COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES OF CALL CENTER AGENTS:

A MULTI-METHOD STUDY OF SOLIDARITY BUILDING AND CONVERSATION CONTROL ON AGENT PERFORMANCE

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Abstract

Previous research has examined call center agent performance from the viewpoint of efficiency (an organizational goal) or from customer satisfaction (the callers' goal). However, few studies examine call center practice from the perspective of the agent and caller by considering the text of interactions between them. The study takes a grounded theory approach to investigate the communication strategies of call center agents at a large company in Singapore receiving calls seeking information and solutions for problems. An initial list of strategies used in calls with customers was derived from an initial sample of 75 calls. These were discussed and refined with call center agents and managers. A large corpus of 1560 calls was then sifted for calls indicating customer-induced social stress factors. These calls were scored for efficiency, courtesy and effectiveness and the results analyzed in terms of communication strategies or conversational moves. Ten key communication strategies emerged that could be categorized into two broader constructs: solidarity building and conversational control. Hierarchical modeling analysis was conducted with a nested model including demographic variables and emotional intelligence, communication competence and cultural orientation of the agents in addition to solidarity building and conversational control strategies. Results showed that solidarity building predicted courtesy, conversational control strategies predicted efficiency, and both solidarity building and conversational control predicted effectiveness. Further, conversational control strategies had a negative effect on courtesy, while solidarity had no significant impact on efficiency. Implications for future research and practice are discussed.

1 Introduction

The modern call center is a recent but rapidly spreading form of customer service and an increasingly important source of employment (Bain, Watson, Mulvey, Taylor, & Gall, 2002; Houlihan, 2002; Russell, 2008). Delivery of customer service through a centralized unit dedicated to providing services and information through telephone calls has become popular among companies because of improved telecommunications and computer technology, in addition to reduced costs (Aksin, Armony, & Mehrotra, 2007). This allows business to be transacted remotely by company personnel or by other parties via outsourcing arrangements. This may even include the offshoring of call center operations to other countries, where there are sufficient numbers of people who speak the language of the home country (Bain & Taylor, 2008; D. Das, Dharwadkar, & Brandes, 2008). Hence, countries such as India and the Philippines have benefitted from outsourcing of call center operations from the UK and the US.

Wherever these operations are sited, call centers are a huge source of employment. The US is estimated to have 47,000 centers and 2.1 million agents, Canada 305,500 agents, and Latin America 730,000 (ICMI, cited in Aksin et al., 2007). The Call Center Directory ("Listing of call centers, contact centers, BPO, VOIP companies.," 2010) reports 999 call center and Voice Over Internet Protocol (VOIP) companies listed in the Philippines.

However, this rapid increase in outsourced and remote customer service in the form of centralized call centers comes at a cost. Customer service has

emerged as an area of difficulty that is all the more acute in centers that frequently manage customer contact across national borders and on behalf of other companies (Bennington, Cummane, & Conn, 2000; Helms & Mayo, 2008).

1.1 The two problems of call centers

There are two related problems in call centers, and it may be said that nearly all the academic literature concerns these areas to some extent. First, call center work is stressful, and managers have sought ways to ameliorate its repetitive nature ("Call centres introduce stress counselling to retain staff," 2000; How to retain and motivate call centre agents," 2000). Second, customers of call centers complain about the level of service to a greater extent than face to face service (Bennington et al., 2000). The two are related in that the nature of work impacts both agents and customers.

Call center work is similar to most other forms of customer service in that it entails psychosocial risks (Smith, Jackson, & Sprigg, 2004), however it differs from other environments in the degree to which these risks are exacerbated by the particular environment of a call center. Call center work is repetitious, involves constant streams of calls (Callaghan & Thompson, 2001), often at unreasonable hours and for rather low pay with limited opportunities for advancement. In addition to the inherent difficulties of the job, agents must also contend with threats to their own personal or national identity from overseas callers with negative perceptions of call centers or outsourcing (D. Das et al., 2008; Pal & Buzzanell, 2008).

