REENGINEERING, RESISTANCE, AND REFLEXIVITY IN PHILIPPINE CALL CENTERS: CHALLENGING THE VICTIMIZED IMAGES OF AGENTS AND NEOLIBERALISM

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ABSTRACT This study challenges and complicates the dominant literature on the universalized and homogenized outcomes of neoliberalism to its workers as well as the victimized images of call center agents. I employ Ong's reengineering of the soul, Scott's everyday resistance, and Giddens' reflexivity to investigate the dynamics of Filipino agents' modes of voluntary and mandatory work adaptation as well as practices of resistance and manipulation. All these work practices can be analyzed better by linking them with the neoliberal reengineering processes and technologies of governing imposed by the third party, offshore call center. The thesis' main data is derived from the narratives of 36 Filipino agent informants; testimonies of call center practitioners (e.g. HR heads, supervisors, and operation managers); and field experiences I got during participant observation in a call center in Metro Manila.

I find that the neoliberal reengineering of Filipino agents' souls is a 'middling success.' The neoliberal reengineering is partially successful in imposing neoliberal work value and corporate norms and it is highly successful in shaping the subjectivities of Filipino agents to embrace cosmopolitan practices. The Filipino agents' resistance as well as their turnover, however, prove the contrary. As I scrutinized their practices of resistance, Filipino agents used them only as 'urgent' strategies to survive work and their reasons for practicing them are highly individualized. Though the execution of their resistance contains collective elements such as collective learning and covering-up, nevertheless they neither aim to facilitate social change nor to organize collective resistance in order to alter their life course and work condition. There is a potential for their resistance to develop repertoires of contention, however, for now they only manifest in forms of Scott's weapons of the weak, a passive-aggressive form of resistance. By weaving their stories of work adaptation, resistance, and manipulation without ignoring the destructive nature of oppression and exploitation, we can appreciate them as reflexive individuals possessing different forms of capital and agentive capacity, not passive reactors to forces overwhelming their life courses and work conditions.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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ACD	Automatic Call Distributor
AHT	Average Handling Time
BPO	Business Process Outsourcing
CBA	Collective Bargaining Agreement
CCAP	Contact Center Association of
CSAT	Customer Satisfaction
CSRs	Customer Service Representatives
DPE	Delivery Project Evaluation
ENDO	End of Contract
FUBU	Fucked Buddy
ICT	Information Communication Technology
ILS	Institute of Labor Studies
IT	Information Technology
OM	Operation Manager
OS	Operation Supervisor
QA	Quality Assurance Analyst
TL	Team Leader
TUCP	Trade Union Congress of the Philippines
UK	United Kingdom / British Account
US	United States

CHAPTER 1: The Problem and its Background

One of the successful capitalist platforms that proliferates since the last two decades is the call center industry. The industry's growth and transformation are fleeting, however, not surprising. The interconnected factors that contribute to its expansion can be associated with the global spread of neoliberalism, a predatory capitalism (Ong, 2006). These interconnected factors include: the demise of embedded liberalism; the hypermobility of capital; and flexible accumulation and valorization of capital through time-space compression using Information Technologies (Bluestone and Harisson, 1982; Giddens, 1971; Harvey, 2001; 2007; Wolf, 1982).

The metamorphosis of call centers can be encapsulated into four stages: a) insourcing; b) outsourcing; c) offshoring; to d) third party, offshoring (Fabros, 2007). Each of the developmental stages of call center has utilized different "technologies of governing" in order to reengineer the soul of its agents, to extract surplus-value from labor, and to secure a high rate of profit (Foucault, 2000; Ong, 2006). However, I argue that the third party, offshoring—the latest stage of call center platform which now dominates the offshore of the Philippines and India—has more extensive and dehumanizing governmentality. How does the latest stage of call center in the offshore of neoliberal Philippines reengineer its agents? What are the 'technologies of governing' involved? Are they successful in reengineering the soul of Filipino agents?

Past call center studies have enumerated the drawbacks and hardness of work—its stressful and oppressive nature and its characterization of modern digital sweatshops, tightly monitored work, highly disciplined and deskilled job, job insecurity, and some forms of precarity (Fabros, 2007; Hechanova-Alampay, 2010; Lloyd, 2013; Naald, 2016; Ponce, 2015; Standing, 2011). Though call center work is considered exploitative and oppressive, joining a labor union, protest, strike, and other practices of collective resistance remain unpopular choices among these agents

to resolve their work issues (Noronha and D'Cruz, 2006; Ramesh, 2004; Resse and Socco-Carreon, 2013; Tilly, 2008). What are the factors influencing them to become hesitant about collective resistance, especially joining labor unions? How do they confront their work issues? What are the practices involved? Why do they engage in these practices?

Moreover, the dominant images of call center work in the past studies as stressful, oppressive, precariat, and tightly monitored, highly controlled work suggest a static picture of call center agents as passive victims of neoliberalism (Harvey, 2007; Brown, 2005). Though these images can zero in the signature of exploitation, dispossession, and toughness of work, nevertheless we cannot disregard the reflexive and agentive capacity of Filipino call center agents. The everyday experiences of neoliberalism, notes Ong (2006), have neither universal nor homogeneous impact, but it has more variegated outcomes depending on the situation or available opportunities. Here, I argue that the life course of Filipino agents does not follow similar trajectory of other workers under neoliberalism such as low-skilled migrants and factory workers. We should remember that the majority of these Filipino agents are young, bilingual, college graduate individuals. They are not passive actors who just follow the work regime because they have more opportunities and capabilities. Following Giddens' agency and reflexivity (1984), Scott's weapons of the weak (1985), and Strangleman's work manipulation (2016), this thesis thus raises the following questions: How do Filipino agents express their agency and reflexivity within the work? How do they adapt in the reengineering process? How do they resist and manipulate their work regime? How can we describe their practices of resistance?

Without ignoring the signature of oppression, dispossession, and exploitation, this thesis hopes to move beyond the victimized images of Filipino agents by probing their modes of work adaptation; practices of resistance and manipulation; and acts of dealing with their work condition

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as prisms in witnessing their reflexivity and human agency. The Filipino agents have been asserting, contesting, complicating, and introducing actions and solutions to what ails their work conditions. From this vantage, the Filipino agents' reflexive capacity in harnessing "weapons of the weak," as well as the capability in adapting, resisting, and manipulating their work regime are magnified (Giddens, 1984:14; Scott, 1985; Strangleman, 2016). By considering these everyday acts, the Filipino agents can be appreciated as reflexive individuals, not passive reactors to forces overwhelming their life courses and work conditions.

1.1. Methodology and Thesis Structure

This thesis is structurally divided into six chapters. The first chapter presents the problem and the background of the thesis. The second chapter begins with an overview of the global call center development and the rise of third party, offshore call centers in the Philippines. I then proceed with a review showing the gap of past call center studies and ethnographic literature and a theoretical review of Giddens' reflexivity and agency and Scotts' everyday resistance and weapons of the weak. While presenting all these reviews, I situate my contribution within the confluence of these streams.

The third chapter delineates the reengineering processes imposed by third party, offshore call centers to Filipino agents. Here I discuss different technologies of governing—e.g. trainings, work rules and metrics, as well as salary and benefits—that influence the Filipino agents' voluntary and mandatory work adaptations. The practices of everyday resistance and other expressions of reflexivity and agency within the work among Filipino agents are discussed in the fourth chapter. The fifth chapter moves beyond the discussion of everyday resistance by presenting different forms of capital possessed and accumulated by Filipino agents before and since the time they work in call centers; their views on their work, nationality, and engagement with globalization; and their

work histories and future plans. This chapter also presents an assessment of the success of the third party, offshore call centers in reengineering the souls of Filipino agents.

The thesis' main data is derived from the narratives of 36 Filipino agents gathered through face-to-face, in-depth key-informant interview. The search and interview of the informant agents started on the third week of March 2017 and lasted until the first week of May 2017. All Filipino agents that I interviewed currently work in call center companies located in Metro Manila and already stayed in call center work for at least a year. The time boundary sets a common starting point and limits the study to agents who already adjusted to work experiences in an offshore customer service platform as established call center agents, with enough immersion to explore the work regimes and to practice everyday resistance.

All interviews were aided by an interview guide and they were done outside agents' workplaces. Follow-up correspondence through email and social media also took place. Key informants were interviewed casually with the intention of mitigating any sense of intimidation or suspicion, and encouraging them to be spontaneous and transparent enough to share experiences, thoughts, and emotions as a Filipino agent. Before the interview, all informants were given a participant information sheet that provides an introduction to the research and formally requesting the informant's voluntary participation. The letter details a summary of the project and information informing them of options for confidentiality, particularly the non-disclosure of personal information, and the use of alternate names when reporting the details of the interview. The informant also has the right to decline to respond to specific inquiries, and to withdraw from participating in the research.

The initial set of information were based on personal contacts (such as former informant agents, friends, and colleagues) and the following set were built by referrals from these first few

informants. Some of these informants' recommendations and suggestions pointed to more informants (snowball/ referral sampling). I selected the key-informants not just based on the availability of possible interviewees within the given time period, but also based on theoretical saturation (Bryman, 2008). This means that the data collection has reached a stage of saturation, in which after a set of interviews, the data are rich enough to develop concepts and theoretical relationships and when new aspects of the data or additional information can be generated.

I conducted a four-day participant observation as a trainee in a call center company under the pseudonym CallExpress–where my cousin, who is also my gatekeeper, is the HR head–in order to enrich my ethnographic data. CallExpress operates in a four-story building located in Quezon City, Metro Manila and approximately they have 650 agents in total. The company handles five international accounts from Australian tollways and webhosting as well as American credit card, cable, and mobile phone companies. I was assigned in an Australian account working on the assessment of toll fees. My participant observation occurred from April 18 to 21, 2017.

I also interviewed some Human Resource and Operation managers to hear the management side of the Philippine third party, offshore call centers from April 24 to 28, 2017. In addition, secondary data gathering in academic libraries, the internet, and other repositories of textual information were done to reinforce the accumulated responses and narratives of interviewees.

The age of my informant agents ranged from 19-46 year old and the median and mean age is 26. There is an equal number of males and females in this study, whereas the overwhelming majority is heterosexual (28 agents); 5 are bisexuals (2 males, 3 females); and 3 are homosexuals (2 males, 1 females). 27 out of 36 agents are single; 4 are married; 3 are single mothers; and 2 are living with their partners. All of them currently live within Greater Metro Manila, whereas the vast majority (29 agents) is living with their first degree (i.e. parents and siblings, husband, wife,

children, etc.) or second degree (cousins, aunts, uncles) family members and the rest (7 agents) rents an apartment alone or with their friends or cohabitants. 21 of the 36 agents presently handle American accounts, 13 agents currently work in Australian accounts, and the remaining 2 agents handle a British and a Canadian account. Those who handle American, British, and Canadian accounts currently work in a nightshift schedule (23 agents), while all agents handling Australian accounts have a dayshift schedule (13 agents). The diversity of the accounts' nationalities allows me to juxtapose different call center metrics by account-type and to observe different practices of adaptation and resistance among Filipino agents depending on the foreign customers they serve.

In the conclusion chapter, I present an outline of my analysis including its practical and theoretical implications. I focus on how my findings challenge and complicate the dominant literature on the universalized and homogenized outcomes of neoliberalism to its workers (Harvey, 2007; Brown, 2005) as well as the victimized and precariat images of call center agents (Fabros, 2007; Hechanova-Alampay, 2010; Lloyd, 2013; Naald, 2016; Ponce, 2015; Standing, 2011) by highlighting their emerging forms of adaptation, practices, manipulation, and reflexivity.

CHAPTER 2: The Victimized Images in Global Call Centers

This chapter reviews the existing body of knowledge on the call center work. The presentation begins with the metamorphosis of global call centers and their landing in the offshore of the neoliberal Philippines. In this part, I also argue that Filipino agents working in third party, offshore call centers are the most exploited and more dispossessed than the previous types of agents. I reiterate that in addition to a dearth of ethnographic literature on call centers in the Philippines, there is also a lack of research that transcends the precariat and victimized images of Filipino agents. I highlight more the Filipino agents' resistance, reflexivity, and human agency instead of focusing too much on transfixed pictures of agents as helpless and passive reactors of neoliberalism.

