries offered jobs to many men, but women, who usually had a vocational education, did not have many opportunities for employment. Against this background, call centre work had been expected to respond to the lack of women's employment opportunities. Also, local policy was to support the location and relocation of call centre offices to the region. Thanks to new technology, call centres can be located far from the customers of a business, but they cannot be located far from a suitable workforce. Thus, call centres are found to offer jobs especially to unemployed women in the northern part of the country. This view was also expressed by one of the experts interviewed:

*Here women's unemployment has been typically higher. And (...) for this reason too these women's jobs are extremely important because they have created a job base that has been lacking here. They are important in the sense that they have*

*created demand on that side. There are significant numbers of women in these call centres. There are men too, but they are clearly in the minority.*

At the time of the fieldwork in 2005, the unemployment rate in the municipality where Blue was located was about 13 per cent, while the unemployment rate in the whole country was about 8.5 per cent and women's unemployment rate about one per cent higher than that of men's (Työvoimatutkimus 2005). In some municipalities in the region, the unemployment rate was as high as 21 per cent. There were about 350 unemployed women and 600 unemployed men seeking jobs in this particular municipality. Thus, women's unemployment rate was actually not higher than men's, even though women's unemployment was argued to be the reason for promoting the location of call centres in the region. The majority of the women were seeking jobs in services (110 people), whereas men were mainly seeking jobs in the manufacturing industries (161 people), construction and mining (157 people), and building construction (126 people). The majority of the vacancies (91) were in retail and sales, whereas in services, including call centre work, there were only 16 vacancies. (Source: expert interview with representative of the employment authority) These numbers of job seekers indicate that the local employment market was clearly gender-segregated and, moreover, women and men sought their way to jobs in different industries.

These regional characteristics formed the context in which Blue operated. Moreover, this context was present in the employees' mundane lives through their own experiences and through the experiences of their family members, relatives, friends, neighbours, and co-workers. For example, the unwanted unemployment and difficulties in finding a job were frequently referred to during our fieldwork and almost in every interview we conducted. Correspondingly, in several interviews, Blue was referred to as offering an escape from an impending or long-lasting unemployment.

Blue consisted of several offices with about 140 employees. The office we<sup>16</sup> visited was barely visible from outside. As a matter of fact, we had difficulty finding the entrance to Blue at all. We found the right street address fairly easily but it was

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<sup>16</sup> I conducted the fieldwork with researcher Päivi Korvajärvi. Consequently, I use the term 'we' from time to time to indicate that this was a joint task. For more details about the fieldwork, see the Appendix.

only in the inner court where the car park was that we saw the sign of the call centre. However, there were no signs indicating the main entrance. We had to ask the salespeople in the shops in the same building how to go to Blue. The salesman in the second shop knew the way and told us where to go. Apparently, this invisibility was deliberate because Blue did not have any clients or customers who needed to pop in. Accordingly, on entering Blue we walked right into the working area because the doors were not locked and there was no reception desk to greet visitors.

The interior space was quite crammed with workstations arranged in groups of four, known as ‘four-leaved clovers.’ The working area consisted of several open-plan rooms which were partitioned into cubicles and connected by passages and stairs. A long corridor connected it to the meeting room with kitchen facilities, which was also used as a coffee room. There was also an empty room with workstations and computers ready for assignments and employees. All this made the office space rather maze-like. However, the interior space was found to be functional in comparison with the office where the firm had first started and had still operated less than two years previously.

*Iida: It was a normal block of flats where we had the use of the fifth and fourth floors. Every time more people came in, we started using more apartments. They were quite normal studios or one- or two-bedroom flats. The workstations were not very comfortable in the sense that the room was there and there was a division in between, and then two agents in each corner. It didn't work so well, if you had to ask something, you had to start running into another room [to ask]. You also didn't hear other people talk so you couldn't get tips and help in that way. Then when we moved into these new premises, it was a really nice change.*

In the new office building, there were several teams that all worked in separate rooms or sections of the office. Some of the team leaders had their own offices but others worked in the same open-plan space as the rest of the team members. Unlike in Green and like in Purple, every employee in Blue worked at a steady workstation.

In general, the job assignments in Blue were quite similar to those in Green in the sense that they had different types of corporate clients, and the agents both received phone calls from the customers and made calls to them. These job assignments were mostly outbound calls, such as telemarketing, selling and booking appointments for

sales agents. In addition, there were some inbound calls, mainly in helpdesk assignments, but the majority of work assignments involved outbound calling. The calls were mostly made to consumer customers but occasionally also to other firms. Some of the agents made both inbound and outbound calls in turns, especially the most experienced employees who did not mind the switch-over.

To demonstrate the agents' everyday work in Blue, I have constructed a fictitious call. It offers an agent's lines during a telephone conversation with a customer:

*'This is Jane Bloggs from Vending Machine Service, good morning. Now you have an opportunity to get a vending machine to your office for a one-week trial period.'*

*'Who is in charge of these kinds of matters?'*

*'Is she/he available? Could I have her/his number?'*

*'Is that so?'*

*'But you know these vending machines anyway?'*

*'Yes, we'll do that, and you have a nice day.'*

The new software programme installed in the office just a few months before our fieldwork period was still under development and therefore not fully taken advantage of. The office had several types of software in use, but none of them included predictive dialling. Therefore, in the outbound assignments, the agents had the customer information on their monitor, they clicked a button, the call was connected and the customer's phone started to ring. If they closed a sale, they had to enter a note of it into a different programme. Thus, when calling the customers, the agents had to use not only one but several computer programmes along with pen and paper. Moreover, software would sometimes malfunction. For example, occasionally the agents could not exit the programme or use it at all but had to resort to the printed register material for calling the customers manually. There were also some problems with telecommunications links, and the employees had to have an extra coffee break while waiting for having the backbone network repaired in another part of the country. In general, it was said that the connection was too slow and it could be cut off. The implementation of technology in Blue had not been very quick and there still were employees who had worked there before the deployment

of computers. However, there were also two women employees who had explicitly said that they wished to work with computers.

In Blue, the agents' work was not controlled much. For example, the statistics concerning the performances of individual agents were available in some projects but not in others, depending on the type of software used. The phone calls were not listened to in real time although, basically, all calls were recorded and some of them were used again in employee training. A couple of agents said that they were interested in listening to their own recorded phone calls together with their superior in order to learn what they could do better during the calls. Moreover, the recordings of the calls could be used to verify agreements between the agents and the customers. In general, the pace of the work in Blue was reasonable, and the agents had time to exchange a couple of words with their colleagues between the calls.

In short, the regional specificity of northern Finland forms the setting in which Blue operated and its employees lived their lives. The distant location, relatively high unemployment rate and decline in population in the northern part of the country had attracted support for the call centre business, which differentiates Blue from the other two case study call centres. However, the basic everyday work in Blue was not substantially different from that in Purple and Green. There were other factors that differentiated them, such as the office space and, following from that, the control of the agents' work. Blue's interior did not look as modern and efficient as that of Green. It resembled more the interior of Purple, although it was much more simplified and office-like. The office space in Blue was arranged into several separate rooms which offered some privacy to the agents, not into single and double offices as in Purple or into one open-plan office as in Green. At the same time, the separate rooms prevented the gaze-based direct control of all agents at once. Moreover, electronic surveillance was possible but not much used in Blue.

#### 4.4.1. Managers' Masculinity, Homosocial Bonding and Networking

This section focuses on the management's relations to one another. In doing so, it is possible to consider the ways in which the male managers practised gender at work, and how the female employees were involved in this. The top management

consisted of three men, Jouni, Paavo and Lasse. Jouni was the CEO of Blue in charge of the whole company. Paavo and Lasse had, as they explained to us, different occupational titles with differently formulated assignments, but in practice they both were call centre managers. Although Jouni was their superior, Paavo and Lasse worked quite autonomously. These three men were in charge of all Blue's places of business and therefore they had to travel around a great deal. For example, negotiations with the corporate clients usually involved travelling to meet their representatives.

We started our fieldwork in Blue by interviewing its CEO, Jouni. The call centre manager Paavo, who was the manager of that particular office, was also present in the interview although he uttered only a few sentences. Earlier in the morning both men had driven a few hundred kilometres each to this office just to meet us. Jouni greeted us by saying: *'Well, the girls have come to the north then.'* I found this greeting quite awkward because neither of us was a 'girl' by any means. In terms of bodily attributes, one of us was older and the other one taller than the CEO.

On the one hand, by using the expression 'girls,' the CEO may have communicated a message of gender relations that he did not intend to communicate (Yancey Martin 2006, 257). It could also have been a local expression, meant to be harmless. The fact that we were called 'girls' several times during our trip in the northern part of the country, for example by the female receptionist at our hotel, supports this interpretation. On the other hand, Jouni may have intended to refer to a gendered power relation between us and to construct a hierarchical difference by referring to us as juveniles. It has been stated that the word 'girl' refers to adolescence; a girl is not a full woman, and a man who calls women girls expresses a paternalistic attitude (Acker & Van Houten 1974, 151; Kantola 2008, 215). The latter interpretation is supported by the fact that Jouni challenged us several times during his interview by emphasizing his masculine authority in various ways. Moreover, I felt every now and then, that we – two female researchers – were deliberately belittled, which is illustrated in the next excerpt in which we were talking about locality and clients' sympathy towards northern Finland:

*Jouni: But why has [a Finnish baseball team from the region] won the Finnish championship several times? Where does that spring from?*

*Päivi: Well? Can you answer that?*

*Jouni: But do researchers know? [pause] But okay. I wasn't born here but about the sport I've learned pretty much in these 2–3 years and then there's [a man's name], who is its father, so we've become acquainted through our other kinds of co-operation activities. He told me just last week that in the local maternity package, there's a baseball glove in it. So it's just the spirit, the culture, it prevails in this region.*

This joke is an example of how Jouni broke the common interview structure by asking us questions and testing us in that way. Testing is an attempt to expose a researcher's inferiority when it comes to grasping the matters being inquired about (Schwalbe & Wolkomir 2002, 207). In the extract Jouni emphasized our occupation by explicitly calling us researchers and tested our knowledge together with Paavo, even though Paavo did not explicitly say anything. In the interview situation, we felt like Jouni attempted to pose a question that we could not answer in order to pinpoint the limits of our knowledge. Surely, this is an impression that cannot be read out from the interview transcript but should be pointed out because such a display of power set a tone for my interpretations concerning the CEO Jouni in general.

The extract also illustrates how Jouni and Paavo excluded us by positioning us as outsiders and strangers who were not familiar with their local milieu and way of life. Men bond with each other through such male concerns as jokes about sports (Acker 1990, 152–153; Padavic & Reskin 2002, 13; Yancey Martin 2001, 601) and, in this case, also through jokes about the special features of local people and culture. Of course, the image of a baseball glove among romper suits and nappies in the maternity package was quite funny; a maternity package with extra gear in it has its own special and local meaning.

In the excerpt Jouni also mentions that he was not born in that particular area but that he localized himself in the north anyway and indicated that he was familiar with the local mentality. He did not see himself as one of those southerners living in the north who are usually referred to as being '*brought by train*' for good, regardless of how long they have lived in the north (Naskali 2003, 15). At the same time, the excerpt is also an example of Jouni's way to emphasize his networks and, moreover, his fidelity to keep in touch with his acquaintances. By doing this, Jouni did not only refer to his networks but he also stressed the closeness of the interaction. As I understand it, sports are very important to both local and national identity in

Finland, and there are lots of networks, community and voluntary work involved in sports clubs.

During the interview, we learned that Jouni had previously worked in a mobile phone business. Later we discovered that it was work experience gained in the mobile phone business that connected the top managers of the company, and that their pasts were strikingly similar. Jouni and Lasse had known each other from the mobile phone business, whereas Paavo and Jouni knew each other through a mutual friend. It seems that Jouni had used his informal networks to identify people that he considered suitable for managers. Thus, the managerial positions of Paavo and Lasse were filled without resorting to formal procedures. This kind of recruitment through informal networks increases men's share of management jobs (Reskin & McBrier 2000). Kanter (1977, 49–68) uses the concept of 'homosocial reproduction'<sup>17</sup> to describe processes by which male managers select other male managers in ways that reproduces men's managerial elite. Kanter argues that homosocial reproduction provides an important form of reassurance in the face of uncertainty, and therefore management positions become easily closed to people who are considered different in some respect. Mutual background in the military service is also suggested as increasing men's unity and readiness to do business with one another (Acker 1990, 152; Lahelma 2002, 206–207; Vehviläinen 1996, 152). Accordingly, in the case of Blue's top management, it could be argued that the relationship between them was built through their gender and, more precisely, through practising certain type of masculinity, which was to a great extent based on making technology-driven business.

Kanter (1977, 49–50) also suggests that there are two kinds of homogeneity which are used in order to decrease uncertainty and increase trust within management of an organization. First, Kanter mentions the similarity of social background and characteristics of managers. Second, there is the similarity of organizational experience, which, according to Kanter, is possible only when the organization or its models are no longer new. Organizational routines have to be established and people have to remain in their positions long enough to make shared socialization and shared experience a meaningful basis for trust. If organizations are new or changing rapidly, management has to fall back on social homogeneity.

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<sup>17</sup> Actually Kanter (1977) introduced the concept of 'homosexual reproduction', but the distinct connotation of 'sexuality' has been replaced by using the term homosocial bonding.



Blue's top management had similar work experience gained in the mobile phone business, which is also a relatively new and still changing business with no established organizational routines. Thus, these men had become accustomed to working at the leading edge of their industry, first in a mobile phone business, and later in a call centre business, which was, according to their arguments, dynamic, strongly expanding, new and technology-oriented.

A case in point was Paavo who described his motives to move from the mobile phone business to Blue by saying that one reason for his transfer was his willingness to engage in the huge growth of the call centre business. He also appreciated the possibility to develop and carry out 'ad hoc ideas' and new ways of making business. The third positive thing he mentioned was the flatness of the organizational hierarchy in Blue. He worked side by side with the CEO Jouni and yet maintained strong contacts with office floor agents. Yet another motive he brought up was his colleagues and their personalities, which he found to be a crucial point in considering whether or not he would want to work as manager in Blue. Quite similarly, the other call centre manager Lasse emphasized the strong bonds between the top management men. For example, Lasse described very vividly how Jouni offered him the job in a meeting:

*It amuses me when Jouni, when I was [as a representative of my previous employer] in a meeting, so the meeting begins, and I myself too wanted to start co-operation. And the meeting was started by Jouni who began to tell us about how he drives around long distances out there late at night and comes home and how he would long for a mate and that he can only think of one name. I thought that now, steady on guy, what are you talking about. So that's how it started. So that kind of a meeting it was.*

Lasse's previous employer had co-operated with Blue, and, at the beginning of one their meetings, Jouni had described how he wished he had someone to accompany him in his car when driving long distances typical in northern Finland. He continued that he had only one person in his mind, one person whom he missed. One would expect that person to be a member of his family, but instead, the person he was talking about was Lasse, who seemed very pleased with Jouni's attention when he was telling us this story. I find this to be quite a fascinating and even

intimate description of the mutual relationship and fondness between two men, which could be called homosociality.

On the one hand, it has been argued that emotional detachment, that is, withholding expressions of intimacy, is one aspect of homosociality and a means in which masculine stereotypes and gender hierarchies are maintained (Bird 1996; 2003, 585; Kimmel 1994). Thus, emotions and behaviour typically associated with women are considered inappropriate within the male homosocial group. On the other hand, it has been argued that also men express fondness as emotional resonance with or affection for each other. (Nixon 2003, 119–133; Soilevuo Grønnerød 2005; Yancey Martin 2001, 603) The latter describes more accurately than the former the male managers' relations and mutual bonding. Thus, although men's homosociality differentiates men from women into same-gender groups, it does not necessarily prevent them from intimate friendships or talking about these relationships to the female interviewer. However, the degree in which men's expressions of intimacy are accepted without considering them as signs of homosexuality varies between cultures and between times. This may, at least partly, explain the differences in research results on men's expressions of intimacy.

All three men, but especially the CEO Jouni, strongly emphasized the creation and maintenance of social networks. He said it explicitly: *'In our business too, this networking, well, it is in.'* Jouni emphasized the contacts he had, which were mainly with men. However, it has been argued that on managerial levels of business organizations, both men and women network mainly with men (Huang 2009, 110–111; Tallberg 2003, 14) and women also network with female associates on life-related networks for social support (Huang 2009, 111). This is inevitable if men make the bulk of the managers and elevate the people whom they consider essential to be acquainted with. In all, Jouni mentioned only a few women during his interview. Two of them worked at Blue. One of them was the team leader Helena and the other was one of the agents he imitated when he told us a joke about a middle-aged woman who resisted the deployment of computers. The only woman Jouni spoke about with the same respectful tone he reserved for men was his ex-boss from the mobile phone business: *'At the time when we were working at [a mobile phone company] we were, she was my boss and I reported to her. And we worked as partners and that's what we do now, too.'* This woman was at the time of the interview the CEO of one quite large and still expanding call centre in the south

of Finland. This call centre had outsourced commissions to Blue when they did not have enough time or employees to carry out the assignments by themselves.