Certainly, there are advantages in call center technology in terms of centralization, efficiency and convenience, yet customer dissatisfaction with call centers appears greater with call center agents than with face-to-face service (Bennington & Cummane, 1998). There is also a perceptible drop in customer appraisals of quality when services are outsourced (Bharadwaj & Roggeveen, 2008). These perceptions of quality are strongly influenced by the behavior of employment with whom the customer has contact (Bowen & Lawler, 1992).

It has become clear that service quality in call center work is problematic, given a level of hostility among the public to call centers that according to practitioner literature ranks them lowest of six modes of service delivery in one survey ("Cashiers, not call centres, say Britain's banking customers," 2003). Some of this animus is perhaps because more than a third of complaints are not successfully resolved (Hoffbrand, 2007).

Given this discrepancy between the desired and actual customer service quality, it is not surprising that a considerable body of research exists concerning the causes and possible means to improve it. Some of this focuses on human resources considerations such as motivation, empowerment and compensation. Other studies consider manipulation of individual variables such as stress, burnout and job satisfaction. Some customer service studies involve cognitive qualities of agents, such as customer orientation, emotional intelligence or perspective taking. These studies all reveal sources of variation in call center agent performance. However, few studies consider the text level

of call centers, the agents' handling of the interaction that occurs when they answer the telephone.

1.2 The missing area of research

What is remarkable in the academic research on call center is how little work has been conducted on the primary purpose of call centers, the making of calls. While there is a rapidly growing body of literature on the characteristics of agents and organizations that contribute to positive outcomes in terms of agent wellbeing and service quality, there appears to be little that describes or makes recommendations on the most proximal point of contact between firm and customer, that of the call itself and the semiotic choices of agents in response to expressed customer needs and the expectations of the management. The text of the call remains a "black box" for researchers.

It may be expected that customer service can be improved either by coercive management practices (Taylorism) or by human resources measures such as empowerment, rewards or recognition, yet it remains true that few studies articulate clearly what behavior these interventions are intended to produce. Scholars such as, for example, Ashill, Rod, Thirkell, & Carruthers (2009) find that job resourcefulness mediates the effects of stress on service recovery performance, but such performance is assessed by a self-report scale. Axtell, Parker, Holman, & Totterdell (2007) relied on self-reports and manager ratings, while Burgers, Ruyter, Keen, & Streukens, (2000) studied caller expectations. True, Rafaeli, Ziklik, & Doucet, (2008) scan calls for "customer orientation behaviors" but limit these to strategies that exceed normal

expectations. What is missing is a parsimonious description of the basic strategies used every day by call center agents in providing customer service. The actual process of making calls and the speech behaviors, or strategies, that agents use remain to be fully explored.

1.3 The research questions

Given the concern of this study with the actual text of calls, it is necessary to define the problem that this research seeks to address. As Rafaeli, Ziklik, & Doucet (2008) note:

> If managers understand the exact nature of [customer orientation behaviors] and their positive association with service quality, they will be better placed to improve service quality in their organizations.

This is undoubtedly so, yet arguably could go further. The behaviors that affect performance cannot be assumed to be limited to customer orientation behaviors, which by definition are calculated to contribute to customer satisfaction. It is by no means clear that customer evaluation of service quality is the sole concern of agents or the firms that employ them. Indeed, as the literature review will explore, call centers are at least equally concerned with extracting maximum value for the agents' labor; managers expect speed and accuracy in addition to the approbation of customers. Of equal interest must be the strategies employed by agents that contribute to these outcomes, and the balance between the expectations of callers and those of managers.

This study takes a grounded theory approach to the examination of strategies used in call center interactions, with the intent of allowing the

research to be informed by the data rather than imposing expectations on the participants.

The two research questions in this study concern performance and the communication strategies in conversation by which call center agents achieve them.