2.1 The Global Development of Call Centers and their Landing in the Neoliberal Philippines

In order to maximize the profit level and to minimize production costs as well as to be more competitive, call centers need to restructure their global operations by adopting new strategies: the outsourcing and the offshoring setup (Fabros, 2007; Ponce, 2015). Call center platforms can be classified into four general typologies based on their location and delivery model. Call centers' location, on the one hand, can be categorized into two: the *onshore* and the *offshore*. Usual onshore locations are the US, Canada, the UK, and Australia, while offshore locations are India, Singapore, Malaysia, Pakistan, the Philippines, among others (Snigdha et. al, 2005). In turn, call centers' delivery model involves insourcing and outsourcing or the presence and engagement of a third-party vendor. Insourcing of call centers are facilities that are operated by and organizationally linked to the mother corporation, while outsourcing or third party call centers are operated by vendors that handle accounts subcontracted by a corporation (Fabros, 2007:41). Its global

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historical development can be analytically divided into three stages: a) *the age of subcontracting*;
b) *the period of relocation to offshore countries*; and c) *the drive to offshore outsourcing.*

Figure 1. Call Center Operation by Location and Delivery Models[1]
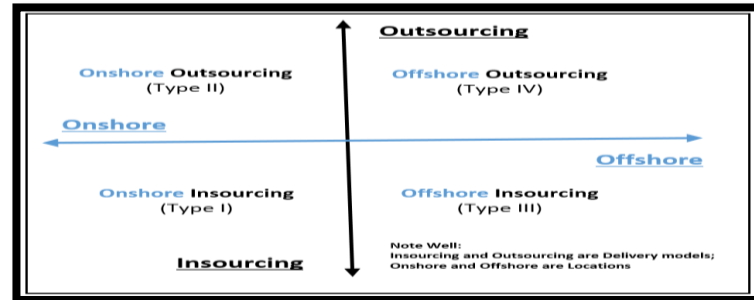
2.1.1. The Age of Subcontracting or Outsourcing

The first two phases of call centers are Onshore Insourcing (Type I) and Onshore
Outsourcing (Type II). The nuance between Type I and Type II call centers is the delivery model
(see figure 1). Unlike in onshore insourcing where call center operation is under company's
management, onshore outsourcing detaches its call center function by subcontracting a third party
vendor. Typically both customers and agents are situated in the same country.

Much literature has been already produced about these call center types. During these
phases, the job design was criticized for having a factory-like working condition. Indeed, in terms
of productivity and efficiency the call center has gone a long way but the question remains whether
the "virtual back offices," supposedly the workplace of the future, represent business frontiers of
innovation and profess, or are simply "white collar factories" that epitomize the "sweatshops of
the 20th century" (Fabros, 2007). Deery and Keenie (2002) point out that "a number of research
studies have explored the organizational characteristics and employment arrangement of call
centers." In general, they have not provided a flattering picture. Telephone call centers have
variously been described as "electronic sweatshops" (Garson, 1998), "twentieth-century

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[1] Modified version of Fabros' (2007) illustration

panopticons" (Fernie and Metcalf, 1998) and "assembly lines in the head" (Taylor and Bain, 1999). The jobs have been characterized as "dead-end" with low status, poor pay, and few career prospects. Moreover, early researches have shown that much of the work is closely monitored, tightly controlled, and highly routinized (Deery and Keenie, 2002:4; cited in Fabros, 2007).

2.1.2. The Period of Relocation to Offshore Countries

Facilitated by neoliberalism, the relocation and restructuring of call center platforms resulted in an expansion that permeated borders with back office variants emerging in the global north and south (Fabros, 2007). This restructured, globalized, and new platform of call center firms is called by business analysts as the "offshoring of call centers" (Snigdha et. al, 2005:20). The existence of lower cost of infrastructure and labor in offshore countries, i.e. India and the Philippines, is thus the prime driver motivating call centers to engage in offshore services. In fact, according to the Contact Center Association of the Philippines, the Philippines now overtakes India in terms of favorite offshore location of call center firms (CCAP, 2016).[2]

Despite the 1997 Asian financial crisis and unstable political set-up (i.e. Second EDSA revolution in 2001), the late twentieth century and the early twenty-first century in the Philippines were considered a transition from a more closed economy to a more open one as a result of neoliberalism. The implementation of neoliberal policies in the Philippines led in the growth of information technology and call center industry. Neoliberalism has facilitated an intensification of accumulation and great flexibility in its accumulation (Cherian, 2015:6; Harvey, 2007). The neoliberal economic reforms of President Ramos from 1994 to 1996 in the Philippines had setup the stage for present era of deregulation. Hence, this has become the motivating factor for many investment of Western surplus which maintains its rate of profit through expanding the market.

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[2] http://ccap.ph/2016/07/25/phl-likely-to-remain-worlds-contact-center-capital/

This has taken the form of foreign direct investment (FDI) into the Philippines and has attracted multinational corporations to build residence in the Philippines because the costs of labor, infrastructure, and maintenance are lower than they have in onshore countries. This has also led in a boom in the specialization of information technologies from software companies to call centers. All these changes become possible due to state intervention and changing laws favoring neoliberal policies (Harvey, 2007; Mandel, 1990; cited in Cherian, 2015:6-7).

Offshore call centers are two types: the offshore insourcing (Type III) and offshore outsourcing (Type IV). Offshore insourcing call center operates when a call center company establishes its own captive business centers in the overseas location and its advantage involves the opportunity for rapid implementation (Fabros, 2007; Ponce, 2015:50). This platform is also particularly popular with call center companies that hope to retain or regulate control to their offshore operations, which they do by operating wholly owned captive facilities in offshore locations while directly employing all workers in that facility. In contrast, offshore outsourcing call center (Type IV) performs when a company contracts out business process functions to an overseas service provider or a third party provider (Fabros, 2007).

2.1.3. The Rise of the Third Party, Offshore Call Center

The latest variant of call center operation, which now dominates India and the Philippines, is the *offshore outsourcing call center* or *the third party, offshore call center* (Type IV). The rise of this call center type in effect represents the development of a new operation in the realm of service delivery in which: a) particular service functions are detached from the parent corporation; b) taken over by another organization, a third party service vendor; and c) where the delivery of such services is taking place in a remote location overseas (Fabros, 2007; Ponce: 51-53).

Type IV call centers allow Filipino agents to interact and engage with the global occupational demands of various players: *the corporate-client; the third party vendor; and the*

customers. The corporate-client slices off its call center operation from the core function to the peripheral function. Because of this, the corporate-client imposes simple, repetitive, highly structured, tightly monitored job standards to Filipino agents and these are being realized by the third party vendor. Moreover, the third party vendor stringently implements corrective measures and key performance metrics to Filipino agents, so that the latter can perform well as a representative in the frontline customer service. It is important to note that the Type IV agents, who directly deal with the corporate client's customers as front liner in customer affairs, are not employed by the corporation from the onshore but rather from the third party vendor. Most of the time, they also interact and deal with the concerns and queries of irate, disgusted, and mad corporate client's customers onshore. In the constellation of these global occupational demands from different entities of the third party, offshore call center (Type IV), Filipino agents play an intersected and mediated role, while carrying much of the burden in this global complex set up (Fabros, 2007; Ponce, 2015).

Figure 2. Filipino Agent at the Intersection of Web of Demands in the
Third-Party, Offshore Call Center (Type IV) [3]
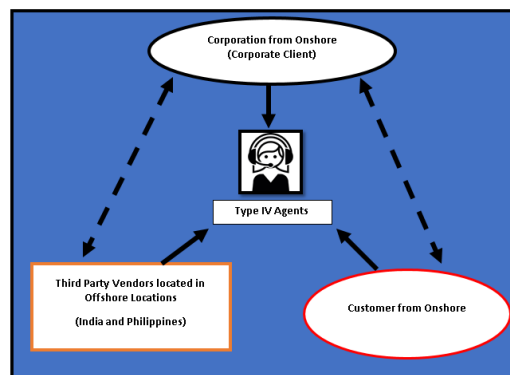
Apart from carrying the pressure of the global demand of third party, offshore call centers (Type IV), Filipino agents are also the most exploited and dispossessed because: a) they have

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[3] Reinterpretation of Fabros' (2007) illustration

heavier workload and more job metrics compared to their counterpart agents abroad; b) of their nightshift schedule that affects their social and physical being; and c) they are the world's lowest paid agent (see table 1). In Marxist language, the Philippine third party, offshore call centers thus create a more oppressive labor process that extracts more surplus value, both relative and absolute, at the expense of Filipino agents.

Table 1. Comparative Annual Nonexempt Labor Costs (Per Hour, In US Dollars)[4]

Job Description	Number of Workers	New Delhi/ Gurgaon, India	Bangalore India	Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia	Manila, Philippines	Singapore City, Singapore	Taipei, Taiwan
Customer Service Rep, Jr	150	$1.91	$1,95	$2.02	$1.88	$6.35	$5.09
Customer Service Rep, Int	175	$2.17	$2.21	$2.29	$2.13	$7.22	$5.79
Customer Service Rep, Sr	125	$2.44	$2.48	$2.58	$2.40	$8.12	$5.51

2.2. The Dominant Images in Call Center Studies: Precarity and Victimization

Early call center studies dwell on how technologies have reconfigured the mode of work, stressing particular themes such as control and surveillance (Fernie and Metcalf, 1998 ; Taylor and Bain, 2000), as well as the mediation of technology (Callaghan and Thompson, 2001) in setting the intense pace and routines of work and the legitimization and integration of tight control in the experience and practice of agents working in in-house or outsourced-onshore call centers (Fernie and Metcalf, 1998; Taylor and Bain, 2000; Fabros, 2007). Also, Standing (2011) dubbed call centers as "ubiquitous, a sinister symbol of globalization, electronic life, and alienated labor." Likewise, Naald (2016:40-41) described the work as a "set of exploitative, extractive, uneven and constantly transformative relational antagonisms that have simultaneously destabilized public sector work while solidifying the ground on which the ICT sector continues to reproduce itself."

Philippine call center studies have included topics and themes such as: the physical and psychological impact of the graveyard shift among call center agents (Hechanova-Alampay, 2010); outsourced selves in Philippine call centers (Fabros, 2007); the eradication of national

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[4] BizCosts.com; see also Joe Fleisscher, Op cit. (Cited in Fabros, 2007)

identity among agents (Tiatco, 2014); the transnational subjectivity in the lifestyle practices of Filipino agents (Ponce, 2015); and the possibility and elusiveness of union formation in Philippine call centers (Resse et. al., 2013). These Philippine studies, just like the experiences of call center agents in the onshore of the US and the UK and even in India, also showed that call center work is usually characterized by job insecurity, disembeddedness, and other forms of factory like working conditions, (Fabros, 2007; Hechanova-Alampay, 2010; Resse et. al., 2013). All reviewed studies cited above, therefore, show the prevalence of alienation, oppression, and exploitation in call centers that impact the physical, psychological, as well as social being of its workers.

In recent studies, the framework of precariat and the diagnosis of new capitalism, specifically the notions of labor flexibility and insecurity, are also used to understand call center agents' work experience and identity. Like for instance, the study of Anthony Lloyd (2013) in a call center, "Call Direct," in the UK shows how the work creates insecure jobs, where turnover is rampant and agents feel little pride associated with their work (143). Lloyd (2013) concludes that agents' feelings toward this dead-end work, their lack of interest in labor organization, or "desire for collective betterment" (151) is indicative of a postmodern identity part and parcel with post-industrialism in a "liquid society" (152). Recently, the thesis conducted by Joseph Naald (2016) also used the precariat lens to map the class identity of Serbian call center agents. He finds that "outsourced Serbian call center agents do not exhibit the consequences of a supposed global convergence toward the precarity and flexibility" (Naald, 2016:40), despite being both "globalization's child" (5) and the product of neoliberal restructuring. Instead of producing the precariat, Serbia's call center sector gives young workers not only good paying jobs, but also "miserable, heavily disciplined, deskilled jobs" (Naald, 2016:41).

The descriptions of call center work as stressful, oppressive, exploitative, precariat, and tightly monitored, highly controlled work have been dominant discussions in the past (Fabros, 2007; Hechanova-Alampay, 2010; Lloyd, 2013; Naald, 2016; Ponce, 2015; Standing, 2011). These studies seem to suggest a transfixed image of agents as a passive victim of neoliberalism, of predatory capitalism (Ong, 2007). However, workers—either in industrialized or deindustrialized form of work—are able to adapt, to resist, and even to manipulate their work regime (Strangleman, 2016). Hence, the discussion of agents' victimization is only a partial screenshot of agents' work experiences. What I want to argue and offer new in the discussion is a dynamic portrait of agentive and reflexive call center agents—who do not only follow work rules and submit themselves in the work regime, but also adjust and challenge them; who are conscious in the power-relations within the work; and who can decide to alter and recreate their life course—without dismissing the stories of oppression, dispossession, and exploitation. This can be done by tracing their ways of resolving work issues and practices of resistance.

2.3. Giddens' Reflexivity and Agency

The triumvirate sociologists who bring to fore the concepts of "reflexivity", "reflexive modernity", and/or "reflexive modernization" are Ulrich Beck, Scott Lash, and Anthony Giddens (1994). In general, they formulate these concepts to argue that the present global era is an extension of pre-modernity and modernity, "a late modernity." They also want to challenge the deconstructive and reconstructive postmodernist standpoint on globalization (ibid).[5]

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[5] Lash (1994) relates reflexive modernization with the "aesthetics and the interpretation of culture." On the other hand, Beck (ibid) introduces the notion of late modernity as a "second modernity." On the one hand, Giddens (ibid) uses the term, "reflexive modernity," to characterize the disembedding processes in globalization, i.e. "time-space distanciation." I will focus to Giddens' reflexivity because it is more related to call center phenomena, specifically the "time-space compression" using Information Technologies in call centers (Harvey, 1989).