In general, men's social networks offer social support but, at the same time, they are sites of competition and oppression and the practices linked to them (Tallberg 2003, 15–16; Yancey Martin 2001). The interviews of the top managers, however, did not contain any direct references to mutual competition between the men. It seems that competition does not occur in every relation between men, but men may make alliances and compete together against other men, as Blue's managers did. In other words, there was no competition in these men's mutual relations, but there was in their relations outside Blue. According to Jouni, the ability and willingness to work with others and to be sincere are qualities that can be attributed to coming from northern Finland, whether or not the people were competitors. The following excerpt is an example of how Jouni constructed the specificity of the northern areas of Finland and the people who live there:

*If anywhere it is here in northern Finland that you hear it widely if someone has cheated you. That is quite certain. Just this morning I was on the phone related to (...) so one person sort of apparently got angry with us. This guy who has a fairly new business (...) and now he is sawing off the branch he is sitting on real hard, that is just it. We have slightly different rules than they have inside the Ring Road III [the Helsinki metropolitan area] that if you try to act honestly and in co-operation, so you should have everybody involved.*

In the quote above, Jouni refers to the competition and disagreements between rivals but he also emphasizes collaboration over differences of opinion. Many of the comments that Jouni presented during his interview invoked an idea of northern Finland as a place where nobody could survive alone, where everybody had to have their networks but also as a place where people had become used to doing things by themselves. At the same time he lays a lot of stress on the regional characteristics of northern Finland, such as the exiguity of business when compared to southern Finland, and such as the importance of personal relationships and networking.

In our field notes, the top management was described in the following way: *The image of networks equipped with a slightly masculine bluster is getting stronger. In these networks men know each other, do business together and provide jobs for*

*women on the side*. Accordingly, these three men appeared to us as male managers who worked together with other male managers and bonded with male managers. Because of that, it seemed to us that there was only little room for different people in terms of their age, gender and background, and, in this sense, for example, for women, in this northern world of business. It has been argued that men's interest in men and also women's exclusion from men's arenas are based on men's power over women and women's lack of resources (Tallberg 2003, 10). Accordingly, the view that men were the managers and women carried out customer service work in Blue was reinforced in our minds during our fieldwork. It is in line with the hierarchical view that men and masculinity are valued higher than women and femininity (Hirdman 1990; Rantalaiho et al. 1997, 7).

In addition, it was not only men who were involved in the process of doing masculinity, but women also backed up this practice. One example of this was an instance in which Helena, the team leader, kowtowed to her boss when she phoned Paavo to ask if he was free from the meeting. Helena said with us standing next to her: *'There are two pretty girls from the University of Tampere here waiting for you.'* Once again we were called girls but this time by a woman who also commented on our looks to a man by calling us pretty. I wonder if she meant it as a compliment but, nevertheless, I felt uncomfortable. Kowtowing occurred also in Purple where a male telemarketer, for example, complimented his female superior on her new hairdo, an episode in which the researchers were not directly involved.

In short, the top management's mutual relationships formed a site for practising masculinity, displaying and reproducing collective power and homosocial relations. Homosociality in this case was men's means to build unity through gender and through relatively strong and intimate bonds in which colleagues were considered to be significant relationships. Moreover, in Blue, homosociality was constructed on the basis of men's similar social backgrounds and related work histories. The CEO Jouni, as the initiator of negotiations about the recruitment of the call centre managers Paavo and Lasse, had used his his male acquaintances when he needed call centre managers and trustworthy colleagues. This seems to leave very little room for women to act, except in bolstering up men's practising and displaying of masculinity.

#### 4.4.2. Managerial Alliances and Tensions

Below I focus on the management in general and on two team leaders, Helena and Harri, in particular. When the team leaders are taken into account, the picture of the management turns from a male majority into a more equal one in terms of the number of the managers. The middle management consisted of female and male team leaders almost in equal numbers, while the top managerial positions were held only by men. Helena and Harri were not the only team leaders in Blue but I concentrate on them because they and the teams they were leading operated side by side. Helena and Harri differed from each other in terms of gender, age and tenure in Blue. The work of the team leaders covered on-line work with customers in addition to their managerial tasks: roughly half of their workload was telemarketing or customer service and the other half was managerial tasks. In the following I juxtapose the two team leaders and discuss their relationship with the top management.

Helena was a team leader of several teams. As I understood it, she had run the whole office quite independently before Jouni started his work as the CEO. She had worked in Blue since the beginning of the firm. Before that, Helena had had a twenty-year long career in the public sector. This is not unusual in Finland where the majority of public sector employees are women and the majority of private sector employees are men (Women and Men in Finland 2009, 37). In addition, Helena had acquired work experience in the private sector, particularly in tourism. She had graduated from a commercial college in the 1970s and had been educating herself ever since. For example, she had written a book about local traditions as part of her studies in information technology. She described her relation to her work in Blue as fervent, she adored it: *'I've been through a lot. I've been involved in many messes. Above all, in this work I have been, the job description has changed like crazy and it's been really versatile and I have liked it enormously.'*

Helena emphasized the strong work experience that she had acquired in various kinds of occupations, which she referred to as a positive thing that had increased her occupational skills. Moreover, during her interview I was given an impression that Helena considered her position as team leader to mean career advancement. She was proud of her past and proud of her current managerial status in Blue:

*It has made it easier to do my own work that I have work history in several fields which I'm able to use. And especially this kind of legal stuff and such, that I ask when I start making sure if there have been changes in the legislation and such. It's probably the one thing that has given me the courage to take on the manager's job. And I've noticed concretely that it's a great help in all these tasks. And when I was a teacher in [the field of education], I was a full-time lecturer (...) so that too has helped of course when I've had teaching jobs in this company but especially in the manager's job concerning supervision. That I have been able to add to the earlier ones and bring in, can you call it know-how, but I myself at least have had a sort of certainty.*

Helena continued the interview by emphasizing the various experiences in her private life which, in her own view, had made her a better supervisor for the agents. She found herself to be good at listening to the agents' worries and thought that she was able to advice and support them, and to keep their affairs to herself. Furthermore, she described herself as an empathetic and considerate person who did not get scared if she was told something rough.

When Helena's relation to the top management is considered, it seems that it was based on the fact that she was accustomed to run the office by herself. Helena explained:

*We've grown accustomed to having the supervisor elsewhere. We've had to take the reins and build things ourselves. And in my character there is such an organizer that I sometimes wake up in this supervisory job that well, now, I launched that case and now it's running. I get the feeling that help, I haven't gone too far, have I? This has been partly caused by the fact that we haven't had the management present all the time. I don't think it's bad, I don't. And when I know that they are just a phone call away and they can be here in two or three hours though, if need be. And that has maybe made my initiative grow. And quick decision-making and solutions. I can then call Paavo that, hey, I have now hired such a person and she/he will start. That you have become, like, independent.*

*Tuija: So your division of labour works then, it is not unclear what belongs to Paavo and what belongs to you.*

*Helena: Well let's say that there is no [unclarity]. No there isn't. Perhaps I should sometimes stop to think for myself and to hold myself back so that I wouldn't go too far. It has maybe come from the fact that I've been here from the start that I don't feel it as a drawback or anything like that, that maybe you've then learned to take the responsibility. (...) I dare to make decisions and quick decisions, and it perhaps also comes from my personality. I feel that I have that security sort of all the time, there is Paavo and there is Jouni and I can ask them for advice.*

Obviously, Helena was proud of her achievements in Blue and in life in general. She was also proud of herself, of whom she was and what she had gone through. Her manner of speaking about her achievements resembles the top managers' self-confident way of presenting themselves. However, what was different was that Helena did not emphasize her acquaintances or networks but rather her personal experiences and characteristics. Yet, in the organizational hierarchy, Helena was on the same level as Harri, for example, who had worked in Blue for less than a year, whereas Helena had been working in Blue for about three years, longer than any of the top managers.

Harri was the leader of the largest team in Blue in terms of the number of the agents. He was a commercial college graduate and, in addition to that, he had had vocational training in several different occupations. However, he had drifted into the call centre business because of the lack of job opportunities in the region. Previously, for example, he had worked in the call centre of a mobile phone operator, where he had first met Jouni. Harri had first started in Blue as an agent but Jouni had promoted Harri to his current position. It seemed to me that Harri had great personal pressures to practise his masculinity, as he described:

*Men don't seek their way to this job, not to this job. Women's work it is that I do, that is when we go to the hunting club to hunt elks, well... Now, of course, I'm the supervisor, so now it's good that I'm the boss, but so far, well those, those jokes are about that. And partly they are about that a buddy of mine drives a truck, so he wouldn't do this kind of stuff, this is not men's work.*

In this outspoken excerpt, Harri said fairly frankly that the work he was doing was women's work. I understand that Harri was also describing here how his

identity as a man has strengthened because of his promotion to a team leader. He was not just an agent anymore but a supervisor, and this justified his work in a call centre where the agents were mostly women. In other words, it was more acceptable to be a supervisor of women than merely their co-worker. In this utterance, gender hierarchy is directly equated to organizational hierarchy. Moreover, Harri compared his work with his truck driver buddy's work which could be considered to be a very masculine working-class job. In the UK, Ben Lupton (2006) has found that working in female-majority occupations appears to create particular difficulties for working-class men in respect to their manly identity, and yet many working-class men find themselves in such jobs. I expect this to have also been the case with Harri.

Harri told the interviewer that in his previous job he had expected to be promoted to a supervisor and therefore assumed a corresponding role or position although he was never actually promoted. He first started working in Blue as agent but was soon promoted. Harri described his managerial work as being '*a jack-of-all-trades.*' For example, he chaired the employees' weekly Friday afternoon meeting, in which I had a chance to participate. I expected Helena to chair the meeting because she had longer work experience in Blue and she was the team leader of a larger number of teams than Harri. However, Helena stayed aside and left the stage to Harri, who appeared to feel comfortable in front of the agents. Unfortunately, I did not have an opportunity to ask about the division of work behind this arrangement.

In their interviews, the top management referred to neither Harri nor Helena very much, and definitely not with the same warm tone as Helena when she described her relationship with Paavo and Jouni. Also, Harri made it very explicit that he appreciated Jouni in particular, but also Paavo, and yet his appreciation did not seem to draw much response from the top managers. Instead, they pinpointed their own good relationships among themselves but not with any of the team leaders. The comments made especially by the CEO Jouni did not give any credit to Harri or Helena, which I interpret as Jouni's lack of appreciation and confidence towards the team leaders and their work. Jouni did not deny or belittle the team leaders' education, work experience or their competence. He implied, however, that the team leaders were lacking in what the managerial work required, namely the right kind of chemistry between people, and, therefore, they were not good enough to be promoted.



Although both Helena and Harri appreciated their supervisory positions, the team leader's post was not a very desired position in Blue. For instance, Pauli had long been the only male agent working there and had succeeded very well in terms of done deals which, consequently, pulled his wage up. He told to me that he had had the opportunity to start working as team leader. However, after hearing how small the wage increase would have been, he refused. He said:

*If I had myself become more involved, so maybe I could have been the team leader, or in some different role here. But I didn't go for that because it [would] not have had any effect on my wage. Although the job description and responsibility would have increased, it [would] not have had an effect in my case. I've always understood that along with increasing responsibility and more difficult tasks, your wages should increase too. That there would not have been a change in the [wage], I was like, no thank you, I might as well sit here and do the calling work.*

Unlike Harri, Pauli did not even consider the supervisory position to be an important aspect of practising his masculinity. He said further on in his interview that *'maybe people think that working with a phone, it's not a man's thing, but I don't agree. This is a man's [job] just as well.'* Pauli thus recognized the gendered cultural image of call centre work but did not agree with it. Moreover, Pauli did not seem to be very career-oriented. Instead, he seemed to appreciate the kind of salary that compensated for his efforts at work, and a decent job in general, as working-class men presented in some earlier studies have done (Collinson 2002; Lupton 2006). Moreover, it could be said that Pauli refused to step on the so called glass escalator (Maume 1999) that offer men a fairly fast and easy career advancement at work.

In conclusion, Blue was a relatively flat work organization in terms of managerial hierarchy, but rather steep in power differences. In other words, there was a clear hierarchical segregation in which women's positions were on average lower in the hierarchy than men's positions. One reason why this kind of segregation stubbornly appears to survive is the recurrent homogeneity of management, which is also considered to be a great obstacle in implementing equality. Recruiting managers is one important means to reproduce the hierarchical segregation. The managers who have the authority to recruit may select and recruit the managers they prefer in terms

of gender, age, social background and other characteristics. This is what also had happened in Blue.

#### 4.4.3. Engaging the Unemployed

I have so far referred only to the recruitment of top managers and team leaders. In this section, I broaden the scope of analysis to concern the recruitment of agents. In Blue, there were several employees who had been working there since the firm had been founded. Unlike in Purple and Green, where the majority of employees were recruited via acquaintances, the most typical way to enter Blue had been to take part in training that was organized as part of the labour market policy measures. Some of the employees had done several periods of training before they were finally hired for the job. In this respect, Blue's recruitment practices had been part of the locally organized labour policy. Later on, according to the CEO Jouni, this changed, and the company no longer offered training for the unemployed. Instead, Blue advertised jobs in the local newspaper, on their own website and the website of the employment office.

Blue co-operated closely with the local employment office and the vocational institute. The CEO claimed that there were no longer many options to recruit good employees among the job seekers signed up in the employment office. '*The unemployment register has been exhausted,*' as he expressed it. Accordingly, one telemarketer supposed that the local unemployed men were '*a bit glum*' and therefore not suitable for customer service work. The potential employees for Blue were not just unemployed people but also former students who had finished their vocational education and people who were willing to re-migrate to the region if they had a job there. Several interviewees pointed out that there were not too many job opportunities in the area and they were happy to have a job, any job. For example, Tuuli, who had been a stay-at-home mother for a year after having her second child, was very surprised to get a job in just a few days after starting to look for it. She had been prepared to search for a job for much longer and was astonished to have one almost instantly.

Most of the employees interviewed were familiar to the recruiters because they were hired after the training arranged as part of labour market policy measures and

they did not have to have a job interview. Those employees who had applied for a job from Blue and had been interviewed described the job interview as having been somewhat casual and conversational. They pointed out that during the job interview, the recruiter tried to find out whether the job seeker was suited to the job and keen on working in a call centre. Similarly, George Callaghan and Paul Thompson (2002) found out that in a British banking call centre, the managers were less concerned with the job seekers' technical competencies, in which training can be given, than with possessing the correct attitude or belief. In a similar vein, when the CEO Jouni was asked what skills were sought after in recruitment, he answered:

*I was smiling there a little bit already when you said that you've come here to ask about the criteria of how people get in here, so I laughed because I have the words that you need for this job. They are will and attitude. Period. It doesn't matter what your educational background is. At least when I'm doing the interviews the questions revolve around this only and you can quite quickly find it out. That if you have in these areas in these backwoods the willingness to work and you have the attitude, then we have the top tools, in my opinion a good workplace with a good atmosphere and also good education.*

The 'will and attitude' Jouni mentioned above were a simplification of the required skills when compared to how the agents interviewed described the job interviews they had attended and to the skills they needed in their work. Later on, when we interviewed Paavo, the recruiting practices were raised again, and we were explained more explicitly how Paavo recognized the will and attitude of the job seekers during the job interviews:

*It's just about tones of voice, facial expressions, reactions and such things in the discussion, about other things than voice. How you act and how you respond and think. Yes, there you have the most essential things. Often we also talk about that you have to have faith in yourself, in the product and in the organization, such basic things that you have to be comfortable in your skin and to be ready to act accordingly. There are no such single questions. Of course in a job interview you go through the traditional questions like what you have done, what your plans are and what you think and believe. But it [will and attitude] you read between the lines.*

Callaghan and Thompson (2002) have also noted the importance of the positive attitude to recruiters. According to them, managers relate positive attitudes to one's personality: the right attitude simply is or is not '*in you.*' Thus, attitude is an ability that cannot be learned. In general, as shown in Callaghan and Thompson's study, what managers recruit is personality, which is why agents must also know how to communicate this personality and how to consciously use their voice as a tool to shape and control the conversational mood. Yet, with the agents interviewed in the same study, the emphasis was different because they were likely to associate job requirements with surviving stressful and repetitive work rather than applying a particular set of personal characteristics. Similar discrepancy between a required ability and skills that were necessary in mundane work was not perceivable in Blue. Instead, the agents indicated that they needed the skills they were told in the job interview they would need.