1. What are strategies in call center agents' conversations with callers in a call center that help them achieve key performance outcomes?
2. What is the effect of these strategies on the performance of call center agents?

1.4 Contribution

Questions remain concerning how agents perform in terms of satisfying customer needs, meeting efficiency goals and balancing the organization's need for rapid processing of calls with the callers' need for attention and care in their interactions with the call center. While performance in call centers is an area of growing interest, the most common quantitative studies rely on survey or interview data (Sawyerr, Srinivas, & Wang, 2009; Tuten & Neidermeyer, 2004), which are subject to coloring by the respondents' or organizations' perspectives.

The contribution of this study is that it applies analysis of spoken text to the study of call center communication and opens the "black box" of conversation strategies that contribute to performance outcomes. This is achieved through a grounded study of recorded calls from a financial services call center in Singapore. The study combines qualitative methodology from social sciences in an exploratory study and quantitative analysis using

hierarchical linear modeling (HLM). In addition, this investigative method reinforces the conversation data with interviews of call center agents.

1.5 Organization of the thesis

The thesis begins with a literature review, outlining the themes of call center research—the psychosocial stressors and their impact on agents, and the implications that the nature of call center work has for customer service. Stress has implications for agents, in terms of job satisfaction, turnover, absenteeism and various psychological impacts. The research on competences of call center agents is reviewed, and methods of evaluating customer service are compared. There are a number of antecedents to call center service quality in personality, dispositional and organization factors, but there exists a definite gap in research on call center agent performance in terms of call-level studies of speech in real time.

The research in this study consists of two studies, as follows.

Study 1: This is a grounded theory study that was intended to compile a list of communication strategies and identify the overarching factors that contribute to performance by agents.

Study 2: In this study, a quantitative investigation of communication strategies in relation to the dependent variables of courtesy, efficiency and effectiveness was undertaken.

The thesis concludes with a discussion of the implications of these findings for studies of quality and service practice. While previous research has

highlighted the role of politeness and service in terms of meeting needs, this has generally focused on the nature of the agent rather than on the quality of collaboration between agent and caller. The establishment of this relationship, described here as solidarity, is the key to achieving productive yet courteous call center service. Moreover, while efficiency has been placed in opposition to customer service, the strategies by which efficiency is achieved are examined and shown to be an important component of effectiveness.

2 Literature review

This review considers call center research, which began to be published alongside the phenomenon itself, in the early 1990s. Over the past 20 years companies have rushed to exploit the efficiency and centralization that call centers offer, and to outsource their telephonic operations to overseas location to leverage cheap labor. However, there is evidence that the outsourcing trend may be slowing somewhat. According to statistics reported by the International Customer Management Institute (ICMI, 2008) the number of US companies willing to outsource technical support centers dropped from 57% to 42% between 2006 and 2007, reportedly because of an increased focus on customer service. This is perhaps because customers dealing with outsourced call centers are 26% less satisfied on average than those who call a US center, and are more likely to defect.

Academic interest began to increase in the 1990s, particularly with the argument by Fernie and Metcalf (1998) that call centers were the "new sweatshops" in which employees were monitored with draconian strictness and expected to endure working conditions monitored with unprecedented rigor. They proceed to compare call centers with the "Panopticon," a form of prison invented by British social theorist Jeremy Bentham, so called because it permitted prisoners to be observed at any time without being able to see the inspector in return; that is, prisoners never knew when they were being observed (Bentham, 1995). The metaphor is apt for call centers, because software can be used to collect data on each agent's length of calls, number of calls handled and periods away from the telephone. These practices are applied

to improve productivity (by increasing call volume) and to ensure that quality standards are maintained (Valsecchi, 2006).