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According to Giddens (Beck, Giddens, & Lash, 1994), social interactions were restricted by time and space during the pre-modern period. In other words, this period is marked by intense real-time, face-to-face interactions.[6] During modernity and late modernity, however, there is a disembeddedness of local contexts because the development of advanced transportation system, internet, electronic communication, as well as globalized cultural and economic systems have created an opportunity to interact with others with limited time-space constraints (ibid). The demarcations that divide the local and the global, as well as the past and the future, become blurred during the late modernity (Ritzer, 2017).

During "late modernity," the self becomes a reflexive project (Giddens, 1990). This means that social agents actively shape, monitor, and reflect themselves, while simultaneously and responsibly construct and reconstruct their life courses (ibid). To further understand "reflexivity," we need to relate it with his "structuration theory" (Giddens, 1984). Neither the structure nor the agent dominates in structuration theory. The theory also repudiates the structural determinism and even the absolute freedom of social agents. He further recognizes the "duality of structure," meaning structure is both "medium and outcome of social action" (Giddens, 1984:25-26). Structuration thus means that the structure can influence individual agents, at the same time individual agents can also produce and reproduce structures. Giddens (ibid) defines "agency" as the "capability of doing those things in the first place . . . and ability of an agent to consciously alter his or her place in the social structure" (9). Reflexivity is therefore tantamount to agency. Margaret Archer (2007) criticizes structuration and reflexivity for two reasons: a) the theory commits a central conflation or an antidualistic position appreciating the interdependency of agency and structure, individuals and society; and b) too much abstraction of reflexivity or agency

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[6] For example, if you want to interact with your brother who works in other places, you need to travel to his place across a definite physical space or boundary and such travel will cost a particular amount of time (Ritzer, 2017).

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(Piiroinen, 2014). The first critique seems to be tenuous because Giddens' mesosociological theorizing does not dismiss the interdependent relationship between the structure and social actors, however, the second critique is valid because he really tends to be too abstract and he provides lacking of empirical evidence of his reflexivity. Although this is not the main concern of my thesis, what I want to contribute is to test the empirical application of reflexivity and structuration in the actual world, particularly through the case of Filipino agents.

2.4. *Scott's Weapons of the Weak and Everyday Resistance*

I argue in this paper that one facet of Filipino agents' agency and reflexivity is through "everyday resistance" (Scott, 1985). In his book, "Weapons of the weak: everyday forms of peasant resistance," James Scott (1985) reexamines and extends the conventional notions and preconceived understanding of resistance by conducting a fieldwork among peasant workers in Kedah, Malaysia. By doing so, Scott coins the term "weapons of the weak" to describe "ordinary weapons of relatively powerless groups: foot dragging, dissimulation, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, sabotage, and so forth" in which "peasant resistance expresses itself against those who seek to extract labor, food, taxes, and rent" (Scott, 1985:29). Scott also articulates that these "informal, low-profile techniques of resistance" were not able to "accumulate and become an effective force in helping them to obtain whatever they are fighting for" (ibid). Apart from explaining the workings of politics outside formal structures, Scott also points out that effective resistance can exist in thought and symbolism.

Scott (1900) extends his discussion of "everyday resistance" on his book, "Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts." Here, Scott elaborates the "public roles played by the powerful and powerless and the mocking, vengeful tone they display offstage" (Scott, 1990). In his analysis of the symbolic politics of resistance, Scott looks into the commonplace forms of resistance that class struggle takes when it does not seek to openly confront the forces that

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dominate. Scott calls these as "hidden transcripts," which for the powerless or weaker are the "dissonant political culture that exists among subordinates out of earshot of their masters- the words of anger, revenge, and assertion or the alternative meanings given to public texts" (Bankoff, 1998:230).

According to Scott (1990), hidden transcripts have three-fold attributes. First, it is "specific to a given social site and to a particular set of actors." Second, "it does not contain only speech acts but a whole range of practices." For the subordinated, the "whole range of practices" refer to activities such as "poaching, pilfering, clandestine tax evasion, and intentionally shabby work for landlords," among others. For the dominant, hidden-transcript practices include "clandestine luxury and privilege, surreptitious use of hired thugs, bribery, and tampering with land titles," etc. In both cases, the practices "contravene the public transcript of the party in question and are, if at all possible, kept offstage and not avowed." The last attribute means that "the frontier between the public and the hidden transcripts is a zone of constant struggle between dominant and subordinate" (Scott, 1990:14).

In the context of Filipino agents, the cursing, the swearing, and their transcripts when talking to the foreign customers while the phone is muted can be considered as hidden transcripts, a form of everyday resistance. This thesis wants to explore other types of 'weapons of the weak' and practices of everyday resistance of Filipino call center agents. By doing this, we can understand how adept the Filipino call center agents are in imposing their agency and reflexivity in the overarching structure and governmentality of Philippine call centers, and how conscious they are in positioning themselves in the power relations within the work.

CHAPTER 3: Reengineering the Filipino Soul
Governmentality, Practices, and Adaptations in Philippine Call Centers

This chapter discusses the technologies of governing imposed by third party, offshore call centers—e.g. trainings, metrics, schedules, as well as salary and benefits—and how they impact the mandatory and voluntary work practices as well as modes of adaptation of Filipino agents. The third party, offshore call center manages, monitors, and reengineers the souls of Filipino agents in order to maintain them in the company and to reduce the turnover rate as well as to increase their workers' productivity and efficiency; thus maximizing profit level. I also argue that these technologies of governing influence and complicate the Filipino agents' relationships with their foreign customers and other actors in third party, offshore call centers.

3.1. Technologies of Governing in Third Party, Offshore Call Centers

3.1.1. Training

The normal recruitment process starts from initial interviews, aptitude test, situational analysis exams, operation manager's interview, and ends with a contract signing. My interviews with 36 Filipino agents and some HR managers revealed that typical trainings in Philippine call centers have three stages: a) language training; b) product process training; and c) nesting stage. According to Jomarie, the operation supervisor in CallExpress, and to some veteran agents who already worked in more than three call center companies, in some cases applicants who have either excellent English skills or many experiences as an agent can be exempted to language training. During the language training that last for less than a week, agents are taught to speak in "neutral English" and be more culture sensitive with nationalities of their foreign customers. This training also familiarizes Filipino agents with the accent, tradition, pop-culture, weather, geography, time zone differences, history and current events, and idiomatic and common expressions of their foreign customers. Majority of my informants (34 out of 36 informants) underwent this training.

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Their trainers innovated strategies to neutralize their English such as tongue twisters, role playing, ice breakers, etc. These training strategies helped agents to strengthen their linguistic capital, part of their embodied cultural capital in Bourdieu's language, so that they could interact, engage, and negotiate well with their foreign customers and clients.

The second stage is 'Product Process Training.' According to the majority (28 agents), memorizing the script/spiel or mastering the call flow is the first part of this training. On my experience, the spiel in CallExpress was shorter and easier to learn (compared to the call flow of my informant agents) because I was only assessing and updating toll fee payments of Australian customers and I only used 6 tools to resolve their concerns. In 90-120 seconds, a CallExpress agent is expected to:

- Greet the customer properly- "Thank you for calling CallExpress, this is Edward"
- Ask permission to use customer's name- "May I have your name please?"
- Offer Assistance- "How can I help you?"
- Ask the toll gates they passed through- "From where to where?"
- Ask the type of their vehicle- 'Vehicle Type? Motorcycle, car, LCV, HCV?'
- Repeat their response and then clarify- "You passed from S1 to S5 using Car"
- State the amount of the toll price- "It costs 8 dollars and 24 cents"
- Ask permission to get their credit card number- "Can I have your credit card number?"
- Tell the customer on the completion of their transaction- "The transaction is done!"
- Give thanks to the customer for his call and use power words to the end call-
  "Thank you for patronising CallExpress, have a nice day mate!"

This simple script is a double-edged sword for agents. It makes the agents' work experience more routinized, boring, and robotic on the negative. The advantage of having simpler call spiel is that there are less number of tools used to resolve customers' problems. As lamented by agent Ynes: *"We have many spiels depending on customers' issues. I feel dizzy in my current account, we use 30 tools to troubleshoot, even in my dreams I saw myself clicking ALT+TAB."* Having many tools or not, these spiels are nevertheless boring because they are repeated many times and they structure every call received by an agent. The usage of script, as a technology of governing, is advantageous for onshore corporate-clients to control and bureaucratize agents' interaction and

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communication with customers. Hence, the call flow/script/spiel outlines what the agents are required to do and sets boundaries on what the agents are able to do (Fabros, 2007:93).

During this stage other account technicalities were also discussed. For instance, 19 informants disclosed that they studied the techniques and processes in product troubleshooting. Meanwhile, 2 informants working in a flower delivery account learned the different types of flowers being sold by their company located in the US and its equivalent name in the Philippines. In turn, 10 informants studied the type of freebies and discounts that they can offer to their customers and also reviewed some tips in upselling the customers' order. Moreover, 6 informants learned some laws related to their work as debt collectors, online sellers, and phone surveyors i.e. 'Mini Miranda,' 'telemarketing time' etc. Further, 17 informants said they made mock calls with their fellow trainees during the product process training. Mock calls helped them to practice and to apply what they had learned.

Nesting is the last stage of training. My four-day immersion happened during this stage, where I received actual calls and I did 'call barging' to observe and analyze agents' performance over the phone. Here, Filipino agents have liminal position between being a trainee and an employee. In nesting stage, agents gradually receive actual customer calls and they are graded by Quality Assessors (QAs), Supervisors, and/or Delivery Project Evaluators (DPEs). According to the HR head of CallExpress, who is my cousin, there are two ways of evaluating agents: remote evaluation and side jack. The latter involves the evaluator's presence beside the agents while listening to actual live calls; the former happens without the agents' knowledge. Agents are graded like regular agents at this stage. Trainees are required to meet the company's standard metrics to secure their ticket to become official agents. In contrast, unsatisfactory performance means leaving

the company. The good case scenario, however, is that the third party, offshore call center can transfer the failed agents to other accounts where their capacity is more suitable.

3.1.2. Work Schedule

The work schedule in Philippine call centers varies according to account types and/or its operating time and location. By analyzing the Filipino agents' work history, all those presently handling American, British, and Canadian accounts (23 informants) had never experienced having a day shift schedule in a call center or had never experienced working in an Australian account. All informants (13 agents) currently handle an Australian account work in a day shift schedule. Of these 13 informants, 11 agents had tried to work in a graveyard shift[7] from their previous call center work. They prefer to work in a dayshift schedule because a) they feel healthier physically; b) they have more time with their family and friends; and c) they have almost similar schedule with typical Filipino workers. As some agents put it:

> I have better income from my previous American account than my present account, however I am not physically and socially healthy in graveyard shift. In my present work, I can now socialize with my friends, I have now more time to serve our church, and I have now more bonding moments with my family. –*Zhia* (34, F, Australian Account)

> My wife and I do not have sex at night that was also the time I handled the American account. My work in graveyard shift has curtailed my sex life. During off days, we tried to eat outside and then check-in in a hotel in order to celebrate our love (Laughing). I could say now that the sensation and expression of sex at night is better than day (Laughing). –*Raul* (46, M, Australian Account

Vast majority of the agents who worked and are currently working in a night shift have mentioned many negative impacts of their schedule in their *physical wellness* (i.e. weakening of the immune system; more prone to flu, hypertension, cardiac arrest, and other diseases; development of bad habits to cope-up the night stress like cigarettes, overeating, and taking

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[7] In the Philippines, the colloquial term for night shift schedule is graveyard shift. The graveyard shift is also used by other non-call center workers working at night, e.g. service crews working in 24/7 fast foods, doctors and nurses having a night duty, among others.

cannabis; and destruction of the body clock and lack of better sleep) and *social being* (i.e. having poor quality time and lesser bonding moments with their significant people particularly friends, families, and partners). They also cited safety issues in working at night (i.e. susceptibility to crimes like hold-up, snatching, and rape). All these narratives about the nightshift schedule also resonate the findings of Indian (D'Cruz and Noronha, 2006; Mcmillin, 2006; Mirchandani, 2004; Poster, 2007; Ramesh, 2004; Singh and Pandey, 2005) and Philippine (Fabros, 2007; Hechanova-Alampay, 2010; Ponce, 2015) call center studies. However, six agents cited positive things about the nightshift schedule such as having higher income due to the night differential fee and having lesser experience of traffic congestion.

The adjustments made by Filipino agents in work schedules baffle the question of where and when. This particularly happens when concentrated and predominant processes remove "social relations from the local contexts of interaction and their restructuring across indefinite spans of time-space" (Giddens, 1990:21). A third party, offshore call center thus typifies interesting dimensions of globalization, as "it reorganizes the nature and conditions of global call center service and work" (Fabros, 2007); thus an ostensible "time-space distanciation" (Beck, Giddens, & Lash, 1994).