What is specific to Blue is that there the job interviews included trial calling that lasted up to six hours. The job seeker made the trial calls usually in a couple of days after the job interview, and because this trial calling was part of the recruitment process, they were not paid for it. The idea of trial calling was that the recruits did not know whether or not they would be able to do this type of work before trying it out. After trial calling, both the recruit and Blue could still withdraw if the recruit was not suitable for the job. If the job seeker was hired, she or he started job training which was mainly organized by Blue, but, in addition, the largest corporate clients provided training to the employees working in their assignments. The training for new agents lasted for one workday, as was usually the case with the training given for every new assignment.

In summary, although the unemployment rates were rather high in the area where Blue was located, recruiting suitable agents was not necessarily easy. This was because the number of unemployed people was small and there was not as much choice as in bigger towns where the population density was higher but the unemployment rate was lower. Therefore, the high unemployment rate in the region did not guarantee effortless recruitment. The recruitment process in Blue leaned more on the local employment authorities and educational institutions than that in Purple and Green. Moreover, recruitment was based on the recruiters' sense of knowing which job seekers had the right attitude, although, at the same time, the

practical side of job interviews included trying the work out. The right attitude of the recruits was appreciated more than their skills or personality. In the interviews, the recruitment process was talked about without many references to gender. However, I was told that earlier there had been fewer men working in Blue than during the fieldwork period, and that the number of male job seekers was on the increase. Thus, the cultural view of call centre work being women's work was slightly changing, which does not necessarily indicate that the vertical segregation in Blue was decreasing.

#### 4.4.4. Remunerations and Work Commitment

This section discusses how the employees related their wages and work commitment along the gender lines. When comparing the employee interviews conducted in Blue to those in Purple and Green, it is striking how often Blue's employees answered my question about their wages with a tone of discontent. Further, they brought up their dissatisfaction with the wages spontaneously. Blue's employees often talked about their wages and many of them expressed their dissatisfaction with wages. I am not aware of the amount of the hourly rate in Green, but, in Purple, the minimum hourly wage in 2004 was 6.47 euros<sup>18</sup>. While the rate is less than in Blue, the employees in Purple seemed happier with their wages. According to the CEO, the minimum hourly wage in Blue was 7.40 euros plus bonuses. However, the minimum hourly wage did not indicate the exact earnings, only the basic wage level.

We asked in the interviews whether the employees talked about their wages with each other and, accordingly, whether they knew how much the others were earning. There were two kinds of answers to these questions about the transparency of wages. Some employees thought that they knew fairly well what the others were earning but that there should be more collegial discussions on the topic. Others said that everyone should mind their own business; they did not ask about their colleagues' wages and definitely did not want to talk about their own. In Finland, the amount of one's salary is a culturally silent topic, manifested in the latter type of

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<sup>18</sup> In comparison: the hourly wage earned by warehouse keepers in 2005 was on average 11.41 euros, by practical nurses 8.13 euros and by cleaners 8.68 euros (Statistics Finland. Wages).

answers. Also, as researcher, I found it difficult to ask about the exact hourly rates of the employees. I did pose the question to the agents in a couple of interviews, but only some of them answered. Thus, there were a few agents who did not want to reveal their salary to me.

Basically, the employees' pay consisted of hourly wages. In some assignments, there were also various kinds of additional bonuses and commissions. For example, according to one agent, his hourly wage was over 8 euros but, at best, he could earn as much as 12–13 euros per hour some months. However, not every assignment yielded bonuses, only some of them did. New employees were paid the trainee's hourly wage for four months. After that, there was a general rise in the hourly rate, but the sum depended on what the employee had negotiated with the management.

The employees were paid both the hourly wage and commission, an arrangement which made it difficult for them to know what constituted their total earnings. I was told that even the payroll clerk, whose job it was to ensure that each employee was paid the right amount of money, could not always get the wages right at once. Therefore, the employees themselves had to be able to understand what their wages comprised of and check them monthly. If there were errors, they would call the payroll clerk who worked at another office of Blue and ask for a correction. This was one cause of uncertainty and a vote of non-confidence towards management in Blue. In addition, the grounds for commission could be changed unexpectedly.

*Iris: We have this insecurity that the bases [for the commission] tend to change each month, we should have fixed rules that now that we are starting September this is what we'll do and this is what we'll make. But then they start fixing the commissions this and that way in the middle of the month and then we waffle about how it's going to go. And this creates insecurity. If you have insecurity, it is certainly reflected in the number of sick leaves and everything. It is the wage; I do see that if they had a good salary system more people would want to come here. This is not such a difficult job.*

In addition, there had been an incident in which the employer had paid some of the employees smaller wages than the minimum wage set by the collective agreement. The employees contacted the shop steward, who also worked at another office of Blue. After that, the employer promised to pay the differential to these

employees retroactively, but a couple of the interviewees suspected that this had not been done. One of them believed that *‘Yes, there is something mysterious about it [the salary].’* Moreover, she suspected that previously there had been malpractices in relation to wages after the training period.

In regard to the hourly wages, their amount was influenced by the employee’s working hours. The employees in Blue worked either six or eight hours per day, which made a great difference to their monthly earnings. Another significant matter was the employees’ living expenses and other costs and their family situation. The employees’ commuting expenses can be surprisingly high<sup>19</sup> in the northern parts of Finland where average commuting distances are long and public transportation is rarely an option. In Blue, several employees commuted about 40 kilometres to work and another 40 kilometres back home. In addition, an agent who lived less than one kilometre from Blue’s office commuted by car. Thus, people who live in these kinds of regions highly depend on their own cars. One of them was Susanna, a single parent who commuted 110 kilometres per day:

*And for a couple of years I had 6.94 [euros] it was, almost two years it was 6.94, my hourly wage, and plus then that there it went, 110 kilometres was the commuting I did, I mean there and back altogether. But it was extraordinarily stupid to my mind to be working on that kind of wage.*

In the interview, Susanna also explained that her current hourly wage was *‘almost eight euros.’* She was quite content with it but still talked a great deal about the commission and even criticized it. She marketed a service to corporate customers and had a sales goal set by the client she worked for. Her aim was to sell one service per hour. If she managed to do that, she would be paid extra three euros per service, but if she did not reach her personal target, she would only receive 75 cents per service sold. She found it hard to achieve the goal and to receive the three-euro commission. This is only one example of the commissions paid in Blue. There were other kinds of commissions depending on the services and products the agents marketed. In some assignments, there were also team-based bonuses: if the team

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<sup>19</sup> Owning and driving a car in Finland is quite expensive. Car-related expenses can by far exceed the price of the car. One has to pay for the car insurance, operating expenses and the MOT test. Also, fuel is expensive because of taxes and other related costs.

achieved their sales goal, bonuses would be paid to the whole team. In helpdesk tasks, the agents did not get any commissions, only the hourly wage.

In Blue, there were no incentive bonus schemes in the form of games and competitions, unlike in Purple and Green. Commission was the only extra pay the agents received. In addition, there were also some goods that the corporate clients sent to Blue, but to whom they were given and on what grounds did not come up in the interviews. In contrast to the common view among the agents that their wages were too low, the management considered the wages of the agents adequate.

*Päivi: What do you think of the level of pay? That it is all right?*

*Paavo: Yes. Yes. We have the basic salary so that is the basic security which is also a good sales argument. With that we guarantee that we have plenty of know-how and continuity. And then, depending on the commission, and of course on the pricing of the commissions, on what kind of agreement we have reached, how it gives the opportunity, so according to the agreement we also of course reward the people who make the calls.*

The managers pointed out that the employees' wages were based on their individual know-how and development on the job, the assignments they had accomplished, and the level of other employees' wages. Each pay raise was negotiated individually with the employee's manager. However, the management and the local experts emphasized how modest the local people were and how satisfied they were to have a permanent job.

*Jouni: They are with us and stay with us. They are sometimes happy with too little so that such bonus systems no longer even attract them, they are happy with the basic salary so to speak. We have even that. But then these 35-year-old and older ladies, they are really good and valuable in our branch. But of course, what we increasingly want when we make outbound calls and seek those strengths, etc., so technical and language skills, all these, so we would increasingly need younger people.*

Thus, the managers thought that the wages of the agents were reasonable, the bonus systems did not attract them, and they were highly committed to their work.



In line with the CEO Jouni's view, several employees mentioned in their interview that they have to be really, really ill in order to take any sick leave, and they may even skip some statutory coffee breaks and work instead. This could have been caused by their willingness to improve their wages. Another reason could have been their attitude towards work; work was very important to them and in general they had high work ethics. However, these explanations are not exclusive. One can ask whether the agents were really that committed to Blue because some of them said that if their wages do not rise, they will not continue working there.

What is important in the CEO's utterance above is the reference to ladies, because the common understanding in Blue was that men did not apply for a job from Blue or stay there for a long time. I was told that the reason for this was poor wages: in the interviews the thought that was commonly shared was that men and young people in general did not seek their way to Blue, and if they did, they left as soon as they found a better paid job.

*Tuija: What do you think about it, because there you have more women, why are men not so into this [work]?*

*Hanna: I think that the biggest issue is salary, quite simply. And the young ones leave because they cannot live on this salary. A person at my age and the other one [the spouse] has a good job and then it works. But the young ones, when they cannot pay rent and other expenses, and especially if they have a family, it won't work. (...) And maybe men have a little bit of this attitude that they think that this kind of telephone service, it's a women's job.*

Moreover, the cultural view of certain jobs being suitable for women and others for men was also mentioned in Blue, as can be seen in Hanna's utterance above. Similar reasoning was also brought up in Purple and Green.

Some of the female interviewees pointed out that they were able to support themselves with their wages only because they had breadwinning husbands. These interviewees were mainly middle-aged women, whose age indicates that they had already paid off their mortgage and had no other debts. The consenting of female employees to their relatively low wages was also in line with the local policy to support the location or relocation of the call centre offices to the area. Call centres were seen as a means to create 'women's jobs' to ensure that both parents had jobs

and that families stayed in the area. However, the decision to move away from an area is usually made on the basis of husbands' wages and, therefore, the view that supporting women's jobs would influence families' decision to stay or move does not seem accurate. (Koivunen 2010b)

In sum, dissatisfaction with wages was common in Blue. However, it was seen that the low wages of the whole call centre business was women's own fault. There are always '*scabs*,' employees who settle for low wages and do not demand a raise, as one interviewee put it. Yet, none of the interviewees referred to any kind of gender conflict among employees when talking about wages. Instead, they referred to disagreement or maybe even conflict between the management and the employer. This is in line with the earlier findings (e.g. Korvajärvi 2003, 63) indicating that gender as an idea is found at work at a distance, not at one's own workplace, particularly when inequalities are discussed. More than ten years ago, Tuula Heiskanen (1997) wrote that the discussion of the wage gap between women and men was a hot issue with emotionally charged opinions. The situation has not changed since. Gendered wage differential continues to be one of the most common issues in everyday debate on gender-related inequality in Finland, although it did not arouse any strong arguments at the three workplaces.

#### 4.4.5. Interaction with Customers and Colleagues

This section shifts the focus towards interactional relations between the employees and the customers and the ways in which these relations are shaped by gender. Moreover, the informal side of the work organization is brought into discussion. In general, the employees told the interviewers more about the internal affairs of their work organization than interaction with customers. However, most of the employees remarked that there really was no such thing as a difficult customer. Instead, there may be bad phone calls or awkward moments with customers, for example, when the employee has too little experience and cannot answer the customer's questions, or the customer may be drunk, busy or irate. In helpdesk assignments, a phone call described as bad was often made by customers whose anger had been building up and who lost their temper during the call. As one agent described, the agents usually tried to develop a non-stick surface for the onslaught

of customers' bad temper. After all, as one interviewee pointed out, the customers were not angry because of the agent but because something had gone wrong, for instance, with their invoicing or other services.

When dealing with a bad phone call, the agents tried to stay calm, reassure, talk and explain the issue to the irate customer. If this did not help the customer to calm down, the agent would end the call politely and quickly. As Virpi put it: *'It's not worth bothering the customer when she/he is not in the mood.'* One of the telemarketers pointed out that she usually wanted to listen to bad phone calls afterwards to learn what she could have done better. If needed, the agents took a short break after a bad call in order to pull themselves together. Thus, it appears as if the agents did not mind displaying emotional labour, and the dealings with irate customers did not arouse any complains in them.

The agents had personal preferences in terms of customers' gender and age. For example, Tuuli found female customers generally easier than male customers to speak with, but she added that the age of the customer also had an effect on how the relationship on the phone was formed. She had found that middle-aged women and men were often busy and self-important, and therefore rather difficult to deal with. The nicest customers were, according to Tuuli, young and elderly women. Laura said that she and some of her colleagues had talked about customers' reactions to their gender and concluded that female customers were more irate to female agents than to male agents, but she did not specify in what way. Instead, she said that her behaviour did not change according to the customer's gender; she was always the same.

Moreover, when the gender of the agents was introduced in discussions, the agents seemed to have opposed views on whether or not it had an impact on telemarketing:

*Tuija: Well, do you think that this job as such is done differently by women and men somehow?*

*Hanna: I don't think so. What I know, they do it in the same way. I have been involved in many campaigns so that I have made calls together with a male colleague. We have called in the same campaign, for example. We do similar jobs, the two of us, and in my mind there is no difference. Gender does not have an effect, so it's quite similar.*

In addition, Pauli told me that some female agents claimed a male telemarketer could be more convincing and produce better results in certain types of campaigns. However, Pauli had worked in such a campaign and said that his performance had been quite the same as that of the female agents. So, in practice, there seems to be no gender-based differences in the agents' performance, at least not in this particular campaign.

The mutual relations among the employees were described by Virpi, who said that: *'As a job this is probably the kind that in the work community you don't have to have such highbrow relations but you can talk about whatever.'* In other words, one could work in Blue without being intimate friends with the colleagues. This differentiates Blue from Purple and Green, where the work community was seen as very important to the employees, and colleagues were important in coping with a repetitious job with the occasional difficult customer. What was similar to Purple and Green, however, was that some of the interviewees in Blue mentioned that having a positive attitude was a crucially important factor that made an employee a good colleague since negative attitude was easily spread to others. In other words, one must not hold back valuable information but have the right attitude to help the colleagues as well as the customers.

The idea of men's importance to the social community of work was repeated by some of the agents.

*Susanna: I've never really thought about what good would follow [from the fact that there are more women than men in the work community]. I find it just the contrary: it would be good to have a few men there. Or more than one man.*

*Tuija: Why's that?*

*Susanna: It would give a better balance. For example, I couldn't for the life of me say that there are cliques here, but unfortunately there are and you yourself are guilty of that sometime, that when you have a bunch of women so even if you do have a good work community and you laugh and everyone talks to each other and nobody hates the other people, so sometimes you may get a bit of that 'well, because she's like that.' I don't know that men would be any better. I have typically always been in such work communities where there have been more men and in my mind it has been somehow more direct that if something comes up you say it and deal with*

*it and that's it. Is it so that among women that you don't talk face-to-face but you have to comment behind people's backs and go like 'don't tell anyone.' But what good is it that there are women. I don't know what good it would do that there are women. No, I simply cannot say it right off the bat because in my opinion as you are men and women, it would be good to bring more of that male perspective into things. Because we [women] think with the bird's nest brains we have.*

Susanna repeated the view that women and men complete each other. She also referred to the cultural dichotomy, according to which women's brains resemble a bird's nest and men's brains a pipe, by saying that '*we think with the bird's nest brains.*' This relatively common view was also mentioned by one agent, Maarit, in Green. However, in this excerpt the connotation was slightly different, because with her reference to women's brains Susanna justified her view that if there were more male agents in the social community of work, it would benefit from it because men have different points of view than women. In Susanna's utterance, the different male viewpoint simultaneously implied somehow a better viewpoint because she did not see the advantages of having a work community comprised mostly of women. Thus, even though she said that the gender-mix was good, she indirectly preferred male colleagues and their viewpoints at the same time.

Like many other workplaces in Finland, Blue threw an annual Christmas party for its employees. However, even during the party, someone had to be on duty in the helpdesk. It was mentioned that there was always someone who was not very keen on partying but volunteered to work. What is more, every other month, the employees had an opportunity to participate in a recreational day. The expenses of the recreational day were partly covered by Blue: the firm paid a couple of euros towards the costs of every participating employee. For example, the employees could go to the theatre, go bowling, take a guided lesson of Nordic walking, go on a cycling trip or take part in an ice fishing contest. These recreational activities took place during the employees' leisure time, which was considered problematic. Some of the agents thought that these activities should be organized during their workday and they did not want to participate unless that changed.