Other scholars, such as Bain and Taylor (Bain, Bunzel, Mulvey, Hyman, & Taylor, 2000) question whether such practices occur to quite the degree suggested by Fernie and Metcalf on the basis that these authors ignored the potential for worker resistance. They claim that while such surveillance is admittedly possible, it is rarely applied to the full extent possible because excessive monitoring is met by worker resistance, often abetted by trade union involvement. In addition, they argue, high turnover discourages practices that would increase dissatisfaction of agents, while the time required for such heavy-handed surveillance makes them impractical to pursue to the "outlandish" extent suggested by Fernie and Metcalf.

It may be that Fernie and Metcalf exaggerated the degree of control in the centers they studied, and it is true that it is difficult to paint all call centers with the same brush when the industry includes so many centers and employs such a large number of employees. Nevertheless, implicit in Bain and Taylor's thesis is the admission that workers and management do clash over the question of surveillance and monitoring as a means to increase productivity. The terms *Taylorization* or *Taylorism* have been applied to call center research (Bain et al., 2002), and refers to the management of performance outcomes through management and scientific measurement techniques (Russell, 2008). Bain, Bunzel, Mulvey, Hyman, & Taylor (2000), examined the particular workplace challenges of the call center, defined by integrated technology and the pressures of coping with a never-ending stream of calls from customers. This is described

by Taylor and Bain as an "assembly line in the head" (Taylor & Bain, 1999).

In truth, call center work suffers from high turnover and absenteeism, with stress-induced turnover costing business an estimated US$10,000 per employee (James, 1998).

The sources of this stress are apparent from an examination of studies on call centers. There is the role conflict induced by management emphasis on rapid call handling while expecting each customer to have his/her issue addressed in full, and the role ambiguity that occurs when a call center agent has insufficient resources or support to satisfy the demands of the job (Tuten & Neidermeyer, 2004). Even at the selection level, Van den Broek (2004) alleges that employers at an Australian call center exercised "significant levels of managerial coercion" by means of selection processes that filtered out older applicants or those with histories of trade union membership. She also notes that employees could face pressure for failing to meet targets or taking too much sick leave.

While the economic benefits are obvious, the risk to quality of service has not been considered to the same extent. Despite the enthusiasm of corporate managers, customers are significantly less satisfied with call center service delivery than with face to face service (Bennington & Cummane, 1998). Bennington (2000) found that major irritants among users of a social welfare call center were lack of personalized service, long waits on the telephone, uncaring communication, "getting the run around," complexity of the telephone system and unreliable information and service. Helms and Mayo (2008) in a survey of customers of a Fortune 500 company's call center found that the four

sources of service failure reported by respondents were rude employees/poor attitudes, overall poor service, employees socializing and not paying attention to customers and slow service. The training and professionalism of agents, especially in outsourced locations can be hard to monitor. As one journalist asks "Would you trust a spotty student with your brand?" (Hoffbrand, 2007). Clearly, service is an area in which work remains to be done.

2.1 Distinguishing features of call centers as workplaces

A call center has been defined in a number of ways, but all definitions focus on the integration of computer technology in the form of a visual display. Call centers are also called "customer satisfaction centers" or "contact centers." Taylor and Bain (1999) define a call center as:

> A dedicated operation in which computer-utilizing employees receive inbound—or make outbound—telephone calls, with these calls processed or controlled either by an Automatic Call Distributor (ACD) or predictive dialing system.

This definition is suitably general to cover all forms of call center while excluding those workers who use a telephone in the course of their work. Taylor and Bain (1999) further note that the establishment of call centers as a form of customer service delivery was a trend that originated in the United States but quickly spread to Europe, driven by increased competition in the financial sector as bank branches closed. The service has been extended by Interactive Voice Recognition (IVR) technology through which a caller can

guide choices using speech without speaking to a call center agent, and online responses or e-service (Russell, 2008).

It may be inferred from this that call center operations by definition involve an element of intertextuality. The agent is a human intermediary between the policies, products and information of the client company on one hand and the customer on the other. The mediation of technology creates an information environment in which productivity, number of calls and level of downtime can be continuously be measured by the management (Deerie & Kinnie, 2002). Computer systems linked to telephones, or "computer telephony integration" (CTI) are changing rapidly, necessitating high levels of training (Jones, 1999).