3.1.3. Metric Evaluation and Job Standards

Gino, an executive director from another call center company, said that different third-party vendors in the Philippines compete with each other to win the contract of the corporate-client or foreign account. Agents' performance, which is measured through metric evaluations, is the prime basis for selection. Thus, third party, offshore call centers put much attention on how to achieve high metrics and good statistics by imposing many job standards to Filipino agents. The prioritized metrics vary depending on the agent typologies: inbound; outbound; and hybrid. On the one hand, inbound agents receive calls to support and resolve customers' concerns and issues about

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the product. On the other hand, outbound agents make calls to their customers to collect payments and debts; to solicit donations for charities or NGOs; or to conduct survey for market research. In turn, the hybrid agent oscillates between the inbound and the outbound function. The classification is thus based on who makes the call. For those inbound agents, Average Handling Time (AHT) is the prioritized metrics, while outbound agents typically aims to reach quota (Gans et.al, 2006). I asked my 36 agents to discuss the different metric evaluation system and job standards imposed on them that they need to prioritize in their present call center work (see Table 2). Most third party, offshore call centers undeniably prioritized 'customer satisfaction' (CSAT) and 'quality scores/ quality calls' metrics. These two metrics, which are usually scored from a 0 to 10 scale (10 is the highest) or 1 to 5 scale (5 is the highest), aim to gauge the callers' experience and the quality of agents' conversations over the phone. In short, they are based on how an agent meets or surpasses the customer's expectation.

Table 2. Performance Metrics and Job Standards

Performance Metrics/ Job Standards	Frequency	Percentage	Rank
Customer Satisfaction	35	97%	1st
Quality Scores/ Quality Calls	33	92%	2nd
Average Handling Time	23	63%	3rd
Up-Sell/ Cross-Sell Rate	19	53%	4th
First Call Resolution	17	47%	5th
Revenue Per Call	12	33%	6th
Total Problem Resolution	7	19%	7th

Average Handling Time or AHT ranks third. It is computed by dividing the total number of seconds spent to resolve customers' issues over the total number of customer calls. According to 23 agents, the AHT or maximum amount of time they need to resolve customer problems is only 300 to 360 seconds (5-6 minutes). These relatively short and routinized interactions with customers are controlled by automatic call distribution systems (ACD), and agents have little control over when and what to speak and with whom to speak (Holman, 2002). Other metrics that were imposed to inbound agents are the "first call resolution" (fifth) and "total problem resolution"

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(seventh). Both metrics require an absolute resolution of customer concerns without having a follow-up or second call. Among outbound and hybrid agents, especially those who are in sales, the revenue they generate from customer calls were also measured and evaluated through "up-sell/cross-sell rate" (fourth) and "revenue per call" (sixth) metrics.

These job standards and metric evaluation systems are beneficial for the third party, offshore call centers' management because they monitor and control the agents' performance. They also utilize these metrics as the basis for agents' promotion and incentives. Likewise these simplified tasks, as produced by various metrics, do not require specialized personnel; hence a relatively short period of training will suffice (Hechanova-Alampay, 2010:17). However, for all Filipino agents I talked with and based on the past studies, these standard metrics pose several disadvantages such as: a) routine work; b) low task complexity; c) monotonous job; and d) poor utilization of autonomy (Fabros, 2007; Hechanova-Alampay, 2010; Lloyd, 2013; Naald, 2016; Ponce, 2015; Standing, 2011). All Filipino informant agents also feel pressured to reach and to maintain good standard metrics; they feel like robots; and they feel their work dehumanized them. Hence, the presence of many job standards imposed to Filipino agents makes them like cogs in a machine as Weber put it (Elwell, 1996).

3.1.4. Income and Benefits

As mentioned in the second chapter, Filipino agents are the world's lowest paid agent according to BizCosts.com. Despite this fact, call center work is still prevalent and popular among Filipinos especially among young urbanites and fresh college graduates. This is because the basic monthly salary of a Filipino agent is twice higher than a Filipino minimum wage earner.[8] Aside from the basic salary, call center agents also receive benefits such as allowances and bonuses, and

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[8] 8,000-9,000PhP/month or 160-180US$/month, according to the Philippine Labor and Employment Department

other perks. Based on the Institute of Labor Studies (ILS, 2013:25), as shown in Table 2, common allowances and bonuses of Filipino agents are transportation allowance, meal allowance, rice allowance, and performance bonus and incentives.

Table 3. Typical Allowances and Bonuses in the Philippine Call Centers[9]

Typical Allowances and Bonuses	
Type	Amount per year
Transport Allowance	18,000
Rice Allowance	12,000
Meal Allowance	16,300
Performance Bonus/ Incentive	1.2 x Monthly Salary

All agent informants are generally 'ok' with the salaries, perks, and benefits they receive from their company now, but seven agents are unsatisfied and unhappy. For instance, some married informants (3 agents) said that their salaries are insufficient for them. As agent Chiz discloses:

> It is not bad for people starting a career, it is pretty good, but for people with a family, you
> have to look out for it. Because you have to think how it would support you and the family
> that you want to have, and that comes to into play, the income might not be enough.

On a positive note, twelve informants disclosed that their present salary is higher than their previous non-call center work. In turn, nine informants were 'happy' with their income, but were disappointed about the tax deducted from their basic monthly income. Furthermore, six informants were satisfied with their present salary but felt dissatisfied compared to the salaries of call center agents from onshore and abroad. Meanwhile, five informants were satisfied with the benefits given to them but not to the company's salary appraisal, and the process of promotion.

3.2. Filipino Agents' Work Practices and Ways of Adaptation

All work practices and strategies that I will present below are Filipino agents' modes of adaptation to achieve customer satisfaction and to improve their other performance metrics as well as to build good relationship with their immediate supervisors and fellow workers. Their modes of adaptation can be either mandatory or voluntary: the former is authoritatively ordered by the third

[9]The currency is in Philippine Peso (PhP). As of June 2007, US$1.00 = PhP49.00 (ILS, 2013:25).

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party vendor; the latter is a product of personal will or choice. However, the analytical boundaries that distinguish them from one another are hardly recognizable in actual life. The dividing lines that appear sufficiently clear for us on the plane of the analytical become blurred when transported to the realm of the actual. We can discuss the distinction between the mandatory and voluntary, but we cannot separate these constructs because all Filipino agents' practices of voluntary adaptation have derived from mandatory practices imposed by the third party vendor.

3.2.1. To conceal or to reveal?

The views of Filipino agents and different call centers regarding the disclosure of the real name and nationality to customers are divided. When I received actual calls during my four-day immersion, my operation supervisor in CallExpress instructed me to hide my real name and to change it for two reasons: the first was for my protection and security from irate customers who could possibly harm me; the second was to have an easy name recognition to prevent confusion among foreign customers, hence shortening the Average Handling Time.

My experience of hiding the real name also resonates the experiences of agent informants like Filo and Nile. From their cases, however, they also conceal their Filipino nationality. Obtaining trust and building rapport are their reasons for it. Nile said that Americans are hesitant to give their credit card number to non-American agents. As Nile puts it:

> I worked before in an American account about mail, shipment, and remittances, every time they pay their bills using credit card over the phone, they always ask if I am an American or not. They are hesitant to entrust their money and card number to someone not coming from the US, may be they have bad experience before with a non-American agent. To avoid the feeling of contradictory and ambivalence from us and also to protect our identity, my company enjoins their agents to conceal the real name and the real nationality. I tend to Americanize my name so that they could recognize it well, there are no more questions from them, and it thus shortens my Average Handling Time (AHT).

This non-disclosure of national identity, however, is a bad practice according to some agents (Shannen, Raul, Tin, Nics, Lady, Brylle, and Jose) because most American and Australian

customers can notice if they talk to a native or not; agents therefore should not conceal their nationality to the customers. Neither should they imitate their customers' accent because it may be an insult. Instead, Filipino agents must study their customers' accent, the speed of the speech, and the tone of the voice, so that they could respond properly to their customers.

3.2.2. Cultural and Linguistic Adaptation

29 out of 36 agents revealed that the cultural and linguistic knowledge they gained from their trainings were insufficient to neutralize their global English. Thus, they need to endure more self-practice and further innovation of personal strategies to adapt customers' culture and language. Some of these personal strategies include reading popular Australian and American magazines, novels, atlas, and dictionary; memorizing and knowing the American military phonetics, holidays, and differences in time zones; watching movies, children shows, series, and NBA games; watching some videos on YouTube.com; listening to the new hits and pop songs; updating themselves with current events and weather news; and embracing the latest fads, fashions, and crazes in the US and Australia. Some Filipino agents handling American accounts also mentioned they study and memorize some US laws and policies related to their handled account like the US consumer rights and taxation laws, the 'Mini-Miranda' law, and other related policies in Telemarketing time. As agent Maita discloses:

> American customers are very technical and they always impose their rights as a consumer… In order to butt-in with their rants, I personally studied their laws related to US consumer rights more particularly the laws on refund… If they would notice you are knowledgeable, you are a competent agent, and you can control the calls, therefore they could easily entrust their card number and you could even get good feedback and CSAT.

The majority (33 agents) agreed that these modes of cultural and linguistic adaptation are crucial to attain a deep familiarity of their foreign customers. This familiarization allows them to clarify customers' issues; rebut properly; deal with customers' jokes and feelings; be culture sensitive; and even initiate small talk and chitchats. Hence, all these are potential ways to maintain

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social and cultural connections with their customers in order to improve their performance metrics. We should take into account that the third party vendor always mandates its agents to keep good relationship with foreign customers, but the strategies in maintaining socio-cultural relationship are voluntarily done and innovated by Filipino agents.

3.2.3. Developing the Negotiation and Probing Skills

In order to lower the AHT, achieve high CSAT, and to know the best timing when to upgrade customers' purchase, according to 26 agents, they are two technical skills that an agent must enhance: the negotiation and probing skills. Like the cultural adaptation, the Filipino agents' ways of adaptation related to probing and negotiation skills were also done voluntarily.

The majority (24 agents) explains that probing skill involves the agents' capacity to identify the root cause of the problems by asking the right questions to customers in order to navigate the right solution. The agents' probing skills can be enhanced in three ways. First, Filipino agents must further explore, know, love, and attach themselves to the products they handle so that they could maintain good relations with their foreign customers. This practice is called by Resse et al. (2013) as 'product identification' (145). Second, to easily track the right solution to customers' issues, agents should conduct more self-studying of the functions and navigation processes of the account's tools. The last way is by developing the sense of being *"madiskarte"* (or having innovative approach) in product troubleshooting as well as developing the rational appeal or the sense of being a quick thinker, informative, and witty in answering the customer's questions about the product. As agent Mico opines:

> I create some techniques beyond what is written in the spiel so that I could troubleshoot and resolve their problems easily, make some *'diskarte'* or have an innovative approach in product troubleshooting. After the resolution of their issues, create some personal connections with them through giving some tips and education on the product they availed. . . Make sure you end the call with a great satisfaction in their reaction, then give your name and employee number to them. After doing all these, I strongly believe you could get good CSAT grade and for the agents good CSAT means incentives and promotion.

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Meanwhile, negotiation skills involve the agents' ability to read the customers' situation, feeling, and urgent needs; thus responding appropriately to customers' concerns. As an example, according to Deng, if an agent feels that the customer is in a hurry, he should be straightforward and on point in resolving issues and he should preclude himself from making chitchats or upselling. In contrast, if an agent feels that the customer is in good mood, it is the best time to do small talk and to offer upgrades to his current product.

3.2.4 Emotional Labor and Impression Management

Compared to other face-to-face service manufacturing or Fordist type of work, e.g. factory workers, teachers, fast food crews, etc., emotional labor is more controlled, managed, and measured among call center agents due to the intense technological surveillance and stringent monitoring system implemented by QAs and DPEs. Like for instance, anger management and empathetic expressions while talking to customers were taught, encouraged, and always reiterated to all 36 agents during their trainings and even within the production. In some call centers, like the case of agents Ynes and Jun-Jun, they use hi-tech monitor screens showing the appropriate emotional expressions that an agent must portray while talking to customers over the phone.

33 out of 36 agents cited different ways to fulfill their work's emotional labor. One way is through "masking the negative (bad mood, feeling, or emotion) with something positive." This can be done by portraying an enthusiastic energy while handling customer calls despite the tiredness and sleepiness. Likewise, smiling can also repel negativities because it makes the agent's voice happier during calls and it also hides anger, sadness, and real feelings toward the irate customers; thus resolving the customers' issues properly and nicely. As agent Julius puts it:

> Even if you are in a bad mood, just always smile every time you receive calls. Your emotion over the phone highly affects how you handle the calls. Wear your best smile, so that your voice becomes happy and you could have good vibes in handling their concern. Hide your anger, conceal your sadness and your real feelings through smiling.