The employees' statutory coffee breaks were staggered and, when I was present, women were sitting on the one side of the table and men on the other. Taking care of the kitchen was divided into rotating shifts which lasted one week at a time. The

shift included making coffee before the breaks and clearing the coffee room afterwards, filling in and emptying the dishwasher, switching the lights off and locking the kitchen door after the workday. As far as I can tell, there were no gender-related arrangements involved in the kitchen shifts.

In contrast, informal discussions during lunch and coffee breaks were defined by gender roles that I would describe as rather conventional in the sense that they were based on women's and men's different spheres of responsibilities. For example, a group of women was once talking about how helpless their spouses were, and how the men could not even find their socks when they were getting dressed. Pauli, the only man present, made a point by asking why the others thought this was happening. The question was returned to Pauli, as if he knew the answer. But he said that he did not know because he always found his socks and other clothes. Then, one of the women said that, indeed, when she was not at home, her husband was usually decently dressed and did not wander around naked wondering where all his clothes were. Everyone wanted to hear what Pauli thought about this matter, turning to him and silently waiting for his answer. After a pause, Pauli explained that he and his girlfriend, who live together, were equal. He said that he knew that his socks were in the wardrobe, or, if they were not there, then they would be in the washing machine, the laundry basket or on the clothes line. Also, in their household, the washing machine was used by the one who had time to do it, including Pauli himself who was familiar with the secrets of the laundering.

This was not the only time when Pauli disagreed with his colleagues and emphasized gender equality at work or at home. However, this incident illustrates how women purposely drew Pauli into the conversation and carefully listened to his opinion. What is interesting here is that Pauli advocated equality in household chores. At the same time, according to my interpretation of the situation, he criticized his female co-workers of assisting their husbands too much and then blaming the husbands of being helpless. What is more, this episode is an example of how domestic life entered the workplace. The conversation used a humorous tone throughout although it was not just joking but talking about serious matters in a trouble-free manner. In addition, gender relations were frequently discussed in informal settings with a humorous tone.

Another incident worth examining is Marja's story about the summer trip of a group of employees to one of their summer cottages. Two of the female employees

went for a swim in a lake naked from the sauna, Marja being one of them. Someone took a photo of Marja wrapped only in a towel and later circulated the photo at work during Marja's summer holiday. I assume that the point of this was to embarrass Marja, whose body curves could be seen in the photo. Going to the sauna and swimming naked in a lake are part of Finnish culture, but when these leisure activities were brought to the workplace, the attitude towards nakedness changed. Maybe the photo was intended to be a 'harmless' joke but, at the same time, it heterosexualized and embodied Marja who did not have the same opportunity to argue back as people ridiculed in gender-related jokes usually have. It seemed to me that Marja did not take this incident very seriously and was not offended, but the episode points out the kind of joking considered acceptable by the employees of Blue. In other words, the employees did not mention any instance of heterosexualization in the interaction with customers, but the photo of Marja was a case in point of heterosexualization between the co-workers.

To conclude, the analysis of the case study organization Blue indicates that call centre work in Blue was performed under very little control, in a peaceful work environment and, to a great extent, at the agents' own pace. The social community of work appeared agreeable and relaxed, even if there were tensions under the surface. The social community of work was not considered an essential source of enjoyment, as it was in Purple and Green. Moreover, the work community supported the men in practising their masculinity, which very much directed the behaviour of women.

#### 4.4.6. Summary

The main findings in Blue are summarized in this section. Several themes that appeared to be central in Blue were related to its location in a sparsely populated area in the north of Finland. Call centres were seen as a means to create new jobs for unemployed people, mainly for women, and, therefore, the location of call centre offices into the area was supported by local policy. They were a big issue in the area, and their operations quite well known by local people. The local gender practices and local policy not only affected the atmosphere in the work community in general, but also justified the hierarchical gender segregation. This is to say that

hierarchical gender segregation was obvious in Blue, and the organizational structure was flat in terms of managerial hierarchy but steep in power differences.

Use of labour in the call centre in northern Finland was a central issue because of the availability of workforce. The unemployment rate in the region was relatively high which, together with local labour market policy, supported the location of the call centres into the area. In other words, call centres were regarded as one solution to women's high unemployment in the area. However, at the same time, there was less workforce available in the area because it was sparsely inhabited and the total number of the unemployed was low, which made the pool of potential recruits smaller than in larger towns. Moreover, according to the local way of thinking, call centre work was women's work, which possibly prevented men from seeking a job at a call centre. Naturally, this attitude also surfaced in the other case study call centres, but it was more evident in Blue, where the number of male agents was the lowest. However, the number of male job seekers was said to be increasing. Gender was not specifically brought up when recruitment practices were discussed, but it seemed that men were rather reluctant to seek their way to a job in a call centre.

In Blue, the implementation of new and sophisticated technology was in progress. Partly because of this, the agents' work was not extensively controlled and kept under surveillance by means of technology, and control was not presented as the main purpose of the technology. For example, recording the phone calls was justified more with interests of education and self-improvement than with control as such. Moreover, there were female agents who explicitly wished to work with computers because it made the work more challenging. One additional challenge was the malfunctioning of the computer software and the telecommunications link in the north. The full potential of the electronic surveillance was thus not utilized, and the maze-like interiors of the office space hindered the visual surveillance of the agents.

What was striking in Blue, was the agents' dissatisfaction with their wages. Many of the female agents said that they could live on their earnings only because their spouses had a good job with a reasonable pay and their mortgage had already been paid off. In practice, to live on their salary, the employees needed to be middle-aged women with breadwinning husbands. Accordingly, some of the agents suspected that there was something '*mysterious*' about the wages but were not able not pinpoint what it was. At the same time, the low wage level was basically seen to



be women's own fault because they did not form a united front and demand a raise. What complicated this was the employees' unawareness of how much the others earned and, in addition, the practice of individual negotiation with the manager over one's salary.

As to the interaction with the customers, the employees of Blue presented different views on it. On the one hand, it was said that female customers were easier to talk with, especially young and elderly women. On the other hand, it was also claimed that female customers were more irate towards female agents than male agents. There were also varying views on the significance of the agents' gender for customer relations. In general, customers were seen to be nice and, according to the employees, there simply was no such thing as a difficult customer, only bad phone calls. This is reminiscent of the old saying that the customer is always right, which lays the responsibility of the interaction between the employee and the customer on the shoulders of the employees. I interpret this as a form of displaying emotional labour (Hochschild 1983/2003). There were practically no other references to displaying emotional labour or mention of doing aesthetic labour, and more specifically, using dialect and colloquial speech at work.

Here it is not possible to deal with the interaction between the employees and the customers in great detail because the interviewees did not describe this side of their work that much and, when they did, they discussed the issues in a quite detached manner. The interviewees talked about their employer and the call centre in general as a workplace more openly than the content of their work. This indicates, according to my interpretation, that the agents had more to say about their workplace, their jobs and their employer than their everyday work with the customers as such. This marks a significant difference between the employees of the three case study call centres. Some of the employees in Blue were content with their employer, some of them were not, but to all of them it was highly significant to have a steady job, instead of being unemployed or having a fixed-term job.

The importance of men to the social community of work was raised by several female employees. This was justified with reasons familiar from the other two case study call centres. For example, an equal number of female and male employees was said to bring about a balance in the work community and to complete each other. But once again, the wish to have more male employees was not expressed in a heterosexualized tone. Moreover, the gender-mix of female and male employees

was seen as good but, at the same time, men's views on various issues were considered more valuable than those of women. As for the informal organization, the organizational housekeeping was arranged in turns, which was a fairly equal system. Informal discussions during the breaks followed somewhat stereotypical, gender-based lines in which the main point was making fun of both women and men. The point of some jokes was ostensibly heterosexualizing, which could be interpreted as harassment but, in this case, the leg-pulling can be interpreted as harmless joking. Respectively, Korvajärvi (2002a, 132–133) has reported on a Finnish metal factory in which male workers told chauvinist jokes, which clerical women seemed to ignore and gave the impression that they were not offended by them.

The organization's top management was all male and mainly mobile. This emphasized the position of the middle management, that is, the team leaders. The top management worked mobile in their cars because of the distant location of the organization. Thus, their managerial work was based on what call centres are all about: communicating from a distance. Despite this, the managers described their work as '*humane*', and they emphasized the importance of their personal relations with the clients, team leaders and agents, as well as their presence in the field offices. However, the top managers did not express confidence towards the team leaders, while the team leaders said that their relations were very confidential, trustful and good. The male management, for their part, practised masculinity for example by bonding with each other, by being at the cutting edge of the business or at least making good sales, or by being managers or superiors of women. Hence, masculinity was practised by men and underpinned by women who did not seem to object to men's homosociality and masculine manoeuvres or to criticize men or their behaviour in general. Instead, women made room for men and did not seem to be offended by their actions. This is one way how the gender divisions at workplaces (Acker 1992; Connell 2005) are produced and maintained. Such managerial homosociality may in some situations operate as a glass ceiling which prevents women's entry to the managerial positions. Thus, it could be said that the homogeneity of the all-male top management allowed gender segregation to appear continuously.

## 4.5 Summary of the Empirical Results

The purpose of this section is to review the research questions and sum up the main empirical results of the study. The aim of the research questions was to trace gender from different angles in the context of three Finnish case study call centres. Here I return to each of the research questions in turn and summarize the empirical findings presented in more detail in the previous sections of this chapter. In doing so, I relate the call centres to one another in order to describe the differences and similarities between the three organizations. I use such relating of the cases in a broad sense rather than as a particular method of comparison. In other words, the analysis of each case study organization as a single case is here complemented with an analysis linking the three cases to each other.

The first research question aimed to find out **what kinds of workplaces the call centres are from the gender perspective**. The question focuses on such matters as the regional characteristics and local understandings of call centre work in relation to gender, gender processes and practices on various levels and instances of the workplaces, the spatial arrangements of the workplaces and technological devices used. To answer the question, I concentrated on the contextual matters at large and, in addition to that, on the organizational environments the three firms form as workplaces. In doing so, I took the whole range of ethnographic research material under scrutiny.

The work conditions varied notably among the case study organizations. This is hardly a surprise, because the premises of the study were to select case study organizations of varying sizes, ownerships, locations, work assignments and workforces. Consequently, the call centres used different types of workforce in terms of the age, work history, educational background and gender of the employees. This is to say that, although customer service work in the call centres was culturally associated as women's work, male employees were also hired. The use of different types of workforce was related to the different locations of the firms. In other words, different regions had different kinds of employees available for work in call centres: in the large towns with educational institutions, there were students and middle-aged or older job seekers, and in the region with high unemployment, there were unemployed job seekers. While the student recruits could be both women and men, the unemployed job seekers who entered the call centres

were mainly, but not exclusively, women. In general, the call centres used a labour force that was in a rather weak position in the labour market and often included more women than men.

Moreover, it could be said that for the elderly employees, the work conditions were convivial and, for the younger employees, more restricted and dynamic. The spatial arrangements and technological devices used in the call centres varied but that was said to be a consequence of rather practical matters. However, they allowed the employees' mutual interaction either between the phone calls or during the breaks.

The relationship between gender segregation, hierarchy and power relations was slightly different in every work organization. In the family-owned telemarketing company, which was the smallest firm in terms of the personnel employed, the degree of hierarchy was low, power differences were small and both horizontal and hierarchical gender segregation occurred. In the largest call centre, the degree of hierarchy was relatively high, power differences were steep, and gender segregation was horizontal but not hierarchical. In the third call centre, which was run by male managers, the degree of organizational hierarchy was quite low but there were still steep power differences between the personnel groups, and both horizontal and hierarchical gender segregation occurred. When discussing the issues of hierarchy, power and segregation, the employees usually did not attach gender to them. They did recognize horizontal segregation but linked it to the assumed gender differences of female and male employees and to gendered products they were representing. As for horizontal segregation, only a few female managers connected gender to it. My interpretation is that these women had faced some kind of discrimination in their career advancement because of their gender and were therefore sensitive to gender inequalities.

The relationship between hierarchy and gender segregation in the work organizations gives an impression that there was no room for female managers in call centres with low hierarchy. Correspondingly, organizational hierarchies in the UK call centres have been found to be relatively flat, and, therefore, there are few managerial positions to which the agents could be promoted (Belt 2002, 55). Furthermore, on the basis of my analysis of these Finnish call centres, the decrease in hierarchical gender segregation did not enhance the decrease in horizontal gender segregation. This may be because horizontal gender segregation in the call centres

was not dictated only by the employer but fostered also by the preferences of consumer customers and corporate clients in whose assignments the employees were working.

As a summary, it could be said that work assignments in the call centres were organized according to gender lines, which in turn generated and maintained gender segregation. What is interesting, however, is that segregation between formal work tasks and informal work was not congruent. In the work organization where hierarchical and horizontal gender segregation was the most obvious, informal work did not follow the same gender lines as formal work tasks but, for example, kitchen shifts were arranged by turns, whereas in two other call centres where hierarchical and horizontal gender segregation was not as steep, informal work fell mainly on the shoulders of a few female employees. This suggests that gender segregation may be formed differently in different parts of the work organizations.

Another characteristic that distinguished the work organizations from each other was their location. The region in which the call centres were located became significant when it was not in the densely inhabited part of Finland. Based on the analysis of the three call centres, the regions did not differ in their considerations of the issue of call centre work being women's work, but, in northern Finland, there were exceptionally few men working as agents. This was because of the view that the work of the call centre agent was suitable for women and that the work of the supervisor was more appropriate for men.

Although the tasks of the male and female workers were quite similar in terms of their content, they differed in terms of the products they represented. In other words, the basic tasks of making outbound calls and taking inbound calls were similar to all workers. Gender came into play through products and services that were gendered according to their characteristics. Thus, in the call centres, the products and services that the workers represented were linked to women and femininities or to men and masculinities. In the company where the only marketed products were magazine subscriptions, the division of the products between two and only two genders was most evident. Such a division was based on the content of the magazines which were most of the time targeted to groups of people of certain age and gender.

Gendering of products and services could also be analysed in the two other case study call centres, but in a slightly different way. For example, in one of them, several assignments were organized so that the corporate client profiled its product

and the workers who were allowed to represent it. That is, corporate clients had a certain idea of their products and selected workers who embodied this idea with their voices and telephone appearances. This process in which gender becomes part of the marketed product can be regarded as gender commodification, making gender marketable. Moreover, it has been suggested that in a call centre, female workers are understood as resources by association with certain products, not as people, and women and femininities are therefore embedded in the commodified products. At the same time, men and masculinities are understood as a resource in attracting customers as individuals in general, and in relation to technology-related services in particular. (Korvajärvi 2009) This kind of valuation of male workers over female workers in the case study organizations, which is detectable in my analysis, affected the interaction between the workers and the customers.

The gendered characteristic of products was linked not only to horizontal gender segregation, but also to gender differences in the workers' wages. In the Finnish debate on gender equality, the wage gap between women and men continues to be a hot topic (Julkunen 2009, 80; Segregation and the gender wage gap 2008, 108). Despite that, it was not raised by the call centre employees. On the contrary, they expressed the view that a wage based on commissions was a gender-equal pay and that their wages were too small in general. Moreover, the employees found it hard to understand how their pay was formed and what bonuses were included in the salary. Their statement about the commission-based wage being gender-equal did not take into consideration gender differences in issues that had an effect on the sales made by female and male employees. For example, if commissions were negotiated differently depending on the assignment and female and male employees did not generally work in the same assignments, their commissions could differ. Nevertheless, the employees stated that the major reason why there were so few men working as agents in the call centres was too low a pay. Thus, in this sense, they did not consider wages to be a gender equality issue.

The call centres appeared to offer jobs to which the employees could commit themselves. Some of them were ready and willing to continue working in the call centres, which indicates that call centre jobs were not considered to be only stepping stone jobs. Exceptions to this were students working in one call centre, who eventually sought occupations for which they had been educated. In general, work commitment varies by age so that young people are more eager than others to

change jobs (Lehto & Sutela 2009, 135). What this study presents is a much more positive picture of call centre work than has been presented by several studies conducted in the UK and Canada (e.g. Belt 2002; Belt, Richardson & Webster 2000; Buchanan & Koch-Schulte 2000; Cameron 2000). My suggestion is that this is at least partly due to the fact that Finland is a sparsely populated country in which the operations of small-sized call centres are more often based on personal relations than on surveillance and measurement of employee productivity. In all three call centres, support was preferred over control. Outside larger cities, it was also a challenge to find employees for unvalued call centre jobs and, therefore, it was worthwhile to have pleasant work conditions to prevent the employees from changing jobs, since it was hard to find new employees to replace the old ones.