According to 12 agents, other modes of fulfilling the emotional labor are through exercising more empathy, patience, kindness, and understanding with the irate callers and by acting like a sponge that absorbs the customers' negative vibes. As some agents said:

> I always practice professionalism by showing more empathy to them or by putting myself in their shoes. If they are angry or irate over the phone, *wag mo silang sabayan* [don't be like them] but rather kill them with your kindness. –*Agent Marx*

> If my Canadian customers are angry or irate over the phone, I just endure more patience and understanding. I always acted like a shock absorber, rants must go in to your left ear and it should go out of the right ear. –*Agent Jane*

Other ways of adapting the emotional labor requirements involve acting like a numb and being tolerant with the discrimination and profanities of irate customers. As an example, some Filipino agents (16 informants) reveal that they just ignore their customers' profanities because these do not directly pointing to them but are rather expressions of their frustrations toward the purchased product. In turn, other Filipino agents (9 informants) perceive that profanities and cursing among Americans are just ordinary things and mundane practices so they just tolerate it. Meanwhile, some agents (7 informants) say that profane words in the English language can be tolerated, so they just ignored them. Unlike the Filipino profane words, cursing in the English language do not strike the Filipino agent as hard.

> Just ignore their profane words, it only hurts when you hear it for the first time, but as time goes by, you can tolerate their profane words. The profane words are in English, so you can tolerate them easily, they don't strike you much, 'Putang ina mo!' [A Filipino curse which means 'son of a bitch'] is worse in the ear than 'fuck you.'–*Agent Wel*

To win the customer's satisfaction, a Filipino agent needs to do a successful performance as a caring and helping customer service representative. The Filipino agents thus always aim to look sincere in front of their virtual audience, the customers, at the expense of suppressing their real feelings—e.g. physically tired, mentally exhausted, and emotionally drained. This finding further bolsters Hochschild's (1983) theory on emotional labor that the greediness of capitalism to

maximize the appropriation of surplus-value has already reached the point of managing and manipulating not only their workers' physical bodies, but also their hearts.

The practice of 'masking the negative, while exaggerating the positive' also points to what Goffman (1959) coins 'mystification,' a technique used for the "impression management" as well for the "maintenance of social distance" in order to "provide a way in which awe can be generated and sustained in the audience" (67). All negativities (bad mood, feeling, or emotion) can jeopardize and ruin the virtual performance of Filipino agents as well as the impression they want to portray toward their irate customers. Thus, a successful execution of 'virtual mystification' is tantamount to a successful performance as a caring agent.

3.2.5. Professionalism and the Filipino Work Practice of "Pakikisama"

Filipino agents do not only maintain social and cultural connections to their foreign customers, but they also use adaptive practices and exert emotional labor to keep good relationship with other actors of the third party, offshore call center: i.e. foreign clients; immediate supervisors; and fellow agents. If the clients are the representatives of the mother corporation from onshore, the immediate supervisors [e.g. Operation Supervisor (OS), Operation Manager (OM), and Team Leader (TL)] are the middlemen between the third party vendors and call center agents (Ponce, 2015:134). All the rules, new processes, and imperatives coming from the third party vendor company and even from the mother corporation are cascaded down by the immediate supervisors to the call center agents (ibid).

32 agents opine that they maintain good work relationships with their immediate supervisors and foreign clients by practicing professionalism. One way of practicing professionalism is by listening, trusting, and following the foreign clients' and immediate supervisors' work recommendations. As disclosed by Marx, Wel, JunJun, Sendo, Jose, Jay-R, and

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Mico, before these supervisors got their positions, they were already experienced as agents, thus they mastered and already knew the problems, processes and even the techniques that revolved around the production area and calls. Some agents practiced professionalism not only toward their immediate supervisors but also toward their fellow agents. As some informants put it, agents must be professional with their fellow agents by separating their personal relationship and work relationship with their fellow agents. Within the work, they must do and focus only on their job as an agent, but after work, they could be friends.

The Filipino work practice of *'pakikisama'* (being cooperative) is also another response of the majority (24 agents) to maintain harmonious relationship with their immediate supervisors and fellow agents. *'Pakikisama'* with the immediate supervisors is shown through active participation during huddle meetings. In these meetings, the immediate supervisors share their best practices in handling calls that can be emulated by the agents.

Also, some agents express their *'pakikisama'* by reading the feelings and situation of their immediate supervisor and/or fellow agents, if they are in a good mood, if they are in hurry to meet the deadlines or not. This is almost similar with Filipino agents' negotiation skills toward customers. To achieve it, the Filipino agents must know how to ride and how to jive with the trip of their immediate supervisors and/or fellow agents.

Other agents practice *'pakikisama'* with their fellow agents and immediate supervisors by being participative in the on-work activities that kill the boredom and release the work stress. Like for instance, Filipino agents design the team board and 'Kudos' message board[10] together; they decorate the team table and workstation related to the holidays and occasions in the Philippines

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[10] Kudos message is a congratulatory and thank you message expressed by a customer to an agent who had resolved problems. This is one mechanism of the third party vendor company to motivate their agents to work harder.

(i.e. Halloween, Christmas, Graduation/School motif, Valentine's day, New Year, etc.) and even events in the country where the account is located (i.e. Thanksgiving day, US Independence day, etc.); and they actively participate in cheering and role playing contests. Among male homosexual and male bisexual informants (Brylle, Filo, and Julius), they maintain good relationship and 'pakikisama' with their immediate supervisors and/or fellow agents by throwing punchlines and jokes in the midst of a busy and hectic work life within the production.

3.3. Chapter Discussion

The technologies of governing as well as the practices of mandatory adaptation imposed by third party, offshore call centers have influenced Filipino agents to innovate voluntary strategies of work adaptation. This innovation shows Filipino agents' ability to adjust and to comply with the overarching work structure of call centers and to engage with foreign customers, immediate supervisors, and fellow agents. All these adaptations—i.e. cultural and linguistic adaptation, developing the probing and negotiation skills, fulfilling the emotional labor requirements, professionalism and *'pakikisama'*—also help them to fulfill their roles as third party, offshore agents; hence achieving successful performance and impression management or presentation of the self in front of the virtual audience (i.e. foreign customers) and supervisors and fellow agents, notes Goffman (1978).

In turn, their practices of adaptation that comply with the company's rules prove their absorption of the neoliberal work value and corporate norms. The compliance thus shows the *partial success* of the neoliberal engineering (Ong, 2006) of Filipino agents' souls. It is only *partial* because Filipino agents have work adaptations that violate the work rules and company's policies. I will discuss in the next chapter the Filipino agents' practices of resistance and manipulation that challenge the overarching structure and hegemonic work regime of third party, offshore call centers in the Philippines.

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CHAPTER 4: The Power of the Victimized Workers?
Filipino Agents' Practices of Resistance, Agency, and Reflexivity

This chapter delineates the reflexive and agentive capacity of Filipino agents within the overarching structure of third party, offshore call centers by exposing their power to practice resistance within the work. Filipino agents mask not only their negative moods during the calls, but also their resistance toward their foreign customers. They do not directly display their resistance because they must maintain ostensible good social relations with their customers. All adaptive practices that I will present below, however, are against the rules of the third party vendor.

4.1. The Power of the Mute Button

The typical and acceptable functions of the mute button, according to some operation managers and informant agents, involve: a) preventing to disrupt the call conversation from unnecessary sounds like coughing, sneezing, clearing the throat, or noise from the production; and b) seeking assistance or asking questions from a supervisor or a fellow agent. There are two ways of pushing the mute button: soft hold and hard hold. The customer does not notice a soft hold because he is not informed by the agent about it. In contrast, during a hard hold the customer is reminded by the agent that he will be put on hold, waiting for a couple of minutes while listening to entertaining sound or the company's jingle-advertisement.

Some agents use the soft hold mute button to mask their annoyance toward their irate customers, a form of everyday resistance (Scott, 1990). Filipino agents strategize to create hidden transcripts and backtalk to the customers by pushing the phone's mute button so that it cannot be heard by the customer. Right timing in muting/unmuting the phone and proper skill in doing backtalk/front talk to customers are required to conduct this practice, which I call 'muted hidden transcripts' (Ponce, 2015; Scott, 1990). A great emotional labor is needed to execute this form of resistance; particularly oscillating between the feelings of being annoyed/irritated and

emphatic/helpful. They use the soft hold moment to speak out anything behind their minds, e.g. customers' stupidity; disgusts over customers' profanities and lies; expressions of sarcasm; etc.

> If I could not take anymore their bad words and profanities, I muted the phone then I also told them, *"You're son of a bitch! Shut up! Liar!"* then I suddenly changed my mood when I unmuted the phone: *"Yes sir, I understand your side, sorry for the inconvenience, on behalf of the company, rest assure I will fix your issues at earliest possible time.*" It takes time to practice this kind of sarcasm, I am not like this before, but I need to change myself so that I could adapt with the stress of the work, with the stress from my customer, fake it till you make it, this is an art. –*Agent Den*

Some Filipino agents react to their customers based on their 'mood.' If they were in a 'good mood,' they just rode along their customer's trip. In contrast, if they were in a 'bad mood,' they practiced 'muted hidden transcript,' and then created lies and drama that would make the customer to drop the phone. However this practice can jeopardize their work status, as agent Jeng reveals:

> To those pervert American customers, if I am in a good mood, I just ignored them and I just rode on their trip. I remember when one customer told me: *"Can you suck my penis before I purchase your product?"* and then I replied: *"Yes darling, I can suck your penis if you purchase 15 sets of my product!"* But if I am in bad mood, I muted the phone and then I said: *"Fucking shit! Mother fucker! Pervert!"* Sometimes I intentionally pretended I did not hear them: "Hello sir? I cannot hear you? Hello sir? Are you still there?" and then they dropped the call. But if our QAs would possibly check and review my call, I may be suspended in my work, with God's grace I haven't been caught.

By looking at the pattern of my informant agents' responses, all agents who handle American, British, and Canadian accounts (23 agents) say they practice the 'muted hidden transcripts.' However, majority of those who work in an Australian account (10 agents) reveal they do not practice it because they feel that most Australian customers are friendlier and more laidback compared to American customers who are too impatient and very irate, so there was little reason to use the 'muted hidden transcript.' During my four-day immersion in CallExpress where I also handled Australian customers, our coach enjoined us to not push the mute button because some Australian customers preferred to hear noise in their background than hearing eerie silence. According to our coach, Australian customers can recognize if they hear no noise in the

background over the phone and they do not like it because they do not want to be talked behind their back. Hence, this statement manifests that most Australian customers are aware about the practice of 'muted hidden transcripts.'

For some agents, they mask their resistance through 'muted hidden transcripts' because these are their expressions of humanness and personhood, *'a human who has an emotion and a person who has also a reaction,'* say agents Flora and DJ. Applying Goffman (1959), the mute function in a sense can be considered as the virtual backstage of the call center, providing Filipino agents an opportunity to do their business for a few seconds and then fix and straighten themselves up to resume the front stage performance (Fabros, 2007). In this regard, the mute button creates a sudden yet temporary virtual backstage for Filipino agents where 'the performance can relax; they can drop their front, forego speaking their lines, and step out of character' (Ibid: 98). Moreover, it permits them to breathe and escape from the pressure of the work performance as well as to critique power, in this case, of the customers', that goes on offstage and also allows them to resist in a surreptitious way against the tightly controlled, highly monitored work structure (Ponce, 2015; Scott, 1990). All these practices of everyday resistance related to phone muting aim for saving customer relations, but also to deliberately impose will and assert agency; hence a manifestation of Filipino agents' consciousness on the power-relations within the work. By masking the resistance through pushing the mute button, the Filipino agent thus straddles contradiction. On the outside, "the Filipino agents appear to be able to revert effortlessly from one voice to the other, where a midsentence switch is a continuous flow of contradictory tone and ideas" (Fabros, 2007:198). Therefore, the adeptness and seamlessness of Filipino agents can be seen in this practice where they can fleetingly find an opportunity; intentionally act in resistance; and clandestinely talk back, without being heard or noticed by the customers.

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4.2. The Power to Manipulate Metrics

High performance scores (i.e. CSAT, AHT, Upselling, etc.) are crucial for all actors involved in third party, offshore call centers as mentioned earlier. For Filipino agents, it means work mobility, i.e. promotion and salary incentives. For third party vendors, this is tantamount with higher chances of winning the contract of the onshore corporation. For the onshore corporation, agents' high performance metrics can be translated into more profit. In the last chapter, I discussed the 'acceptable' ways of work adaptation among Filipino agents to achieve good performance metrics. They are considered 'acceptable' because they do not violate the rules and policies set by the third party, offshore call center. However, these Filipino agents do not only practice these 'acceptable' ways, but also impose their agency through manipulating some of the performance metrics.

During my participant observation in CallExpress, our supervisor emphasized that we needed to prioritize AHT since we were a queueing account. He encouraged us to observe and do 'call barging' to veteran agents in order to get techniques. I observed some agents in CallExpress practiced the *"pitik"* (or call flicking) just to shorten their AHT. Mara (not her real name, she seated in the right side of my work station in CallExpress) deliberately pushed the 'release button' before the customer talked over the phone in order to lower her AHT. The computation for AHT is the sum of the seconds/minutes of all calls divided by the number of calls. The required AHT in CallExpress is 300-360 seconds. The one second call due to *"pitik"* or call flicking pulls down the AHT and results in a negatively skewed distribution. She needed to do it without being caught by her fellow agents and TL. If Mara noticed that her AHT had already exceeded the standard, she started to practice *'pitik'* (call flicking). "*Yun 'oh! pumitik ka na naman Mara, hahaha*" [You made call flicking again Mara, (laughing)] Marco said to Mara. Mara replied Marco with a smile and said: *"Fuck you! Haha! Marinig ka ni TL"* [Fuck you! (laughing), be quiet TL may hear you].

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This practice of *"pitik"* (call flicking) was also done by some informants particularly by Ynes, Deng, Flora, Chiz, Marx, Venus, Jane, and Clarence. However, Clarence and Chiz did not call this practice as *"pitik"* but they called it *"Hadukken."*[11]

If the team leader or the supervisor strictly wanders and observes around the production, it is difficult to execute the 'call flicking,' so other informant agents think of other shrewd strategies to release calls and to lower AHT such as: a) if they feel that the customer talks too much and is very uncooperative, they immediately transfer the call to other agents even if it is not necessary; b) they act as if the signal fluctuates, pretend they do not hear the customer on the other line, and wait for the customer to drop the call; and c) they destroy the phone's wire to disconnect the call and make a drama to the immediate supervisor that they experience technical problems.

Another unacceptable strategy of achieving good metrics was called by DJ as "*Bengbang*." DJ worked before in a British Surveying Outbound Account, where he asked some questions to the British donors if they can donate money in UK's charity programs or not. "*Bengbang*" (a call center colloquial term coined within the office of DJ) describes the agent's way of forcing the caller to say "Yes," even if their answer is undecided. He usually asked 15 questions to the potential donor and every donor's "Yes" response is equivalent to 8 UK Pounds. In DJ's account, he was required to achieve a quota of 600 UK Pounds per day. To achieve it, he did the practice of "*Bengbang*." If the quality analyst of the calls found out that an agent provoked the donors to response 'Yes' even if they were undecided, it was a ground for termination. DJ further explained, just like the *"pitik"* (call flicking), *"bengbang"* also requires the right timing and luck (luck as to be uncaught by the QAs and the management) to perform and execute successfully.

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[11] Hadukken is a superpower exerted by Ryu and Ken in Streetfighter. It requires proper timing before it will be released to the enemy. Having an analogy in releasing calls, agents should also know the right timing before clicking the release button.

Similar to *"bengbang,"* some outbound and hybrid Filipino agents also manipulate their upsell rate by upgrading the purchased product without the customer's knowledge or full consent. Some agents, particularly Venus and Leni, revealed that there were some American customers, especially the more affluent, who just paid their bills monthly without checking the current status of their purchased product. According to Leni, in order to execute it successfully, an agent must check first the customer's call transaction and payment history. Those customers who only call twice or less for two consecutive months, but actively paying their monthly bills using credit cards are the easiest potential 'victims' for this forced and manipulated upselling. If there are no complaints from the customer, the agent is too fortunate. In contrast, any negative reactions from the customer regarding the illegal upselling can lead to agent's termination.

The existence of these modes of metrics manipulation practiced by Filipino agents challenges the total control and monitoring as well as the intense surveillance of third party, offshore call centers. While Filipino agents are aware that different technologies of governing of call center have technical capabilities to totally monitor and see every agent, they are also conscious that those capabilities are incompletely exercised (Fabros, 2007; Ponce, 2015). Due to the huge number of customers calling every day, the management cannot listen and even evaluate each call even if technically they could. Hence, the agents' practices of resistance and metrics manipulation demonstrate a certain level of agility and sophistication (ibid). However, this does not imply that the call center's work structure and governmentality that invade and control the everyday work experiences of Filipino agents are weak. This rather proves how dexterous and agile yet opportunistic Filipino agents are to recognize ruptures of the call center work structure and use them as opportunities to impose their self-reflexivity and agency in order to survive their oppressive and overwhelming work condition (Fabros, 2007; Ponce, 2015; Resse et. al., 2013).

4.2.1. Reasons for Manipulating Metrics

When I asked my Filipino agent informants regarding their views and reasons for manipulating metrics, the majority's dominant answer was 'pressure' (20 agents): particularly they felt pressured by their immediate supervisors and fellow agents. The pressure from supervisors can happen in two ways: a) when the set deadline by the immediate supervisor to achieve the target is far-fetched, this thus tempts and triggers the agents to manipulate the metrics; and b) in some cases, the immediate supervisor can be the mastermind of these anomalies where he enjoins and provokes the agents to do the manipulation by promising them that they will both gain benefits from it, either in forms of salary increase or appraisal. Meanwhile, the pressure from fellow agents occurs when some agents manipulate metrics because they preclude themselves to be stigmatized as 'weaklings' and 'losers' of the team. In the Philippine third party, offshore call centers, Filipino agents are distributed into different teams. The performance of an agent affects the whole team performance. If a team has a good performance, they can receive monetary incentives and other bonuses like gadgets, gift certificates, all-expense tour, etc. In contrast, a bad performance from an agent can pull down the team metrics; thus pressuring them to practice metrics manipulations and other anomalies. Lastly, the pressure from fellow agents takes place when the majority in the production practices 'unacceptable' ways of attaining high metrics, as Ynes puts it: *"Even you don't like to do it, but almost everyone does it, you will be pressured and tempted to do the same."*

Other factors mentioned by Filipino agents that affect their decisions to manipulate metrics involve: a) curiosity (8 agents); b) act of selfishness, i.e. earning more money from incentives (5 agents); and c) *'bad-apple-effect'* or being influenced by someone who is very professional in manipulating metrics (3 agents). According to Venus and Raul and to operation supervisor Jomarie, those professionals are mostly call center job hoppers who are much exposed to different call center production systems and have more confidence to do anomalies in attaining high metric

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scores. According to the operation manager from the other company I interviewed, this was sometimes the reason why some Philippine call centers more preferred to hire 'call center virgins' or those who do not have call center work experience compared to veteran call center hoppers.

4.3. The Power to Exit: The Last Resort to Resist

When the power of the mute button and the power to manipulate metrics have become less effective for Filipino agents to resolve their work issues and to cope up individual stress, the last resort to resist is the power to exit. I argue that this is the highest expression of individual resistance among Filipino agents because it ends their consent, both active and passive consent notes Buci-Glucksmann (Showstack, 1982), to the neoliberal reengineering and hegemonic work structures of the third party, offshore call center.

The power to exit is the capacity of Filipino agents to transfer easily to another call center company or to find another job. The vast majority of the informants (34 agents) viewed that it is easy to enter and to leave call center work because of its overwhelming proliferation in the Philippines. The informants' statements such as: "*It is fine to do call center-hopping because call center jobs are available everywhere*" and "*If you are tired and really feel oppressed by your company, then leave*" manifest the normalization of turnover in the Filipino agents' consciousness. The ever-increasing turnover rate among Filipino agents remains the industry's major issue. In fact, the Contact Center Association of the Philippines (CCAP) said that in 2014 "the Philippines holds the highest turnover rate worldwide of 60 to 80 percent."[12] This high turnover phenomenon is thus the reason why there is an everyday hiring in Philippine call centers and why there are many reengineering strategies imposed by third party, offshore call centers to keep Filipino agents in the industry (the latter will be discussed thoroughly in the next chapter).

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[12] http://www.bpotruestories.com/understanding-key-drivers-to-call-center-attrition/

4.4. Collective but still Individualized: The Paradox of their Resistance

According to some informants, when "muted hidden transcripts" and "manipulating metrics" are practiced, elements of collective action are present: collective learning and collective covering up. Collective learning happens when some veteran agents clandestinely transmit knowledge and techniques to "newbies" or "call center virgins" on how to successfully execute metrics manipulation and muted hidden transcript. While collective covering up occurs when they conceal each other's anomalies from their immediate supervisors and they just condone and are being tolerant about the metrics manipulation (like the case of agent Mara in CallExpress).

Though there are collective elements in some Filipino agents' practices of resistance, the potential for these practices to generate new repertoires of contention, however, is too slim. If Filipino agents will utilize their resistance to disrupt or challenge the system in order to improve the work condition of the collective, new repertoires of contention will emerge. The existence of high individualism in their work dispositions, however, proves the contrary. Statements such as, *'You need to survive on your own'* and *'No one can help you except yourself,'* as well as the values of being too competitive and very conscious on performance metrics are traces of high individualism among Filipino agents and this resonates the findings of Resse et. al. (2013). Further, by scrutinizing the Filipino agents' practices of muted hidden transcripts, metrics manipulation, and call center hopping, their motivations for practicing them are also highly individualized. Thus, there is a paradox in some of their practices of resistance: the execution has collective elements, but the reasons are still individualized.

Filipino agents use their practices of resistance only as urgent strategies to deal with their condition; assert their agency and reflexivity; position themselves in the power-relations; and above all to survive work. They neither aim to facilitate social change nor to organize collective

resistance in order to alter their life course and work condition. For now they only manifest in forms of Scott's weapons of the weak, a passive-aggressive form of everyday resistance.

4.5. Labor Unions in the Philippines and the Hesitation of Filipino Agents

Though the 1974 Philippine labor code and the 1987 Philippine constitution guarantee the establishment and promotion of labor unions, according to the Trade Union Congress of the Philippines (TUCP)—which is the Philippines' largest trade union center—majority of the Filipino workers are still reluctant to join labor unions. The sources of reluctance involve the: a) implicit discouragement from the management; b) decline of the political will of most unions; and c) common belief that joining labor unions and protests have no direct benefits for them (Herrera, 2014).[13] This hesitation towards unionism can be also traced among Filipino agent informants.

The majority (30 agents) has also negative views on joining labor unions and protests because membership and participation can lead to work termination and discrimination from fellow agents. Moreover, they all believe that their work issues can be heard better during a town hall meeting or during a team open forum, and can be properly addressed by the HR Management Office through individual counseling or consultation, instead of joining a labor union, participating in a protest, or posting grievances online. Further, 19 agents mentioned that working conditions in call centers are better than in factories; hence joining a protest is a nugatory idea. The majority (29 agents) also revealed that the process of problem resolution as well as the facilitation of collective bargaining agreement (CBA) in labor unions are tedious and take a lot of time. Above all these, they all believe that what they really need are immediate and urgent solutions to confront and to survive their everyday work issues. This shows that they are more reliant on the power of the mute button; the power to manipulate metrics; and the power to exit than the power of collective action.

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[13] Herrera, Ernesto F. (24 November 2014). Are labor unions still relevant? Manila Times. Accessed on June 7, 2017 http://www.manilatimes.net/labor-unions-still-relevant/144141/

4.6. Chapter Discussion

The power of the mute button, the power to manipulate metrics, and the power to exit demonstrate the reflexive and agentive capacity (Giddens, 1984) of Filipino agents to adapt as well as to challenge the overarching structure of third party, offshore call centers. This findings can repudiate the assumption of false consciousness that subordinated groups cannot resist against hegemonic structures (Scott, 1990). In muted hidden transcripts, we see them performing the public transcripts (Scott, 1985; 1990) of being a caring agent, but at the same time subtly resisting and clandestinely criticizing the powerful, the foreign customers. During metrics manipulation, we observe their false compliance that contests the hegemonic work structures. In call center hopping, we see how they end their active and passive consent—similar to thick (active) and thin (passive) forms of false consciousness, argues Scott (1990:72)—to their dehumanizing work. When all these are executed, we thus see the Filipino agents' adeptness in reading the situation, finding opportunities, and situating themselves in the work's power relations.

Though their resistance can disrupt the call center system, the disruption is not tantamount to the total collapse of the call centers' operation. If Filipino agents are seamless to detect ruptures in their work and use these cracks as 'open spaces' to practice everyday resistance (Scott, 1990); the global call centers, as children of neoliberalism and global capitalism, are more intelligent and resilient to resolve the glitches of their system and can mercilessly terminate those agents who could not bow to their bureaucratic governmentality. It thus proves that the Filipino agents' individualized practices of everyday resistance are only weapons of the weak (Scott, 1985), a passive-aggressive form of resistance. I argue that Filipino agents can do more than using these weapons of the weak because they possess many forms of capital compared to other victimized workers of neoliberalism such as low-skilled migrants and factory workers. I will discuss in the next chapter their actions [and movements] beyond everyday resistance.

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CHAPTER 5: Beyond Everyday Resistance and the Future
A Successful Reengineering Project?

The dominant literature on neoliberalism assumes that there is a smooth movement and seamless absorption of the neoliberal knowledge from the global scale to local actors involved; hence the assumption of a homogenized and universalized process (Ong, 2006:219). This assumption, as influenced by Sassen's (2001) global city theory, focuses too much on how to comply with the neoliberal norms and fails to recognize the variegated reactions of its citizens towards the neoliberal reengineering. To address the gap of this assumption and to assess the success of the reengineering process of the third party, offshore call center for its workers—an offspring of neoliberalism or predatory capitalism[14]—an investigation of Filipino agents' work practices of compliance and non-compliance (practices of resistance); work histories and future plans; as well as their intersections is necessary. By doing this, I can also provide more dynamic picture of Filipino agents, instead of showing transfixed and victimized images.