In short, call centres are culturally considered to be women's workplaces, even though men have access to them and are even favoured in recruitment and largely desired as co-workers. The call centre literature has been divided by Deery and Kinnie (2002) into four themes: the characteristics and organizational features of call centre work; the choices and strategies that are available to manage call centre work; the effects that this form of work has on employees; and the responses and reactions of staff to their work experiences. These themes would also benefit from taking gender into account. On the basis of the results of this study, I argue that the cultural understanding of call centre work as women's work and the consequences of this view have an effect on all four themes.

The second research question aimed to identify **the ways in which gender is practised in customer service work in the call centres**. In order to answer this question, I focused on analysing interaction within the content of the work, that is, interaction between the employees and the customers in general and the ways in which emotions and heterosexuality are described in the interviews and field notes in particular.

In call centres, interaction between the employees and the consumer customers was evidently the most important everyday practice on which their work was based. On the basis of the analysis, I argue that the product or service at hand was the baseline that affected this interaction. It directed, although did not dictate, the gender of the workers and the communicational style they used. Moreover, to some extent, the content of the product defined its target group in terms of the customers' age and gender, which were also brought into play in interaction. Obviously, there

were products which were not so clearly gender-specific. For example, both women and men use mobile phones, have their money in a bank account and watch TV. Both female and male employees were able to work in assignments with these kind of target products, in situations of interaction which were not notably gendered. In such cases, the starting point of the interaction was not gendered, but the interaction between the agent and the customer could take a gendered shape during the phone call.

The type of calls, that is, whether they were initiated by the worker or the customer, gave its own twist to the interaction. If the call was made by the worker, the customer could answer the phone anywhere in the middle of almost any human activity, which defined the circumstances of the customer's orientation to the call (Koivunen 2007, 324). If the customer made the call, the tone of the interaction was quite dependent on the original reason for the call. Presumably, customers who called in order to subscribe to a product were more co-operative and non-hostile than, for example, customers who called because they thought there was something wrong with their invoicing.

The ways in which the employees considered the female and male workers in respect to gender and the characteristics attached to them varied. Some employees thought that gender made a difference in customer service work; others considered gender to be irrelevant, which I would here call denial of gender. In addition to that, on the basis of the analysis, I identified two patterns of interaction between the call centre workers and the customers in which gender was seen to make a difference in the interaction. The first one I named the pattern of homosocial interaction. It indicates how the workers described same-gender interaction to be more effective and easier for both female and male workers than cross-gender interaction. The second pattern of heterosexualized interaction occurred concurrently. This cross-gender pattern was also described to be the most efficient in interaction with the customers. Thus, both of these patterns were argued to occur in the same call centre, but the employees did not bring up any contradiction between them, despite their relative inconsistency.

There were also other apparent contradictions in the call centres in respect to female and male employees and their interaction with their customers and colleagues. For instance, the workers said that the customers did not listen to female agents as easily as male agents, and that it was easier for a female agent than for a



male agent to make social contacts with customers. Another view was that women were the most difficult customers, especially for female agents, and, in contrast, that the male customers are the worst customers to deal with. Furthermore, the employees told me that the female workers have good social skills and are empathetic, and yet the female employees are cruel, and have unprofessional personal rows and disagreements with their female colleagues. Notably, such unprofessionalism was attached only to female employees, not to male employees. In short, the contradictions above indicate that gender was frequently used as a basis for generalizations concerning women and men, as well as their behaviour and interaction. Moreover, when such contradictory explanations were used in describing the gendered actions of people, one or the other was usually confirmed.

Interaction between the workers and the customers was framed by the expectations that were laid on the workers to display emotional labour, aesthetic labour and heterosexualized labour. In all three call centres, these expectations were somewhat implicit and subtle, yet existed. The female workers in particular were expected to display emotional labour, and they were hired because of the communication skills and social skills they had accumulated, for instance, in their previous occupation as nurses. Despite this, it can be said that the workers had some emotional autonomy which helped them to interact with the customers and gave certain independence to their work. This coincides with previous studies on some other customer service jobs. For example, it has been found that individual public house employees exercise considerable autonomy in dealing with customers and set their own emotional rules (Seymour and Sandiford, 2005). Moreover, unlike in some face-to-face service occupations, such as flight attendants (e.g. Williams, 2003), the call centre workers in the case study organizations were not forced to be loyal to either the abusive customer or the employer at the expense of their own well-being. In this respect, the findings in this study concerning emotional labour and aesthetic labour are rather different to the earlier findings in call centres.

The three case study call centres offered jobs in which customer interaction was mediated through technology and based on hearing but not seeing each other. It has been suggested that when interaction between the customer and employee is based on modern systems of communication, such as the telephone, e-mails and text messages, even a hint of the body disappears (Morgan et al. 2005, 4). Nevertheless, a voice heard over the telephone reveals many characteristics of its bearer's body in

terms of gender and age, for example. The workers' appearance or aesthetic labour was therefore also paid attention to, but mainly to the extent it affected how they sounded on the phone. There was no linguistic training aimed to neutralize the workers' accent, as, for example, in India and the UK (Callaghan & Thompson 2002, 242; Mirchandani 2008; Noronha & D'Cruz 2009; 86), and the call centres did not avoid hiring people with different dialects, accents or speech defects. Still, the workers needed to be recognized as either women or men on the basis of their voice (also Koivunen 2006, 6), which limits the ways in which the workers can practise gender in the call centre work.

There was variation between the call centres in how strictly the management or their corporate customers profiled the voices they employed in their assignments. In one call centre, the workers' voices and dialects were of no interest to its management, while in another call centre the recruiters and some of the corporate customers paid a lot of attention to the workers' voices. In other words, in this call centre, the increasing pressure to display aesthetic labour came from the corporate clients, not from the call centre employer. The profiles given by the corporate clients were quite detailed in terms of the kinds of voices they wanted to be represented with and the kind of aesthetic labour the workers were expected to display on the phone depending on their gender. Moreover, according to my analysis, technology remained largely in the background of the call centre work, although it was telephone technology that mediated the workers' voices and interaction with the customers.

The third research question I asked was: **What are the ways in which gender is practised among the workers, between the management and the workers, and among the managers in the call centres?** To answer this question, I analysed interaction on the horizontal and hierarchical occupational levels and within the three case study work organizations as a whole.

What was striking in the views of the employees on their mutual relations was how strongly they appreciated their male colleagues and described them to be good workers. Both the workers and the managers highlighted the view that male workers were good with technical and other so-called masculine or manly products, and with female customers. The employees also welcomed men to their social community of work: male workers were said to bring along with them a special and highly needed male point of view and to complete the female-majority personnel by creating a

better gender balance in the workplace. In their opinion, a balanced gender-mix of female and male employees was a good thing, instead of having too many female employees. Such a longing for men is found in earlier studies of workplaces (e.g. Bruni, Gherardi & Poggio 2005, 117–118; Korvajärvi 2002a, 132) but also, for instance, in studying at the University of Third Age (Ojala 2010, 254–259).

As for the employees' informal organization during the breaks and other non-working time at work, the topics of discussions were differentiated according to gender. In one of the call centres, the workers even spoke about topics and told jokes that could be interpreted as sexual harassment, and, also in another call centre, rough humour was said to be common. In many Finnish work communities, women face quite rough horseplay and chauvinist, even heterosexualizing, joking that they consider to be humorous and either ignore it or answer back (Korvajärvi 2002a, 132–133; Lappalainen 2008). Despite this, it could be said that the employees did not find gender and heterosexuality as significant in their mutual relationships as they were in interaction with the customers.

The top management in each work organization was either mobile or remained otherwise remote to the workers. Only in the family-owned call centre was the managing director described to be somewhat close to the workers. The CEOs of the other two call centres remained more remote from the workers because of the lack of direct interaction. Consequently, this emphasized the position of the workers' immediate supervisors as mediators between the workers and the remote top management. As for the management's operations in relation to gender, it became relevant especially in recruitment of the new employees. My analysis indicates that, in addition to the workers, the managers who were responsible for recruitment likewise preferred male job seekers to female job seekers who made up the majority of the recruits.

The call centres offered managerial positions to women, although there was also hierarchical segregation in these work organizations. Accordingly, women could hit the glass ceiling preventing their career progress, but they could also to break it. In some sense, the call centres may be called 'women-friendly' workplaces, as did the female interviewees in the study by Belt, Richardson and Webster (2000, 377). However, I find 'non-hostile workplace for women' to be a more accurate portrayal of call centres than 'women-friendly workplace.' This is because it is not only the emergence of opportunities for women for promotion to the team leader level that

makes a workplace particularly friendly towards women. Instead, a women-friendly workplace would also offer career prospects to positions of high status, rewards and responsibility, but not at the expense of family life.

As to the gender composition of the management in the call centres, one of them consisted mostly of women and two others were all-male. There are no statistics available on the managers' gender in the Finnish call centres, but the female CEO I interviewed recalled only one woman, besides herself, as having been in charge of a subcontractor call centre. She said, however, that women were more often in charge of in-house customer service units. In a family-owned firm, the managers were hired from among the family members and the employees, which was convenient with this form of ownership. In the second case study organization, the female managers were hired from outside the call centres and, moreover, some of them were promoted inside the firm. In the third call centre, the male managers were recruited on the basis of their social homogeneity, which had several striking consequences. First, the managers' homosocial reproduction was a source of trust relations based on gender, and yet these kinds of recruitment practices narrowed down the potential networks that could have been exploited for the benefit of the company. Generally, when employees change jobs, they not only move from one network of ties to another, but also establish a link between the two. The recruited managers who had similar social backgrounds and work experience did not have any connections to new, potential corporate clients. Managers' existing networks and strong willingness to network could be considered an important resource in a recruitment situation. Second, when managers have similar social backgrounds, it is presumable that they do not bring any new ideas, fresh points of views and different perspectives into the work organization. (Granovetter 1973; Kanter 1977) In this third call centre, the male managers practised male homosociality between one another, which attached them strongly to one another but excluded others.

To sum up, the characteristics of women and men as employees were discussed with inconsistent terms but, at the same time, men and masculine were clearly more valued than women and feminine. Moreover, gender had significance in the employees' mutual relations but it became visible most clearly in the interaction between the workers and the customers. It could be said that the gender system still existed in these call centres: women and men were differentiated and segregated to different work tasks, different informal tasks and different positions in the

organizational hierarchy. Thus, Hirdman's (1990) conceptualization of gender difference and hierarchy is still strongly relevant in relation to everyday work in Finland. In only one of the firms examined in this study, women had entered top management positions, which can hardly be interpreted as indicating that gender hierarchy had evaporated from these work organizations.

Despite the alleged differences between women and men, I did not come across any illegal gender-based or other discrimination in the call centres that would have required further action. There is a difference between legal gender-based inequality and illegal gender-based discrimination in work life, which indicates that all gender-based inequalities cannot be tackled with by means of legislation. The legislation concerning gender-based discrimination in work life is essential in preventing gender-based inequalities and increasing gender equality. Yet, it seems to be too rigid a tool for preventing all the reappearing and changing forms of gender-based inequality in workplaces. Having said that, I find it important to point out that all practices based on gender cannot and should not be considered to result in inequalities between women and men. For example, differences in styles of interaction among woman–man and woman–woman dyads are hardly unequal, but the distribution of work assignments between female and male workers could possibly be.

## 5. Concluding Discussion

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the empirical conclusions and contributions of the study in more general terms than in the previous chapter. The empirical findings are manifold and they are here considered in relation to a larger empirical perspective and to earlier research on call centres and on gender related-practices. In addition, the theoretical and methodological contributions of the study are brought into discussion. In doing so, the contribution of the conceptualizations related to gender-related practices are evaluated and reflected on. This study offers several clues and calls for future feminist research and will therefore present some suggestions for future research that follow from the findings, methods and concepts used here.

In the introductory chapter of this book, I presented a fictional passage from a novel situated in an Indian call centre. In the passage, the call centre agent called Vroom talked with Ms Paulson, a North American customer who had opened the top cover of her oven and had an electric shock. In the novel, the bay in which Vroom and his colleagues worked is described in an ironic tone as follows:

*Our bay's name is the Western Appliances Strategic Group or WASG. Unlike the other bay that troubleshoots for computer customers, we deal with customers of home appliances such as refrigerators, ovens and vacuum cleaners. Management calls us the strategic bay because we specialize in troublesome and painful customers. These 'strategic' customers call a lot and are too stupid to figure things out – actually the latter applies to a lot of callers.*

*We feel special, as we aren't part of the main computers bay. The main bay has over a thousand agents and handles the huge Western Computers account. While the calls are less weird there, they miss the privacy we enjoy in the WASG.*

Bhagat, Chetan (2005, 47) One Night at the Call Centre

This passage paints a picture of a fictional call centre which is in many ways similar to the call centres described in earlier research. What strikes me most here is the number of the agents in the offices. Over a thousand agents working in one call centre is a number that is difficult to imagine in Finland. Furthermore, the call centre in the passage is an in-house call centre offshored to India. Thus, when the results of this study are considered in relation to existing call centre literature, it should be kept in mind that the call centres in the literature are usually large in-house call centres or offshored call centres. In these call centres, the calls are typically initiated by customers. Because this study concentrated only on relatively small independent call centres where phone calls are mostly initiated by workers, the results should be looked at with caution when juxtaposed with the earlier findings.

It could be argued that all the three case study organizations in this study do not fully represent call centres since at least one of them is more like a telemarketing company. I have deliberately understood the concept of call centre in a broad sense, considering any communication platform from which firms deliver or market services and products to customers via telephone, combined with computer or not. This has allowed me to study very different firms with varying work assignments, instead of concentrating solely on homogeneous call centres. As a consequence, the results of this study are manifold and multifaceted, and the study presents a wider picture of customer service work via telephone than it would have offered had I left the telemarketing company out. Moreover, magazine subscription is one of the oldest products sold to customers by telephone, and therefore it is very familiar to customers. From the customers' point of view, it makes no difference whether the received phone call comes from a call centre with advanced telephone technology or from a telemarketing company which operates without the integrated computer and telephone technology. However, from the employees' point of view, the tools they use have significance for their work.

Another difference between call centre literature and findings presented in this study is the national labour markets in which the call centres operate. The labour markets form a specific setting for the call centre business: for example, the UK, where a large number of the call centre studies are carried out, differs from India, to where the call centres are largely offshored. The Finnish labour market has several

special characteristics which, for their part, have an effect on the operations of the call centres. These characteristics include high female labour market participation and women's full-time work, strong occupational gender segregation, great proportion of educated women in comparison to men, and a large number of retiring employees. Consequently, in Finland call centres can employ skilled labour force with full-time and permanent job contacts, in contrast to many call centres in the UK which hire mainly part-time employees. In relation to gender, this may mean that the ways in which the gender-related practices at workplaces are organized are not changing rapidly.

As mentioned above, the national labour market forms the setting in which the call centres operate. This study offers new knowledge of Finnish workplaces, more specifically, of call centres that have so far been under-researched. The ways in which gender organized the practices of the workers and the managers in the call centres can be viewed from the larger perspective of the Finnish labour market. The cultural understandings of gender presented in this study probably have points of resemblance to some other workplaces, besides call centres, especially in the service sector. In this respect, the study contributes to a better understanding of gender-related practices in Finnish work life in general.

### ***Reflections on the Research Results***

The following aspects which permeate the whole book are drawn from the findings of this study and they summate the answers to the research questions. In other words, the ways in which gender organizes the practices of the workers and the managers in the call centres are here summed up and elaborated on further. Moreover, the following aspects are not strictly embedded in the conceptual and theoretical frame of this study but aim to engage in a wider discussion in more general terms. On the basis of this study, then, it can be said that the following aspects exist in Finnish workplaces: gender segregation, gendered interaction patterns, commodification of gender, male managers' homosociality, and, lastly, emotional labour, aesthetic labour and heterosexualized labour. However, it can also be said that these aspects are not unambiguous but internally contradictory.

First of all, the study illustrates the relations between gender segregation, hierarchy and power and argues that the flat organizational hierarchy did not



indicate small power differences or better opportunities for women to enter managerial positions in the work organizations. On the contrary, it appeared that the fewer managerial opportunities there were in the work organization, the fewer of them were occupied by women. In other words, women had access to managerial positions among other managers, but if there were only a few managerial positions in the work organizations, they were not open for women. This does not mean that in work organizations with steep hierarchical relations, the managerial positions were open for women without a struggle. On the basis of my analysis, I suggest that some of the female managers in the call centres had succeeded in breaking the glass ceiling and entered the manly area of top management. Yet, in the work organizations where women were in the top management, the horizontal gender segregation was still steep. Consequently, the decrease in the hierarchical gender segregation did not indicate a decrease in the horizontal gender segregation in any way. Horizontal segregation is said to be more unchanging than hierarchical segregation throughout the occupational structure (Charles 2003, 270), which seemed to be the case also in the call centre where women had entered top managerial positions. This is understandable when taking into account the pervasiveness of the horizontal segregation from individuals' educational decisions to the cultural understanding of the gender division of jobs and occupations. Gender segregation, that is, the distribution of work and positions, is based on cultural understandings of what are suitable places and tasks for women and men in work organizations. Therefore gender segregation could be considered as a form of gender practices.