5.1. Work-Value Reengineering: Partially Successful

Following Ong (2006), reengineering refers to "the conversion of neoliberal workers to become self-disciplining professionals who can remanage themselves according to corporate rules and practice" (23). Thus, one indicator of successful reengineering is making the workers more adaptable to the work regime; in particular the workers' internalization of neoliberal corporate norms of self-initiative, self-management, and self-responsibility (222). By analyzing the case of Filipino agents, we observed some of their adaptive work practices showing the absorption of neoliberal corporate norms such as their 'acceptable' practices to achieve good performance metrics; personal strategies to improve their cultural and linguistic capital; work professionalism

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[14] Aihwa Ong (2006) equates neoliberalism with predatory capitalism.

and the practice of *"pakikisama"*; and ways of maintaining good relationship with foreign customers through emotional labor and impression management (see chapter 3). These adaptive work practices demonstrate the *partial success* of the reengineering of the third party, offshore call center to Filipino agents. It is only partial because the practices of everyday resistance of Filipino agents, such as 'muted hidden transcript' and 'metrics manipulation,' violate the work rules and cause system upheaval.

5.2. Cultural Reengineering: Very Successful

The cultural reengineering imposed by third party, offshore call centers to Filipino agents aims not to replace the Filipino culture, but to bring the foreign customers' culture to make a hybrid culture. If Filipino agents can embrace easily their foreign customers' language and culture and they can incorporate themselves within it, it will be easier for them to communicate and engage with their foreign customers. The strategies and techniques introduced by call centers to localize the globalized neutral English language are effective based on the majority's statement (34 agents).

One indicator proving the cultural reengineering's success to Filipino agents is the response of all informants that they improve their English skills a lot when they become part of the call center. All of them also admitted that they have imbibed and adopted the language and accent of their customers in some of their daily communication even outside the workplace. The success of cultural reengineering can also be traced when they revealed some of their lifestyle practices and dispositions that were influenced by their exposure to the culture of their foreign customers. Agents who handle American accounts believed, for example, that they have adopted the American sense of being productive, efficient in time, frank, vocal, straightforward, and independent as well as the practice of casual sex ('Fucked Buddy'; 'no strings attached'; and 'friends with benefits') and the consumption of U.S. products. On the one hand, agent Jane, who is currently handling a Canadian account and who has also a Canadian fiancée, has adopted from her Canadian clients the Canadian

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way of greeting and communicating during a business meeting. By contrast, Claire, who is presently handling a British account, did not adopt any cultural traits from her British customers, but admitted that she unconsciously uses in her daily communication some British slang words like 'mate,' 'bugger all,' 'knackered,' 'gutted,' and 'gobsmacked.' Meanwhile informants currently handling an Australian account saw themselves as having become more laid-back and friendlier, having somewhat adopted the Aussie sense of being cool and calm under stress.

Even if Filipino agent informants were much exposed to foreign culture, even if they adopted some cultural traits and language of their foreign customers and clients, even if they spoke like foreigners at work, and even if they became now global citizens practicing cosmopolitanism, surprisingly all of them are still patriotic and are proud Filipino in heart and in mind. Contrary to the notion portrayed in popular media[15] that agents still desire an imagined "America," "Canada," "United Kingdom," and "Australia," Filipino agents maintain a sense of pride on being someone who is not from these countries. Being able to perceive negative qualities of these foreign nationalities in their interactions with their customers, their sense of national pride is somehow reinforced. This thus proves two things: first that the cultural reengineering process does not dwindle the sense of national pride; and second that patriotism, cosmopolitanism, and global citizenship are not mutually exclusive.

> . . . I collect debt payment in their health insurance and school loan. I find it difficult to collect fees from them [referring to American customers]. They have many alibis and excuses to me, I am not sure if they are telling truths or lies, some would make drama over the phone, they would cry on me because they have no job, they have no food for dinner, and they have pending bills in their utilities like water, electricity, phone, internet, etc. . . Before I have the perception that there is no poverty in USA, when I entered call center my perception has totally changed. . . I prefer now to stay here in Philippines and to be remained Filipino. Unlike in the US, we respect our elders, we have rich cultural traditions, beautiful sceneries and beautiful people, and no doubt it's really more fun in Philippines.

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[15] Like the Philippine movie "Call Center Girl" (2013) and Indian movie "Outsourced" (2006)

5.3. Reengineering the Filipino Agent Souls to Stay the Work: Reasons behind the Failure

Referring back to the high turnover, the main challenge faces by Philippine call centers today is how to reengineer the Filipino agents' souls to preclude them from leaving their work. Different reengineering strategies were already innovated to reduce the industry's ever-increasing turnover rate such as additional salaries, bonuses, and other perks; different compromises; and programs aiming to maintain their work-life balance. Apart from the incentives they can get if they have good performance metrics, some companies also give additional 13th and 14th month pay to their agents. They all mentioned also that they have received many perks when they became an agent like having discounts in some coffee shops; free membership to well-known gym, swimming school, spa, nightclub, etc.; and life and health insurance card.

The health card for some agents is essential not only because it shoulders their hospitalization fee, but it also covers their medications. The case of Raul, for example, his maintenance medicines for diabetes and hypertension that cost PhP 7,000 (or 145US$) per month are covered by his health card. Some companies also add more leave credits to their agents, especially to those who are married and single parents, like additional vacation leave and leave for family day. Monetization or conversion of unused leave credits to money are also institutionalized.

Another reengineering process is the establishment of a "total institution" in some call centers in order to make the Filipino agents' work-life more balanced and happier; i.e. the presence of comfortable sleeping quarter (all agents); sex room (Jose); individual and peer counseling room (Lady, Leni, and Maita); daycare center or recreational playground with baby sitters inside the workplace (Venus); night school and open university (Shannen); gym and fitness center (Chiz and Mico); and even dormitories (JunJun and Jolly). A work atmosphere that is free from age and gender discriminations is also maintained and promoted by the company to retain their workers and attract more potential agents. Given the above mentioned reengineering strategies to modify

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the Filipino agents' souls and encourage them to stay the call center work, why is there still high turnover rate in the industry? Why is job hopping still prevalent among Filipino agents? What are their reasons for leaving the call center?

Based on the Filipino agents' narratives, I found that their reasons for leaving the call center work were not solely based on their whims and caprices. Instead their decisions to leave are social in nature (i.e. influenced by others or by the structure) and either made by: a) the mother corporation onshore (dissolution of the call center account); b) the third party vendor (*ENDO* or end of contract); and/or c) the agent himself (job hopping).

The mother corporation pulls-out the account in the third party company, based on one operation manager, due to three reasons: a) negotiating with the new third party vendor that offers a better bid in lower costs, but with lesser anomalies in performance metrics; b) transferring the whole operation to other country; and c) establishing their own captive business centers in the Philippines or offshore insourcing. To deal with this dissolution of the account, the third party vendor transfers the agents of the dissolved account in other available accounts, but this is still dependent on the agents' performance evaluation. Agents who show good performance in their dissolved account are retained, in contrast those so-called 'unproductive agents' are removed.

ENDO (or end of contract) is a slang word used by agents to refer to the termination of their employment. The renewal of contract is primarily determined by the discretion and decision of the third party vendor according to agents' performance evaluation. Probationary status is given to a starting agent. Usually, regular status can be decided only after six months of stay in the company or after full completion of the initial contract. Labor flexibility is thus the new work set up of the call center as being impacted by the global restructuring and offshore outsourcing.

Table 4. The Work History of Filipino Call Center Agents

#	Name	Job 1	Job 2	Job 3	Job 4	Job 5	Job 6	Job 7
1	Anna	Student Assistant (3 mos.)	US Account (1 yr. and 1 mo.)					
2	Brylle	IT Staff (4 yrs.)	Encoder	US Account (8 mos.)				
3	Chiz	Bill Delivery (3 mos.)	US Account (11 mos.)	US Account (1 yr.)	US Account (1 yr. and 3 mos.)	Australian Account (1 yr. and 3 mos.)		
4	Claire	US Account (4 mos.)	US Account (6 mos.)	US Account (2 yrs. and 1 mo.)	UK account (1 yr. and 4 mos.)	US Account (1 yr.)		
5	Clarence	US Account (5 mos.)	US Account (7 mos.)	US Account (2 yrs.)				
6	Den	US Account (7 mos.)	US Account (2 yrs.)					
7	DJ	UK Account (1 yr. and 6 mos.)	US Account (1 yr.)	US Account (1 yr. and 6 mos.)				
8	Filo	Navy Dancer (1 yr.)	Canadian Account (3 yrs.)	Australian Account (1 yr. and 4 mos.)	US Account (1 yr.)			
9	Flora	US Account (4 mos.)	US Account (1 yr. and 3 mos.)					
10	Gela	Canadian Account (5 mos.)	Australian Account (3 yrs. and 8 mos.)					
11	Hannah	US Account (5 mos.)						
12	Jane	NGO- Secretariat (3 mos.)	Canadian Account (1 yr. and 7 mos.)	Canadian Account (9 mos.)				
13	Jay-R	US Account (6 mos.)	Australian Account (1 yr. and 5 mos.)					
14	Jeng	Parking Teller (5 yrs.)	Factory Worker (1 yr.)	US Account (1 yr. and 2 mos.)				
15	Jose	US Account (1 yr.)	US Account (6 mos.)	US Account (6 mos.)	UK Account (1 yr. and 6 mos.)	Australian Account (1 yr. and 6 mos.)		
16	Julius	US Account (2 mos.)	US Account (1 yr.)	Australian Account (1 yr. and 9 mos.)	US Account (4 mos.)			
17	Kyla	Grocery Cashier (1 yr. and 2 mos.)	Canadian Account (9 mos.)	UK Account (6 mos.)	Australian Account (6 mos.)	Australian Account (2 yrs.)		
18	Lady	Sales Lady (2 yrs.)						
19	Leni	UK Account (1 yr. and a month)	US Account (6 mos.)	Australian Account (2 yrs. and 3 mos.)				
20	Maita	US Account (7 mos.)						
21	Mico	Gardener (3 mos.)	US Account (5 mos.)	Micro-Finance (1 mo.)	US Account (1 yr. and 1 mo.)	Australian Account (1 yr. and 7 mos.)		
22	Nics	US Account (5 mos.)	US Account (5 mos.)	Australian Account (6 mos.)	Australian Account (1 yr. and 11 mos.)			
23	Nile	US Account (3 mos.)	Australian Account (2 yrs. and 6 mos.)	US Account (6 mos.)				
24	Raul	Computer Comp. (3 yrs.)	Family Business (4 years)	US Account (2 yrs.)	Australian Account (4 yrs.)			
25	Sendo	US Account (1 yr. and 4 mos.)						
26	Tin	Australian Account (2 yrs. and 4 mos.)						
27	Venus	Law Firm (2 yrs.)	American Account (2 years)					
28	Zhia	American Account (3 weeks)	American Account (1 yr. and 2 mos.)					
29	Wel	American Account (1 yr. and 3 mos.)	American Account (2 yrs. And 3 mos.)					
30	Ynes	Travel Coordinator (6 mos.)	American Account (6 mos.)	American Account (4 yrs.)	American Account (1 yr.)	American Account (9 mos.)	American Account (9 mos.)	American Account (1 yr. and 4 mos.)
31	Deng	Marketing Asst. (6 mos.)	American Account (4 yrs.)	American Account (6 mos.)	American Account (1 yr.)	American Account (1 yr. and 6 mos.)		
32	Jenny	American Account (2 weeks)	American Account (6 mos.)	American Account (1 yr. and 3 mos.)	American Account (1 yr. and 6 mos.)			
33	JunJun	American Account (1 yr.)	American Account (3 yrs. and 2 mos.)	American Account (11 mos.)	American Account (1 yr. and 4 mos.)			
34	Shannen	Service Crew (2 mos.)	American Account (1 mo.)					
35	Marx	American Account (2 mos.)	American Account (1 yr. and 4 mos.)	American Account (4 mos.)	American Account (5 mos.)	American Account (6 mos.)	American Account (1 yr. and 2 mos.)	
36	Jolly	Janitor (1 yr. and 1 mo.)	American Account (6 mos.)	American Account (9 mos.)	American Account (27 days)	American Account (9 mos.)	American Account (6 mos.)	American Account (1 yr. and 2 mos.)

Legend: Green- Non-Call Center Work; Yellow- Call Center Work; Black- Vacant for More Than 6 mos.

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By analyzing the Filipino agents' fragmented work history (see Table 4), only 11 out of 36 agents stayed in their current account for 2 years or more. The informants' mean length of stay in their present account is 20 months or 1 year and 8 months. Moreover, on the average, informants had already worked in 2-3 call center accounts. There are several manifestations of how "ENDO" or labor flexibility has become a taken-for-granted phenomenon among Filipino agents, based on the manner in which they describe their call center employment patterns. One indication relates to the way they characterize the duration of their employment. *"Pansamantalang trabaho"* (temporary job); stepping stone; and *"panandalian"* (momentary) are the illustrations they used to describe their call center job. Furthermore, some informants compared call center work in disposable items ("battery," "napkin," and "plastic bags"). The quality of call center agents' work histories goes the same with other worker victims of neoliberalism; e.g. low-skilled migrants and factory workers. Also, the Filipino agents' disposable work history resonates with the British agents' experiences according to Lloyd (2013).

Testimonies like "it is normal in the industry" and "almost all agents go through it" were common responses when informants' views were probed about such practices. These articulations indicate the normalization and incorporation of ENDO in their mundane vocabularies. Bauman's liquid labor can be manifested in the fragmentation of work histories and the normalization of such practice of agents. Liquidity in work is the metaphor for the condition where labor identities and characters cannot keep their shape (Bauman, 2001: 29; cited in Curato, 2013:4).

The prevalence of job hopping among Filipino agents is symptomatic of the third party, offshore call center's failure to preclude the rising rate of attrition. Despite the reengineering process to keep them working in the industry through bunches of promising compromises and offers, Filipino agents still opt to leave due to variegated and interconnected organizational and

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personal reasons such as: a) dissatisfaction with the management, e.g. delayed in giving performance bonus and promised allowances; b) better salary offer by another call center company; c) inconsiderate immediate supervisor i.e. Team Leader; and d) conflict with their fellow call center agents, which can be either work related or personal.

However, all these reasons cited by Filipino informant agents cannot be exclusively attributed to them because these reasons to leave the work can be also traced to other low-skilled workers of neoliberalism. I do not argue that these factors are invalid, but I just want to reiterate that the case of Filipino agents is different. I already delineated in previous chapters that Filipino agents can adapt, manipulate, and resist their work regime. However, there are past studies showing the capacity of some low-skilled Chinese immigrants (Shi, 2008) and Chinese Factory Workers (Li, 2012) to express their everyday resistance and everyday politics. These expressions are nevertheless weapons of the weak, notes Scott (1985), but Filipino agents can move beyond the practices of everyday resistance. The nuance of Filipino agents from other low-skilled workers is thus the former's possession of stronger cultural capital that allows them not only to survive their present work condition, but also to better contemplate the future.

Apart from the cultural and linguistic capital gained by Filipino agents when they became part of the industry, i.e. bilingualism and practices of cosmopolitanism, the majority also possessed college and associate diploma (21 agents) and undergraduate education (10 agents), which are forms of institutional cultural capital, according to Bourdieu (1990). Meanwhile the remaining 5 agents are graduating college students (3 agents) and high school graduates (2 agents). In terms of future plans, the 3 graduating agents (Anna, Hannah, and Lady) stated during the interview that they only used to work in call center in order to financially support their college studies, and did not see themselves pursuing a long-time career in call center work; hence they wanted to resign

from their job after graduation to pursue "real" profession. These agents' aspirations for leaving the call center and then pursuing a "real" profession based on the college degree they earned also echo the statements of all Filipino agents holding diplomas (21 agents) and college undergraduate informants (7 agents). In their minds, working in a call center was not a long-term option but was useful in allowing them to earn enough to survive while giving them time to better contemplate the future. The dominant responses of Filipino agents regarding their future plans involve: a) using their license (as a teacher, nurse, etc.) and pursuing their "real" profession; b) establishing their own business; c) pursuing graduate studies; and d) working in another country.

Unlike the majority of uneducated and low-skilled Filipino workers, who do not speak English fluently and who have neither high school diploma nor college education experience, there are many opportunities waiting for Filipino agents apart from working in call centers. Almost all of them (35 agents) also believe that they have good 'fallback careers' or 'backup plans' if they resign their present call center work. This might be one of the reasons why they are confident to practice everyday resistance (such as 'muted hidden transcripts' and 'metrics manipulation') and they are not even afraid to lose their job and to leave the industry. All these thus show the reflexivity of Filipino agents to survive their work condition.

However, when I asked about their personal savings since the time they worked in a call center, a great majority revealed no personal savings (33 out of 36 informants). We must take into account that detailed plans for the future, notes Lloyd (2012), often "require either returning to some form of education or training or moving away from the area, both of which necessitate time, money, and hard work" (630). Therefore, this lack of personal savings implies that Filipino agents are reflexive in their 'present' call center work, but not reflexive in colonizing their future.

CHAPTER 6: Conclusion

Challenging the Victimized Images of Call Center Agents and Neoliberalism
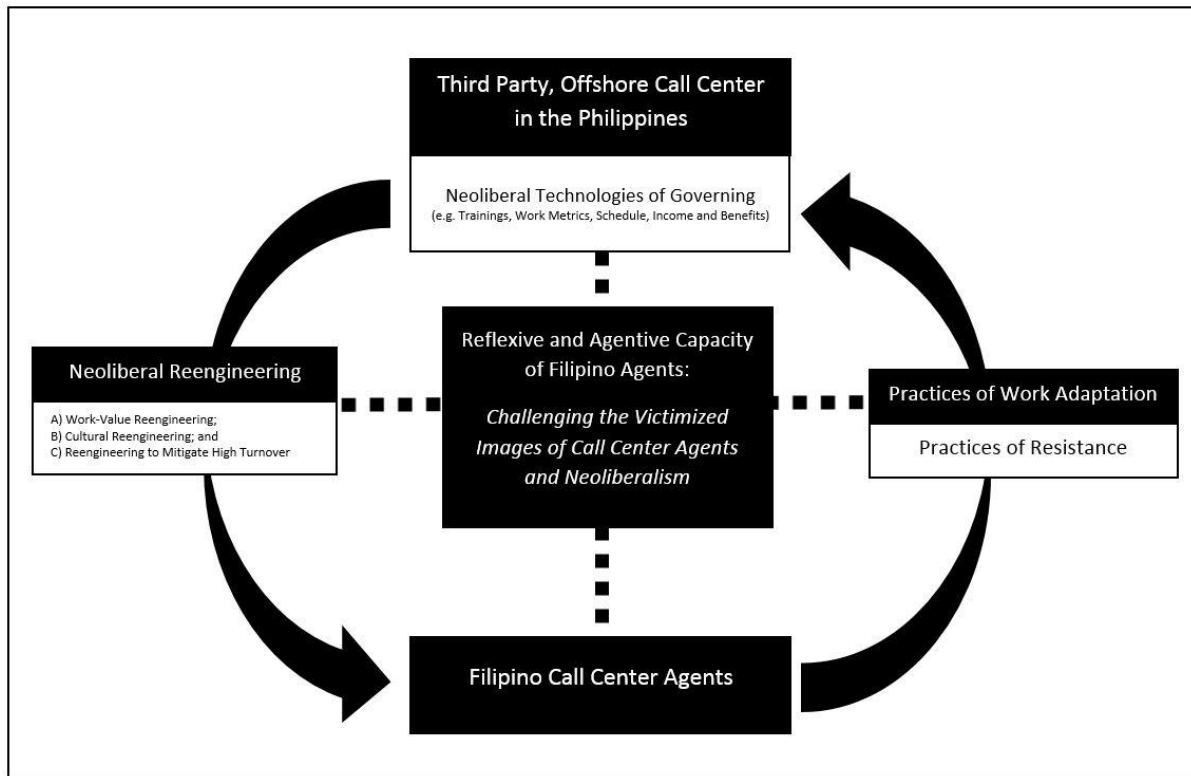

Figure 3. The Framework of the Study

This study challenges and complicates the dominant literature on the universalized and homogenized outcomes of neoliberalism to its workers as well as the victimized images of call center agents. I establish an analytical framework (Figure 3) that would hold together the empirical findings and theoretical concepts I employed in this study. I used Ong's (2006) reengineering of the soul, Scott's (1985; 1990) everyday resistance, and Giddens' reflexivity (1984; 1994) to investigate the dynamics of Filipino agents' modes of voluntary and mandatory work adaptation as well as practices of resistance and manipulation. All these work practices can be analyzed better by linking them with the neoliberal reengineering processes and technologies of governing imposed by the third party, offshore call centers, the dominant call centers in the Philippines.

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The third party, offshore call center imposed new technologies of governing (Foucault, 2000) in forms of trainings, work metrics, schedule, salary, and benefits in order to reengineer the souls of Filipino agents. I find that the neoliberal reengineering of Filipino agents' souls is a 'middling success.' The neoliberal reengineering is partially successful in imposing neoliberal work value and corporate norms and it is highly successful in shaping the subjectivities of Filipino agents to embrace cosmopolitan practices. The Filipino agents' resistance as well as their turnover, however, prove the contrary.

As I analyzed the Filipino agents' practices of resistance, they used them only as 'urgent' strategies to survive work and their reasons for practicing them are highly individualized. Though the execution of their resistance contains collective elements such as collective learning and covering-up, nevertheless they neither aim to facilitate social change nor to organize collective resistance in order to alter their life course and work condition. There is a potential for their resistance to develop repertoires of contention, however, for now they only manifest in forms of Scott's weapons of the weak, a passive-aggressive form of resistance.

The framework can also be explained using Giddens' (1984) structuration theory. One theoretical implication of this study is the empirical application of Giddens' abstract concepts of reflexivity and structuration in the actual world. In this study, the emergence of the third party, offshore call center offers new imperatives, work regimes, and new work structures to Filipino call center agents. These new work structures are enabling and constraining; they provide, in other words, opportunities and limitations to them (ibid). Call center work gives them opportunities to acquire resources [such as income, bonuses, and allowances which can be considered allocative resources for Giddens (1984:25-30) and can be a form of Bourdieu's (1990) economic capital] and other forms of cultural capital (cosmopolitan practices and bilingualism). In contrast, some work

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structures especially the rules on work scheduling (nightshift schedule) and job standards and metrics limit them from experiencing diverse work routines and unrepeated work habits (on-work constraints) and having quality time and bonding moments with their immediate family and friends outside work (off-work constraints) (Ponce, 2015:196).

These work standards also impose rules on behavior towards customers that accentuate behavior as performance or presenting a character that hides one's emotions, attitudes, and even one's nationality (ibid:197). Beyond the limitations provided by the third party, offshore call center among Filipino agents, the latter has reflexive and agentive capacity in engaging and dealing with the former's work structures and global occupational demands by constructing 'acceptable' practices of work adaptation (e.g. 'acceptable' practices to achieve good performance metrics; personal strategies to improve their cultural and linguistic capital; work professionalism and the practice of '*pakikisama*'; and ways of maintaining good relationship with foreign customers through emotional labor and impression management) and practices of everyday resistance (e.g. muted hidden transcripts; metrics manipulation; and turnover). By weaving all these narratives of work adaptation, resistance, and manipulation without ignoring the destructive nature of oppression and exploitation, we can appreciate them as reflexive individuals possessing different forms of capital and agentive capacity, not passive reactors nor victims to forces overwhelming their life courses and work conditions.

The empirical findings and concluding statements above can provide practical implications on research, policies, and social issues regarding the Philippine call center work. First, the study offered fresh insights about Filipino agents that update their work experiences, their reflexive capacity and imposition of agency within the work, factors for being hesitant about joining unions, future plans, as well as reasons for leaving the call center work. All these can be used as baseline

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data for labor unions, the Philippine government, and Philippine call centers to create programs and policies for the betterment of Filipino call center agents. In particular, according to one operation manager I interviewed, there are organizations—like the labor group Trade Union Congress of the Philippines (TUCP) and the Contact Center Association of the Philippines (CCAP)—that now build the foundation of the first national labor union for Filipino agents. These organizations can utilize my findings to think and innovate creative strategies and mobilization that would help Filipino agents to consider joining unions and to realize its importance and benefits as well as to rethink about the power of collectivism.

For the government and lawmakers, they should draft magna carta and laws, establish a government agency that would address the BPO's concern, and implement programs for the betterment of Filipino agents, in the same way that it strives to protect and uplift the morale of other workers in the Philippines. In addition, the study found that the majority of Filipino agents have no personal savings since the time they worked in a call center. Accordingly, Philippine call centers, especially the third party vendors, must think strategic thrusts and incentives that would motivate Filipino agents to manage their financial resources and to save money.

Secondly, apart from having time and financial constraints, this study relied too much on qualitative methods in order to address immediately the research questions I raised. My findings could be enhanced further and sharpened empirically by incorporating a quantitative method or conducting a mixed-method research. This can be facilitated by designing a survey questionnaire based on the study's results.

Lastly, this endeavor recommends that a new research should be pursued in order to qualitatively explore and sharpen the analysis on the reengineering, resistance, and reflexivity in Philippine call centers. The present study failed to bring out the significant differentiations of

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Filipino agents' work practices of adaptation, resistance, and manipulations in terms of gender (sexual orientation) and age (generation), which are important dimensions of one's habitus, notes Bourdieu (1990). Also, this research was unable to highlight the work experiences of other non-voice workers in the call center or BPO industry—like the chat support, account executive, IT support, etc.—what are the reengineering process and technologies of governing imposed to them? Do they encounter similar work experiences with Filipino agents? Do they have similar practices of adaptation and resistance? How do they express their reflexivity and agency within the work? For the meantime, this endeavor has just established the initial scaffolding towards deeper understanding of Filipino agents' practices of work adaptation, resistance, and reflexivity.

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