Furthermore, it is significant that in these call centres men in general were highly valued, appreciated and welcomed as employees. Similar findings have also been noted elsewhere (Bruni, Gherardi & Poggio 2005, 117–118; Korvajärvi 2009). The appreciation of male employees indicates that hierarchization, one of the two main mechanisms of the gender system (Hirdman 1990), was clearly emerging in practice in the call centres. The principle of hierarchization in the gender system is that in every instance men and masculine are rated higher than women and feminine, which was precisely the case in regard to the call centre employees and customers.

Secondly, the gendered patterns of interaction framed the ways in which gender was practised between the call centre workers and their customers. For one thing, some of the employees found that gender made no difference in customer service

work, which I would call denial of gender. Whether this was caused by active and purposeful denial or was just a consequence of not paying attention to gender is definitely an interesting question but the kind that goes beyond the scope of this study. Furthermore, this study illustrates the numerous ways in which gender was used to explain various, even contradictory, ways of thinking. In many cases, but not always, these contradictory explanations were related to women's and men's characteristics in interaction. The explanations could be considered to reflect gender practices as well as to include notable inconsistencies, particularly in regard to women's alleged characteristics. Therefore, I would argue that gender, or more to the point, the characteristics of women and men that are found following directly from their gender, are widely used as an explanation for the ways in which particularly women but also men interact. At the same time, gender is accepted as explaining various kinds of human behaviour. Consequently, it is difficult, if not impossible, for anyone to step outside the binary gender system, and it seems that almost any interactional behaviour is explained with one's gender.

In addition, I have identified two contradictory patterns of interaction according to which gender was practised in interaction between the workers and the customers. On the one hand, the pattern of homosocial interaction indicates how the workers described the same-gender interaction as more effective and easier for both female and male workers than cross-gender interaction. On the other hand, the pattern of cross-gender interaction between women and men was also described as most efficient in interaction with the customers. Thus, both of these patterns occurred simultaneously in the same work organizations and were stated as being useful in making rapport and profit. Yet, the contradiction between the stated effectiveness of the two patterns was not paid attention to. Within the framework of specific research on call centres, the most striking results here are the gender-based practices in interaction that I have named the pattern of homosocial interaction and the pattern of heterosexualized interaction. These patterns enlarge and open up research on call centre work and the ways in which gender is practised in service work.

Thirdly, the services and products in question are part of gendered interaction, not just interplay between the workers and the customers. This study indicates, in line with earlier findings (Bruni, Gherardi & Poggio 2005, 136; Korvajärvi 2009), that gender had become commodifiable and profitable to sell, and in call centre work it was also embedded in the products and services. This is a process in which

gender becomes part of the commodity that is marketed, sold and purchased. In other words, then, gender becomes an increasingly abstract feature that organizes business activities. However, while commodification of gender enhanced selling products, it also directed the ways in which the workers practised gender – that is, towards ways that sell well. It could be said, then, that the gendered interaction between customers and workers is not only social, but it combines both social aspects and material aspects in the form of products in question. The understanding of services and products as part of the gendered interaction opens up new possibilities in call centre research to discuss the ways in which gender takes part in organizing gender in everyday operations of work organizations.

What is more, the study points out that heterosexuality, broadly understood, is also present in such a commodity process of gender. The display of heterosexuality is then used in shaping the style and tone of interaction. In other words, the symbolic space of heterosexuality is utilized in modifying the relationship between a customer and an employee. Interaction based on displaying heterosexuality has been described as one form of heterosexualized labour (Spiess & Waring 2005; Warhurst & Nickson 2009).

Fourthly, the study brings into discussion the homosociality of male managers. The mutual relationships of the all-male management formed a site for practising masculinity and homosocial bonding. Moreover, homosociality was constructed on the similar social backgrounds and related work histories of the male managers. The homosociality of the male managers differentiated them from female employees and left only a limited space for women to act. However, it needs to be emphasized that homosociality could and should be analysed among women as well. The research material I analysed offers only vague hints about female homosociality, which were not enough, in my opinion, to make an argument about the issue.

Finally, contrary to my expectations derived from some earlier findings (e.g. Buchanan & Koch-Schulte 2000; Warhurst & Nickson 2009), emotional labour, aesthetic labour and heterosexualized labour did not play a central role in the work of the call centre employees but stayed more in the background. More to the point, the employees were expected to display emotional labour and, at least occasionally, also aesthetic labour with customers. However, these expectations were somewhat rarely expressed. In addition, the employees, to a certain degree, had emotional autonomy. There were also some instances in which the employees displayed

heterosexualized labour with customers. However, this appeared as more employee-driven than organizationally driven behaviour. Similar to emotional, aesthetic and heterosexualized labour, the research results indicate that the Finnish call centres did not use other forms of employee control very extensively either, when compared to the results of some earlier studies (e.g. Fernie & Metcalf 1998; Kinnie, Hutchinson & Purcell 2000; Taylor & Bain 2001). This is not to say that the control in the case study organizations is non-existent or irrelevant, quite the contrary. My suggestion is that the possibilities and the facilities for control do exist, and the employees are quite well aware of that. However, it is rather the possibility of surveillance than the actual monitoring that is used as a means of control.

### *Theoretical Reflections*

The most important theoretical framework of this study consists of gender-related conceptualizations. In the following, I discuss the five permeating aspects of this study in relation to the theorizations of gender, namely the gender system, sets of gender processes in work organizations, practising of gender and gender practices, and, finally, emotional labour, aesthetic labour and heterosexualized labour. In doing so, I reflect the feasibility of the gender-related theoretical framework.

First, Hirdman's (1990) conceptualization of gender system, that is, difference and hierarchy between the genders, can be found looming behind every gender-related finding of this study. It has been suggested that customary heterosexuality is, in addition to the mechanisms of difference and hierarchization of gender, a distinctive mechanism of its own (Rantalaiho et al. 1997, 8). I would argue, however, that customary heterosexuality that the employees and customers displayed is a consequence of the mechanism of gender difference in the same way as the mechanism of gender hierarchization is. In other words, neither gender hierarchization nor customary heterosexuality can exist within this framework without the main mechanism of gender differences.

The often unquestioned binary of women and men, that is, two and only two genders, derives from the basic idea of difference in gender system. Yet, the word 'gender' is quite often also in work life associated with women but not with men. Nevertheless, there are some studies of men from the gender perspective: men as gendered subjects and male-majority workplaces (e.g. Collinson 1992), token males

in almost all-female workplaces (Floge & Merrill 1986; Lupton 2006; Simpson 2004) and male managers (Collinson & Hearn 1996; Collinson & Hearn 2005). However, what seems to be rare is research on male workers in general and in co-operation with female co-workers and in relation to customers in service jobs. Although the gender system is an adequate conceptualization applicable also to work organizations, even if it is not elaborated for that, it is too general to offer tools for neither detailed nor situational analysis of gender.

To direct the production of the research material in the field and its analysis from the gender perspective, I used the sets of gender processes presented by Joan Acker (1992) and Raewyn Connell (2005, 7; 2006, 839). Taking into account the subtle, disappearing and reappearing nature of gender in work organizations, these sets of processes helped me to concentrate on the substantial.

A gender process that came up clearly in this study was gender divisions in all three work organizations. This is not a surprising finding in Finland, where gender segregation of work is steep (Julkunen 2009, 70). Gender segregation is a process identifiable with both Acker's (1992) and Connell's (2005, 7; 2006, 839) sets of processes concentrating on the divisions along gender lines. These sets of processes allow tackling the issue of division of labour in formal organization, such as horizontal and hierarchical gender segregation. It also refers to informal organization, such as the division of the organizational housekeeping. However, focusing solely or mainly on the process of divisions along gender lines may lead to the body counting of women and men, which tells very little or nothing about the processes and practices behind these gender divisions.

This study showed several contradictory views on women and men. For example, women were either considered to be jealous and cruel creatures or social employees. At the same time, men were found to be one-dimensionally good and favoured co-workers. In Acker's and Connell's analysis, the processes of gender culture, images and symbolism guide the analysis of gender in this direction, since their sets of processes refer to the ways in which gender appears in language, symbols, culture, dress, ideology, and the prevailing beliefs about and attitudes towards gender. Notably, my example of the understandings according to which female co-workers are cruel and male co-workers are welcomed is only one instance in which these sets of processes can be found. These are large sets of processes which may refer to

cultural and ideological understandings of individuals, groups of people, as well as work organizations.

The call centre employees' gendered management of emotions (Hochschild 1983/2003) was one task that they performed along with interaction with customers. Another gender-related practice was the male managers' practising of homosociality, which excluded some men and all the women. The sets of processes in Acker's and Connell's work concentrating on interaction between individuals point towards such findings and, moreover, they include emotions and human relations in general. Furthermore, the gendered patterns of interaction I identified and named as the homosocial pattern of interaction and the heterosexual pattern of interaction add nuances to these sets of processes. It appears that in this study the interaction between the workers and customers was the sphere of organizational action in which gender was most clearly traceable, placing emphasis on these sets of processes.

Besides the similarities between Acker's (1992) and Connell's sets of processes (2005, 7; 2006, 839), there is also one clearly dissimilar set of processes in each analysis. In Acker's analysis it is the process of internal mental work that helps to produce gendered components of individual identity. An example of this could be the male team leader who rationalized his work in the call centre with his supervisory position as team leader of female workers, although at the same time he considered his telephone work with customers to be women's work. In her analysis, Connell has distinguished a set of processes that she calls gender relations of power. In this study it can include the power of the employer, the customers and the corporate clients to have an influence over the workers' gendered appearance. I find this to be an important point and appreciate Connell's direct emphasis on power relations. Yet, I am not saying that the analysis of power relations is not possible with the set of processes Acker has presented, on the contrary. In Acker's analysis, however, attention is not directed as straightforwardly to power relations as in Connell's analysis.

By choosing to use both Acker's and Connell's sets of processes, it was possible to concentrate on a wider range of gender processes than by using only one of them. In the workplaces, these gender processes are parallel and simultaneous rather than completely separate from one another (Kivimäki 2009), and, therefore, the more pieces we find to fill the gaps, the more complete the jigsaw puzzle of gender-

related practices will be. Had I not chosen to use both of these sets of processes, my analysis would probably have been different. It is possible and perhaps even probable that I would have not analysed with such subtlety as I did the gender-related occurrences that can be described as internal mental work and power relations between the call centre employees. Therefore I consider my choice worthwhile.

Based on this study, it is possible to identify some aspects of gender which Acker's (1992) and Connell's (2005, 7; 2006, 839) sets of processes do not reach or catch only poorly. These aspects offer new openings for future feminist research on gender in work organizations. One such aspect is a process in which gender is left aside, denied, ignored, or undone either for or without a purpose. In the Finnish work life, such denial of gender is not rare (e.g. Korvajärvi 2002a; 2002b; 2011) and yet this process needs further theorization. However, it is appropriate to consider the denial of gender as a means to practise gender (Kelan 2010, 189; Korvajärvi 2002a, 136; 2002b, 112–113), and, in this respect, this elaboration is relevant to Yancey Martin's (2006) argument that gender is mostly practised unintentionally and therefore unreflexively, especially at work.

Second, the gendered body work which in this study refers mainly to the workers' appearance and aesthetic labour in the form of voice is a gendered process that goes beyond Acker's and Connell's sets of processes. The study of emotions in general and of emotional labour in workplaces in particular is a vibrant area of research that has grown considerably for more than 25 years (Meanwell, Wolfe & Hallett 2008, 1). In contrast, heterosexualized labour and aesthetic labour including embodiment have gained much less attention. I find it fruitful to emphasize the interactive service work in call centre as embodied work because then the central resource of the employees, that is, their voice, catches attention. The call centre agents' voice expresses their embodied appearance, including gendered attributes, and willingness to be of service. Moreover, it helps to create and maintain the images of products (Koivunen 2006; Korvajärvi 2009). In call centre work, then, various kinds of female and male voices are basically permitted but only within certain limits that are set and controlled by the employer, the corporate client and the consumer customers.

Consequently, I am curious to see new openings and innovative research designs and findings about the gendered and embodied appearance of the work of service

sector employees. From the employers' point of view, the main question is what kinds of bodies are preferred in recruitment and why. Customers could complement this view by telling whether their preferences are congruent with those of the employer. Moreover, the employees' point of view may or may not focus on meeting the expectations of employers and customers. In any case, the approach of the employees to their gendered and embodied appearance is more experience-based than that of the other parties. To put this differently, the employees' gendered embodiment is an under-theorized field of research which offers a large variety of opportunities for further study.

Third, a process in which gender is involved but challenging to reach with Acker's and Connell's sets of processes is heterosexuality. This is although Acker (1992, 252) has pointed out that sexuality in its diverse forms and meanings is implicated in all four processes of her analysis. In her set of processes Connell explicates only sexual attraction as an example of emotions, which is inadequate since heterosexuality is one of the fundamental patterns based on gender in people's understanding. The heterosexual pattern formed interaction between the workers and the customers. In this respect, it was evident in my analysis.

Despite Acker's lack of sensitiveness to heterosexuality in her work, the framework I have adopted from her indicates that sexuality is part of the ongoing production of gender (Acker 1992, 250–251). Following Diane Richardson's (2007) careful analysis on different conceptualizations of the relationships between gender and heterosexuality, it is obvious that gender was this study's starting point and therefore prioritized over heterosexuality. In fact, within the framework of the study, the prioritization of gender over heterosexuality was a reasonable choice. However, it would be intriguing to contemplate whether other kinds of relationships between gender and heterosexuality would be possible to combine with the conceptualization of practising gender.

The analytical power of Acker's (1992) and Connell's (2005, 7; 2006, 839) sets of gender processes in work organizations would not be adequate without complementing the theoretical frame with Yancey Martin's dual concepts as an additional conceptualization. Therefore, also Yancey Martin's (2003; 2006) elaboration of the two-sided dynamics of practising gender and gendering practices has been used. This conceptualization of practising gender offers an analytical tool to scrutinize interaction between individuals. The conceptualization has, for



example, offered access to various inconsistencies between what the employees say and what they do, and the discrepancy between these two. Moreover, the conceptualization of gender practices is also very important to this study because it clearly focuses the analysis on the cultural understandings or resources of gender appearing in the employees' attitudes and beliefs. Without it, the location of gender-related practices would probably not have been in such a central position in this study. Furthermore, gender practices and practising gender are empirically partly overlapping because practising of gender is based on relatively general cultural understandings of what gender is and how it is presented.

If gender is seen as socially constructed – talked about, acted on, used, denied, and ignored by women and men at work, as Yancey Martin (2003, 343), for example, has seen, it is insufficient to concentrate only on some of the subjects of this process. Thus, feminist research on men as workers, colleagues, subordinates, supervisors and managers that captures the fluid and dynamic processes of gender-related practices should be produced and welcomed. In addition, this is crucial in order to avoid relating gender only to women, instead of also seeing men as practisers of gender. By saying this, my intention is not to trivialize the role of women in feminist research. Yet, if men are ignored in feminist research, many opportunities for developing more nuanced understandings of the construction of gender are wasted.

My results show that in the analysis it is easier to identify gender-consistent than inconsistent practising of gender. Therefore, the very same deed practised by a woman is easily interpreted as feminine but when practised by a man, it is seen as masculine, which has also been noted elsewhere (Yancey Martin 2003, 358). Thus, it seems that femininity and masculinity are concepts which do not adequately reach empirical occurrences. According to Fenstermaker, West and Zimmerman (2002, 29–30; also West & Zimmerman 1987, 136–137), people are already categorized by their alleged (biological) sex when they do gender. This stresses the invariance of the belief in essential differences between women and men, that is, women practising only different forms of femininity and men practising nothing but a range of masculinities. The question that follows from this is, with what means it could be possible to recognize and interpret women and men practising sex-inconsistent gender. If we are bound to recognize only women practising femininity and men

practising masculinity but not vice versa, then the whole explanatory power of the concept of practising gender proves to be disappointingly narrow.

Having said that, I still agree with the researchers (Deutsch 2007, 116; Yancey Martin 2003, 344) who argue that under some conditions gender may be so irrelevant that it is not even accessed. That is to say, that not everything that women and men do at work or elsewhere signifies gender. This leads to another conceptual challenge which is to theorize undoing gender. Francine Deutsch (2007, 122) has suggested that doing gender should refer to social interactions that reproduce gender difference between women and men. She uses the phrase undoing gender to refer to social interactions that reduce gender difference between women and men. This proposition pursues what Elisabeth Kelan (2010) criticizes. That is, most of the doing gender approaches operate on a binary basis, in which the gender binary is mapped or mapped differently but the binary as such is not questioned.

From my perspective, Deutsch's suggestion is too simplistic in the way that it reduces the complex phenomena of doing gender and undoing gender only to reproduce and reduce the difference between women and men. For instance, women practising masculinity (Halberstam 1998) cannot be scrutinized as either doing or undoing gender. Similarly, it is difficult to argue whether the female telemarketer of magazine subscriptions who both read and marketed men's hobby magazines to male customers and the male telemarketer who had been marketing children's magazines to their mothers were reproducing or reducing gender difference. However, from the gender perspective, these are important examples of individual employees who undermine the customary organization of gender with the choices they make – and are allowed to make – regarding their work.

For her part, Elisabeth Kelan (2010) has presented two approaches to undoing gender. The first one is ethnomethodological and based on Hirschauer's (1994, 2001) work and the second one is poststructural and discursive and based on Butler's (1990, 2004) work. According to the first approach, gender is undone when it is not done in accordance with one's alleged biological sex, that is, sex category. Then the mismatch between sex category and gender unsettles the association between either belonging to the female sex category and enacting masculinity, or belonging to the male sex category and enacting femininity. An example of this could be the female telemarketer who talked with her soft and feminine voice about the winter tire test in a men's hobby magazine with the male customers. From the

second, Butlerian, perspective, gender is undone through positions which question the naturalness of the gender binary, for example, through enacting multiple forms of masculinities and femininities. Instead of just not referring to or ignoring the gender binary what the ethnomethodological approach allows, this Butlerian approach destabilizes the whole gender binary. There is hardly any reference to such undoing of gender in this study, but the female CEO in one of the call centres could be interpreted to be an example of this. She was a person who carried out different kinds of masculine and feminine practices in turns. She, for example, had her background in fields of education and work considered masculine, which she herself emphasized. In several respects she acted like any masculine manager, and yet she had accepted the CEO's post because of family reasons and launched many social, employee-friendly practices. In doing so, she combined her positions as mother of a toddler, CEO, boss and work colleague.

Another example that can be interpreted as undoing gender is offered by West and Zimmerman (1987, 133–134). They have described a salesperson whose gender display was too ambiguous to identify and the customer's confusion when she could not tell whether the salesperson was a woman or a man. This confusion of the customer affects the whole interactional situation. Quite similarly, it has been noted that also in call centres the agents' display of gender needs to be recognizable as one of two and only two genders (Koivunen 2006, 6). These examples emphasize the importance of salespersons' recognizable gender in interaction with customers and the difficulty of stepping outside the binary gender system.

Regarding the conceptualizations of emotional labour, aesthetic labour and heterosexualized labour, the findings indicate that they are also relevant in this study although the findings in relation to these concepts were not as clear as expected. More to the point, it is important to separate these concepts from one another, instead of including all the aspects into the concept of emotional labour. For example, the concept of aesthetic labour applies accurately to different aspects of the employees' voice, which is the most important hint of their aesthetic, bodily appearance in call centre work. Furthermore, the study also suggests that with the concept of heterosexualized labour it is possible to find certain kind of sexualized processes which are otherwise easy to bypass. Such processes include, for example, the instances in which heterosexualization operates as social guidelines that direct the manners of communication and interaction between workers and customers.

Based on these findings, I suggest that it is fruitful to apply the concepts of emotional, aesthetic and heterosexualized labour to studying gender in call centres. However, I find it important to produce more nuanced knowledge in future about the ways in which gender is related to the practices of emotional, aesthetic and heterosexualized labour in different types of jobs and occupations.

Men's emotionality and emotional labour have not gained as much attention in research as they perhaps should have gained. Instead, the lack of vivid descriptions of male employees' emotions reiterates the picture of men as non-emotional doers. In a similar vein, Michael Roper (1996, 211) has suggested that Hochschild's (1983/2003) argument according to which gender and emotional divisions of labour uphold each other leaves many unanswered questions in relation to men and emotions, especially the ones termed positive, service-oriented emotions. Surely, the emotional labour of, for example, US male police officers (Martin 1999) and male litigators (Pierce 1995) has been scrutinized, but I call for examinations of male employees' emotional labour in jobs where customer service is the core content of the work. Thus, more knowledge is needed of the effect that gender difference has on the requirements of doing emotional labour between women and men, and of the ways in which male employees experience such requirements, and with what consequences.

Finally, the findings of this study can be placed within the formal organization of the workplaces, that is, activities and practices which are inevitable in work. However, all of the findings cannot be directly and solely linked to work but are rather wider, cultural occurrences. Moreover, the analysis also covers the informal organization with which I refer to activities and practices not inevitable in work but still possible to carry out during working hours at the workplace. These are not required by management but employees still bring them about at work. Attention has also been paid to the physical organization in the forms of office buildings, spaces and tools, and employees' possibilities to embody these spaces. These levels of work organization obviously overlap to some extent and are not clearly separable in every instance (also Korvajärvi 2002b, 113). An example of this is an informal gathering during which the subject of work surfaces as a topic of discussion every once in a while, but then at times is not referred to at all. Lastly, the study increases knowledge of the ways in which gender organizes work practices and work at large.

This knowledge is of general interest, but it can also be capitalized in future research and interventions.

### *Methodological Reflections*

The methodological starting points of this study lie in feminist methodology, in ethnography in general and in feminist ethnography in particular. These are combined in order to create an adequate approach to gender-related practices. It has been said that feminism and ethnography suit each other (Skeggs 2001, 426) and therefore my premises in these two are intertwined and in places impossible to tell apart. Having said that, I have to admit that I consider doing feminist research in general, including feminist ethnography, to be something very specific and, at the same time, something more ambitious and advanced which makes it more demanding than doing 'mere' ethnography. Accordingly, I understand feminist ethnography as a target that I have pursued and mainly succeeded in doing. I am not trying to be modest by saying that my success in this has been only partial, but I feel that feminist ethnography is such a high-value target in the ethical sense that it is almost unattainable (also Stacey 1988, 26).

In order to study gender-related practices in their everyday settings, it is essential that the researcher goes near the people in the field. More specifically, the researcher has to have a sense of togetherness with the participants in order to create a trustful relationship (Ikonen & Ojala 2007, 93–95), although this togetherness is not coherent but rather ambivalent and occasional. Togetherness is needed in producing research material concerning gender-related practices. There are numerous possibilities for how the creation of togetherness may go wrong. During my ethnographic research process, I was not able to avoid a lack of unity with two telemarketers, which eventually led them to turn down my request to interview them. I have analysed the chain of events related to these refusals elsewhere (Koivunen 2010a). In general, however, I would say that I was able to carry out the fieldwork and the production of research material, as well as its analysis, in an ethically sustainable way.

During the years I have done feminist research and talked about it, I have noticed that gender is easily found to be a provocative issue that can arouse turmoil. This was what I tried to avoid in the interviews and consequently adopted a peaceable

way of interviewing. Elina Oinas (2004, 226–227) has differentiated three styles of interviewing which she calls listening, discussing, and impugning. Obviously, my interviewing style was mostly listening, which, according to Oinas, leaves the interviewees with a large space to guess what the interviewer is after. Had I used a more discussing style, the dynamics of picking the topics would have become more obvious. Further, had I adopted a more impugning interviewing style, the interviewees would have had the possibility to form their views more thoroughly and to take a stand against my interpretations of their views.

There are bits and pieces in the research process in which I did not strictly follow the ethical guidelines mentioned as feminist. One of them is the reciprocity and equality of the researcher and the participants (Ramazanoğlu & Holland 2002, 156–159; Skeggs 2001, 433). However, it has been argued that full equality and reciprocity between the researcher and the participants is impossible to attain, and therefore it is more reasonable to pay attention to power relations in research (Ikonen & Ojala 2007; Oinas 2004, 221–222; Reinharz & Chase 2002, 228–229). I acknowledge that as author and researcher I have more power in relation to this study than the participants, and I have tried and still try to be worth the responsibility this position requires. Hence, I would argue that I followed the ethical guidelines well enough and, moreover, they have directed my decision-making. This is so even though I did not face any major ethical concerns during the research process. Yet I understand ethical reflexivity as one important aspect of justifying doing feminist research. While feminist ethical guidelines were too rigid and ambitious to be attained, they worked as a guiding target beyond my reach. Further, it could be said that among the contributions of this study to research is that it also produced knowledge of the complexity of the ethical questions during the research process.

Thus, although I am an advocate of feminist ethnography, I would not go as far as to state that there is only one perfect methodological approach or method for the production of research material on practising gender or gender-related practices. It has been stated that if one wants to inquire into work practices, ethnography is the strategy to choose (Henttonen 2010, 16). This may be true but at the same time ethnography has its shortcomings, too. One of them is that with ethnography it is only very limitedly possible to accomplish the making of change. By saying this, I particularly have in mind a change in the ways in which gender is practised and a change in gender practices in workplaces. Ethnographic fieldwork may operate as a

minor intervention in relation to participants' deeds and understandings, but I am sceptical about the continuity of this potential change after fieldwork has been completed.

The implementation of the ethnographic principles in practice may be dictated by the practicalities and resources available and therefore be adjusted during the process. Therefore one of ethnography's best features is its responsiveness to changing doers, resources and surroundings. A case in point is the length of fieldwork, which is a result of many different negotiations and research resources. In this study, the periods of fieldwork were relatively short, and the emphasis was more on interviewing than observing. Longer periods of observation would have been appropriate only in the two case study organizations to which I had full access. However, I am convinced that, for an unpractised fieldworker as I was, it was easier to concentrate on conducting separate and limited observation periods. Moreover, I believe that observation is the means to unearth exciting aspects of practising gender which do not surface in interviews.

The way of analysing the research material in this study was informed by methodological literature but it was still to a great extent created in action. As a generalization I would say that every ethnographer creates her or his own method of analysis although it needs to be guided by some general rules common to scientific research. As a consequence of the research design, the analysis of gender is here more wide-ranging than detailed. Had I chosen to take a look at gender in a more limited and narrow context than the work organizations as a whole, I would have been able to catch more nuanced knowledge of gender. For example, focusing only on the informal side of the work organizations would probably have produced knowledge of practising gender in unofficial and unstructured surroundings, while now the gender practices are mainly contextualized in formal work.

As a consequence, I greatly support the alternative and innovative ways of conducting feminist ethnography. Of course, ethnography with its long and intensive fieldwork, thick description and substantial amount of research material rich in nuances, and the comprehensive description of the cultural system is obviously very enjoyable to read and it has plenty to give to both the reader and the ethnographer. However, there are not that many opportunities to conduct wide-ranging ethnography in terms of the resources needed and obligations required of the researcher and her or his willingness and commitment. A feminist alternative

could be, for example, a microethnography of a particular setting (Wolcott 1995, 102) or feminist auto-ethnography in which one's research subject is oneself and which presents the actions and interaction with others from the author's perspective (Skeggs 2001, 345). Moreover, collective ethnography, that is, a collaborative effort of several researchers (e.g. Henttonen 2010, 37; Korvajärvi 1998, 49), which is also done in this study, could be a convenient means to emphasize the collective nature of feminist knowledge production.

Conducting feminist auto-ethnography, microethnography or collective ethnography, for example, with adequate research design could produce additional valuable knowledge about gender-related practices. On the basis of my study, I suggest that focusing on practices such as displaying emotion management, aesthetic bodily appearance and heterosexualizing interaction would bring new insights into the gendered landscape of service sector work.



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# Appendix

## Doing Ethnography in the Case Study Organizations

This section provides information about the research material and the ethnographic fieldwork carried out in the work organizations named as Purple, Green and Blue. The companies and their workforces are also briefly described here. Further, the final section explicates the division of labour in fieldwork.

The empirical basis of this study lies in four types of research material: interviews, fieldwork notes, digital photos and various other documents. The interview material includes, on the one hand, interviews with the experts dealing with the call centre business. On the other hand, it contains semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions produced in the three work organizations. The majority of the research material was produced at three points in time in the course of ten months. Moreover, in one of the organizations, interviews had also been conducted earlier, and this recurrence of fieldwork is fully presented under the headline, ‘Description of the Fieldwork in the Case Study Organizations.’ In the following, I give details of the research material produced especially for this study.

### The Research Material

The empirical research material consists of:

- 8 expert interviews
- 54 interviews with call centre workers and managers
- approximately 75 pages of transcribed field notes
- 82 digital photos
- approximately 20 pages of documents

## *Interviewing the Experts*

I interviewed eight experts in order to map the development, change and future of the call centre business in Finland. The experts represented, first of all, The Service Union United (Palvelualojen ammattiliitto PAM), which is a trade union that negotiates the collective agreements with the employers' federation for the call centre business. Second, I interviewed one expert from The Finnish Direct Marketing Association (Suomen Suoramarkkinointiliitto, later renamed as Asiakkuusmarkkinointiliitto), which is the interest group of direct marketing companies from different sectors. The third expert represented The Finnish Business College (Suomen Liikemiesten Kauppaopisto), which coordinated the vocational qualification exams in telemarketing. Fourth, I interviewed two pioneers of the call centre business who have been in the front lines of the sector from its early years in Finland. Finally, I conducted three expert interviews in the northern part of Finland. These experts include the manager of an employment office, the manager of developmental affairs<sup>20</sup> and the former manager of a rural regional development programme. All three experts informed me about the local unemployment and employment situation, in addition to a range of municipal policy and means to boost business and, consequently, employment in the region.

In order to recruit the experts for the interviews, I sent e-mail messages to persons that I was interested in talking to. All of them either agreed to my request or forwarded my e-mail message to another person they found would be more appropriate for discussing the topic with me.

The expert interviews were conducted in 2004 (one in April, one in May and two in September) and in 2005 (four in May). The interview questions and themes varied according the expertise of the interviewees but the key themes common to all were:

- the expert's background especially in relation to the call centre business;
- the characteristics of the call centres in general, the personnel policy and personnel strategies carried out in the business;

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<sup>20</sup> I arranged the interview meetings in advance. Unfortunately, one expert had to cancel our meeting at a very short notice but I was recommended to have an interview with the manager of developmental affairs who agreed to meet me.

- the characteristics of the existing and preferred labour force of the call centres;
- the turnover and ways to strengthen personnel's work commitment;
- the significance of gender in the call centre business;
- the organization of vocational education and the need for education in general;
- the significance of locality within the business;
- the future development of telephone technology and the whole business; upcoming problems, chances and prospects; and
- suggestions for work organizations to be studied and experts to be interviewed.

All the expert interviews except one were audio recorded. The non-recorded one was set up, at the interviewee's request, in a restaurant which turned out to have a rather noisy interior. Moreover, the restaurant table was fairly small and placing the recorder on it would have been difficult. Thus, I made a quick decision not to record the interview but just to take notes instead. All the other expert interviews were carried out in more peaceful places, such as offices, meeting rooms and coffee rooms. Some of the recorded interviews are verbatim transcripts, while others have been listened to several times and notes have been made of their contents.

### *Interviews in the Call Centres*

The orientation and preparations for fieldwork and the outlining of the question guide in particular were developed collectively in the meetings of the project group<sup>21</sup>. However, I reformulated the question guide after testing it in two pre-interviews<sup>22</sup>. I also revised the question guide to fit the characteristics of each of the three work organizations.

All the themes I brought up during the interviews were intertwined with the questions of gender-related practices, interactional relations within and between the call centres, and, moreover, the importance of the location of the call centres.

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<sup>21</sup> The project group included Kirsi Hasanen, Päivi Korvajärvi, Antti Saloniemi and me.

<sup>22</sup> The pre-interviews are not included in the data.

However, the question guide for the interviews with the call centre agents and telemarketers had a different point of view than the question guide for the managers' interviews. The main themes of the interview questions for the agents and telemarketers were:

- the track to the firm and current assignments;
- the significance of gender in work and gender divisions at the workplace;
- social interaction and relations with customers, with co-workers and with managers;
- the requirements for and changes in work and a possibility to make errors at work;
- possibilities to balance work life and private life;
- commitment to the work and to the social community of work;
- the monitoring, controlling and supervision of work; and
- potential conflicts, disagreements and problematic situations and means to settle them.

The questions for managers were mostly about the following themes:

- the educational background, the track to the firm and inside the firm, and current assignments;
- the significance of gender in one's own work and the work organization in general;
- the characteristics of the work organization in general and especially its workforce, the personnel policy and the process of recruitment;
- the turnover rate and the means to strengthen the employees' commitment to work;
- the characteristics of managers' leadership;
- surveillance, employee performance appraisal systems and the monitoring of profitability in the work organization;
- the relations with the corporate clients and partners in co-operation, and the assignment process;
- the location of the call centre office and regionality; and
- the managers' own future and the future of the firm.

Generally the interviews lasted about 60 minutes. Yet there was variation in the length of the interviews in all three case study organizations, which is explained in more detail later. All interviews were carried out at the workplace: in the employees' own offices, in empty offices or in meeting rooms during the employees' working hours. Thus, the only financial benefit the call centres offered for the study was the employees' working hours and a place for the interviews. All the interviews were audio recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim. This was done mostly by professionals (at the company called Tutkimustie Oy) but also by me, my mother and a trainee working for the project group. Later on, I listened to the interviews while reading the transcripts made by the others in order to see if they were alike. In other words, I made revisions to the transcripts if needed before storing them into the qualitative data analysis software package, Atlas.ti, in order to do the analysis.

### *Field Notes*

The research material includes field notes which are based on observations during and in between the interviews in the case study organizations. The focus of the observations was mainly on practising gender at everyday work. In other words, gender was observed, when relevant, in relation to matters like office space, spatial arrangements of work and work assignments; the symbols of status and hierarchy; co-operation, social relations among employees and managers, interaction with customers, emotional labour and aesthetic labour; the employee's embodiment; hints and signs of private life such as home and family; silent topics which are not talked about; informal topics such as bantering, joking and gossiping; expressions of trust and mistrust; locality; and finally, conflicts, disagreements and cliques. However, because of the brevity of the fieldwork time, it was not possible to ensure extensive coverage of all these themes in the observations

The first phase of writing the field notes occurred when jotting down the key words and phrases during the days spent at the workplaces. In order to do this, we<sup>23</sup> carried booklets and pens with us and wrote down key words as they emerged. The

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<sup>23</sup> With the plural form 'we', I refer to the fact that I did the fieldwork occasionally alongside Päivi Korvajärvi. More details about this are presented in the section 'Division of Labour in Fieldwork'.

second phase was later on (at best) in the same day, when we wrote the full field notes. Due to practical reasons, the time slots for observations were brief because it was never possible to use a whole workday for observation. The time of observation was relatively short, and, therefore, it was quite easy to remember and write down the episodes, comments, conversations and impressions that emerged. However, I could not recall all the details at once, but would usually remember some more during the following days and then add them to the notes.

The observations we made cannot be completely separated from the interviews because they were frequently produced at the same time. For instance, when I was interviewing an employee in her or his office, I simultaneously carried on with the interview, looked around and made observations about the interviewee and the office space, including the workstation in general, the technological devices available, and the decoration. In such situations, interviewing and observing overlapped. In contrast, during the coffee breaks, meetings and other more collective instances, I did not have only one person under observation but also the group dynamics and mutual relations. Thus, the diversity of the observations is based on the situations under observation, as well as on the differences between the work organizations. These organizational differences are explained in more detail later under the headline, 'Descriptions of the Fieldwork in the Case Study Organizations'.

### ***Digital Photos***

The research material includes altogether 82 digital photos, which were taken in two of the three call centre offices. In Green, I did not have an opportunity to take photos because observation was restricted. In Purple and Blue, I photographed mainly the work premises, entrances, hallways, corridors, offices, furniture, and notice boards. However, I did not take any identifiable photos of people in order to maintain their anonymity.

### ***Documents***

The research material is complemented with about 20 pages of various documents. The documents consist of, for example, training material, written scripts



for the telemarketers, a list of the work organization's values and pay scale. Some of the documents, such as Purple's pay scale, I rewrote on the basis of the digital photos that I had taken of the documents pinned up in a visible place on a notice board. However, all the photos of notice boards were not rewritten into documents on paper.

All the documents, whether originally photos or sheets of paper, are from Purple and Blue but not from Green. In Green, I was permitted to read some documents meant for the company's internal use but only as background information for my analysis.

## Descriptions of the Fieldwork in the Case Study Organizations

This section provides an illustration of the fieldwork in three case study organizations on the basis of the following outline:

- access to the work organization
- access within the work organization
- the selection of the interviewees
- interviews, observations, photos and documents
- the quantity of the research material

### *Purple*

In order to access Purple, I wrote a letter to its managing director. The letter included information about me: who I was and what I was doing, as well as what I had planned to do and why I was interested in Purple. In addition, I told him that I had found Purple's contact information on the Internet. Further, I explained about the resources, such as the funding of the study and the place where it was carried out, as well as the practice of conducting the fieldwork, and how the firm might benefit from taking part in the study. Finally, I promised to contact the managing director by phone after a fortnight, as I did.

The first step in the actual fieldwork in Purple was to conduct an interview with the managing director. During the interview we agreed on the schedule and consent for producing research material in different situations. The managing director was very co-operative and did not object to any of my requests. For example, he implied that I might be able to listen to the telemarketers' phone calls with an extra headset, but later I was told that there was no extra unbroken pair available. However, I observed the telemarketers' work by sitting side-by-side with them as they worked. Moreover, the managing director permitted me open access in Purple, but asked me to enter the telemarketers' offices in their own terms. Further, the front door was locked, and every time I arrived, I preferred ringing the door bell and waiting for somebody to let me in, instead of using the code number written on the inside of the front door and sneaking into the office without anyone noticing. In this way, everybody knew that I was coming in.

The selection of the interviewees in Purple was not co-ordinated or mapped out in advance but varied situationally. I had made a request to conduct interviews with telemarketers and managers with different backgrounds in terms of their age, gender, work assignments, length of employment, and educational background. In practice, the selection of the interviewees depended on the employees' presence and willingness to be interviewed. The managing director or one of the two sales managers told me whom I could interview or observe at work. The managers had asked for the consent of the interviewees beforehand. In some cases, managers or I explained the state of affairs and asked the employee for consent in that particular situation. Later on, I proposed to conduct interviews with some employees or to observe them working. One self-employed telemarketer refused to have an interview with me and another telemarketer I interviewed found it uncomfortable to be observed while working and did not give me permission to observe. Further, I had to cut one session of observation short because, instead of calling to the customers, the telemarketer started to chit-chat with me, which was not the aim of observation.

The fieldwork in Purple lasted 7 days during November–December 2004 and one more day in March 2006. On the first day, I only interviewed the managing director and agreed about the practices of fieldwork. The other six days I spent at the workplace observing and interviewing the employees. During that time I made altogether 11 interviews including 7 telemarketers (4 women and 3 men), both women sales managers and the founder of the firm. Päivi Korvajärvi was also

present one day and she interviewed one female telemarketer and one male office worker. She also re-interviewed the managing director. I re-visited Purple in March 2006, when the office had been moved to another building. I then re-interviewed the managing director, as well as two women telemarketers.

In sum, the interviewees conducted in Purple included:

- 5 female telemarketers; two of them interviewed twice;
- 3 male telemarketers;
- 1 office worker, male;
- 2 female sales managers;
- the managing director, male, interviewed three times; and
- the founder of Purple, female.

Thus, the research material includes altogether 17 interviews with 13 interviewees (8 women and 5 men). The interviews generally lasted about 60 minutes, but ranged from a brief 15-minute chat with the founder of the firm to 90-minute interviews. The interviews and observations are interlocked and therefore it is not possible to fully tell them apart. For example, when I interviewed the managers, there were several interruptions which illustrated well their everyday work at Purple. Transcriptions of interviews include about 330 pages with 1.5 line spacing, which amounts to 681,421 characters.

The research material also includes about 35 pages of field notes, which consist of observations about the furniture, colours and decoration of the employees' office space and the common premises. Attention was paid to such details as curtains, rugs, potted plants, posters and paintings on the walls, bookshelves and employees' personal mascots, photos, as well as other signs of family. Further, the field notes include descriptions of the work processes, coffee breaks and other group situations in which different forms of informal interaction occurred. Moreover, field notes were also written about research practices, such as recruiting interviewees, refusals to interviews, and observations during the fieldwork. In addition, there are also 43 digital photos about the interiors and exteriors of the office included in the research material.

## *Green*

I started the fieldwork in Green in March 2005 by re-interviewing the contact person who had negotiated my access to the organization with the CEO. During the interview, we agreed on the procedure and schedule of the fieldwork. Later on, the contact person sent me an e-mail message confirming that the interviews had been arranged according to my schedule and wish to interview customer service agents and managers of different age, gender, assignments, length of employment, and education. Later, however, some of the pre-arranged interviewees had to be changed on a short notice because of the sudden sick leaves of the employees, and other reasons. Thus, all the interviewees were selected by the contact person who also asked for their consent in advance.

The fieldwork was carried out during 9 days in March 2005. I was not permitted to observe the work of employees or to have free access to the open-plan office where the agents worked. I only had access to the meeting rooms, the lobby and other 'public' spaces within the office. Thus, the brief observations that I made were conducted during and after the interviews in the meeting rooms and hallways. I always went to the reception desk to let the receptionist know that I was arriving at Green, and the receptionist directed me either directly to the meeting room or to the lobby where I waited for my interviewee to come to meet me. The meeting room and the lobby were situated so that a visitor did not have a view to the open-plan office. However, the lobby was quite a good spot to observe the employees coming in and going out and occasionally also the job applicants sitting there and waiting for their job interviews.

In sum, the 17 interviewees were:

- 9 customer service agents, 6 women and 3 men;
- 3 supervisors, a woman and two men;
- 3 managers from middle management, 1 woman and 2 men;
- the call centre manager, female; and
- the CEO, female.

I carried out one to three interviews per day. The majority of the interviews with the agents lasted exactly one hour, the maximum time agreed on with the contact

person. All the interviews took place in the meeting room, the managers' own offices or an empty office. The transcripts of the interviews include about 400 pages with 1.5 line spacing, which amount to 766,565 characters.

The research material also includes about 10 pages of field notes about practices related to the interviews and organizational spaces, but no digital photos.

### *Previous Fieldwork in Green*

Fieldwork was also done in Green earlier (2000–2001 and 2003). In the period of 2000–2001, all the interviews were conducted by Päivi Korvajärvi<sup>24</sup>. In 2003, Päivi Korvajärvi and I conducted one interview together, and I conducted the remaining five interviews myself<sup>25</sup>.

In the period of 2000–2001, the 24 interviewees included:

- 11 customer service agents, 7 women and 4 men;
- 5 supervisors, 4 women and one man; and
- 9 managers, 4 women and 5 men.

In 2001, two supervisors were interviewed together and, therefore, there are 25 interviewees but only 24 interviews. The transcripts of the interviews include about 455 pages with 1.5 line spacing. I have access only to printed transcripts and therefore can not specify the exact number of characters in them.

During the fieldwork in 2001, five pages of field notes were also produced, but no digital photos or any other documents.

In 2003, the six interviewees were:

- the call centre manager, female;
- 2 customer service agents, female; and
- 3 supervisors, 2 women and a man.

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<sup>24</sup> The interviews were conducted for the project of 'Gendering Practices and Transformations at Work' funded by the Academy of Finland (project number 49213).

<sup>25</sup> I produced the research material for my Master's thesis 'Work Commitment in a Call Centre' (in Finnish, Koivunen 2004).

Two of the persons interviewed had been interviewed already in 2001 and the call centre manager was interviewed again in 2005. The transcripts of the five interviews with agents and supervisors include about 75 pages with 1.5 spacing, which is 147 861 characters. I have access to the 30-page interview transcript of the call centre manager only in printed form and therefore can not specify the exact number of characters.

After conducting interviews in 2003, I also wrote five pages of field notes, although I was not allowed to observe the actual call centre work then either.

### *Blue*

Access to Blue was accomplished by writing an e-mail to its CEO and calling him after a few days. The content of the e-mail message was almost the same as in the letter I sent to Purple. Thus, it included information about who I am, what I was doing and what I had planned to do and why I was particularly interested in Blue. In addition, I told him that I had found Blue's contact information from the Internet. I also explained about the resources, such as the funding of the study and the place where it was carried out, as well as the practice of conducting fieldwork and how the company might benefit from taking part in the study. Finally, I told him that I would contact him later by phone, as I did.

The fieldwork in Blue was conducted in the course of five days in August 2005. Because of the location of Blue, fieldwork was not conducted in the form of several short visits, as it was in Purple and Green, but during one five-day stay. Päivi Korvajärvi joined me for the first three days. We started the fieldwork by interviewing the CEO. One of the two call centre managers was also present even though we conducted an individual interview with him later on. The CEO and both call centre managers encouraged us to collect as much material in Blue as we needed, and thus, at least in principle, we had access to everywhere in the company. The managers also told the workers that they may talk to us about confidential matters related to their work and to the whole company. We were allowed to observe the work by sitting side-by-side with the agents and telemarketers, watching and listening them working. The pace of the work allowed us make questions to the agents and telemarketers while observing them.

The selection of the interviewees was first organized by asking for volunteers. This turned out to be somewhat problematic because surprisingly many people volunteered and, at that point, we could not screen out anybody. In another team, we asked the supervisors to select the interviewees for us in order to have as multifaceted interviewees as possible in terms of their age, gender, work assignments, length of employment and educational background. In this way we were able to limit the number of the interviews according to our capacity to stay focused on the interaction with the interviewees. Later on, I spontaneously asked a couple of agents and telemarketers whether I could interview them, and they all agreed, except for one male telemarketer.

In sum, the 23 interviewees were:

- 13 customer service agents and telemarketers, 11 women and 2 men;
- 4 supervisors, 2 women and 2 men;
- 2 call centre managers, male; and
- the CEO, male;
- failed interviews: 3 customer service agents and telemarketers, 2 women and a man.

Altogether 23 interviews were conducted, but only 20 interviews are analysed in this study. This is because the audio recording of three interviews failed. Consequently, the research material includes only some short notes about the interviews that failed technically. Generally the interviews lasted about 60 minutes but their length could vary from 30 minutes to 80 minutes. They were conducted in empty rooms or in the coffee room. The transcripts of all 20 interviews include about 425 pages with 1.5 line spacing, all in all 848,850 characters.

The research material also consists of 39 digital photos of exteriors and interiors of the offices, workstations, halls, lobbies, corridors, offices, flip charts, and duty rotas on notice boards. The research material includes about 30 pages of field notes written on the basis of the observations conducted during and between interviews. The field notes also concern the research practices which were put into use. In addition, there are 18 pages of documents consisting of training material, a loose

script for marketing calls, and details of gifts given with subscriptions, including the conditions for receiving them.

## Division of Labour in Fieldwork

Searching and selecting the experts for interviews were my responsibility. Planning the expert interviews, especially the formulation of the question guide, was done jointly by Päivi Korvajärvi and me. I was also responsible for conducting all eight expert interviews.

In Purple, the fieldwork in 2004 and the revisit in 2006 were my responsibility. During the first fieldwork period, Päivi Korvajärvi paid a one-day visit to Purple and carried out three interviews and wrote field notes. In Green, all the interviews during 2000–2001 were conducted by Päivi Korvajärvi. The fieldwork in 2003 and 2005 was conducted by me, except for one interview in 2003 which we carried out together. In Blue, Päivi Korvajärvi and I conducted the fieldwork together in 2005 for three days. In addition, I continued the fieldwork in Blue for two more days.

Päivi Korvajärvi and I both wrote field notes from our own points of view and, later on, we read each others field notes. We also discussed our fieldwork experiences in the meetings of our project group. We wrote working papers on the practices and experiences during the fieldwork. The aim of the papers was to reflect our access to the work organizations, our embodiment in relation to places and spaces in the field, as well as the occasional feelings of discomfort that we had, for example, when we felt that we were in the employees' way or snooping around

Both in Purple and Blue, which allowed us to conduct observations and take photos, all the digital photos were taken by me. I was the one who assorted and analysed the photos, in contrast to other research material, which was more or less discussed together but analysed and utilized in our own, separate studies by both Päivi Korvajärvi and me.

The number of the personnel in the work organizations and the quantity of the research material conducted is summarized in Table 3.



Table 3. Number of Personnel and Quantity of Research Conducted

	Purple	Green	Blue
Personnel of the call centre	about 30 <sup>26</sup>	about 150	about 140
Days at the workplace	9 days	8 days	8 days
Interviews conducted	17	17	23/20 <sup>27</sup>
– managers	8	8	7
– agents and/or telemarketers	9	9	13
Digital photos	43	None	39
Field notes	35 pages	10 pages	30 pages
Documents	2 pages	None	18 pages
Interview transcripts	330 pages 681,421 characters	400 pages 766,565 characters	425 pages 848,850 characters

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<sup>26</sup> This is measured differently from other organizations. Here part-time workers are summed up and then considered as full-time employees.

<sup>27</sup> In Blue, 23 interviews were conducted but three interviews suffered from a technical failure.