The basic operation of a call center is that calls are channeled through an ACD to call center agents (also known as customer service representatives or CSRs), who answer and follow prompts on a computer database to provide information, resolve a problem or take action immediately (Houlihan, 2000). Agents may work in shifts, with some call centers open around the clock, 365 days a year (Taylor and Bain, 1999).

Monitoring of quantitative measures of productivity can be easily achieved by software, which is tempting for managers in a workplace that they see as primarily existing to save money (Robinson & Morley, 2006). Call centers have many internal measures: length of 'talk time' with a customer, 'wrap up time' (time to finish a transaction after the completion of a call) and abandonment rate, or number of calls not answered

(Armistead, Kiely, Hole, & Prescott, 2002). These metrics are used to assess the work and to monitor workers (Callaghan & Thompson, 2001).

2.2 The two problems of call centers

Studies of call center services consider two general problems. One stream of literature is primarily concerned with issues such as turnover and human resources directed toward improving quality, while the other addresses issues of performance in terms of customer relations. These issues are related, because ultimately both have implications for the provision of call center services, but the variables of interest differ. To understand the context of quality measurement and assessment in call centers, it is necessary to examine the problems that face organizations and agents.

Studies that seek to assess the operations or quality of a call center service can approach the problem in a number of ways. Service issues can be addressed through compensation, manipulation and division of workload, staffing, motivational strategies and appraisal. These are driven by such models as the job-demands resources model (Bakker, Demerouti, & Schaufeli, 2003) or human resources production models (Batt & Moynihan, 2002), which conceptualize the work of individuals as resulting from the actions of management or work teams. This perspective is one in which the behavior of agents is one of supervision versus empowerment. Excessive control is blamed for turnover and resistance from agents, and managers may fear a greater degree of empowerment because of the risk that service quality will decline (Houlihan, 2002).

Another approach concerns the traits of individual agents, which determine their reaction to stress or ability to empathize (or appear to empathize) with a caller. Service quality is affected by such personal attributes or abilities as perceptive taking (Axtell et al., 2007), deep acting or emotional regulation (L. S. Goldberg & Grandey, 2007). In these studies, characteristics such as emotional intelligence (Higgs, 2004) or perspective taking (Axtell et al., 2007) or job resourcefulness (Ashill et al., 2009) are shown to have a predictable effect on the workplace behavior and performance of agents' duties. These traits are compared with outcome variables such as customer satisfaction, yet seldom with behaviors observed during calls.

Some studies are studies of customers, matching customer reactions to the agent with reasons for these. An example might be Pontes and Kelly's (2000) study, in which customers reported behaviors such as "did not speak too quickly" or "personalized the call". However, these do not include actual text but rely on a caller's memory and impression.

Another approach, of primary interest in this study, is that of the call itself. This seems an obvious starting point, but is apparently rarely applied, perhaps because of lack of access to real call center calls and the relative difficulty of quantifying behavior. However, this effort is rewarding because the data thus obtained are rich and most proximal to the experience of both caller and agent.

2.2.1 The Tayloristic environment of call center work

The rise of the call center is described by Bain, Watson, Mulvey, Taylor, & Gall (2002) in terms of productivity measurement, or "Taylorization," of white collar work. The period between the 1930s and 1980s saw increasing efforts to measure white collar work in a similar manner to work with quantitative output, such as factories. As computerization progressed, it became easier for managers to monitor employee output in real time, and thus save substantial costs in back-office operations. With impressive results within companies, the early 1990s witnessed a rapid shift to replicate these savings in front-office operations in the form of call centers. Many companies adopted target-setting methodologies to optimize the quantity and quality of employees' work. This was successful to some extent, but these competing desiderata are difficult to balance, sometimes producing heavy-handed results-driven management (S. Fernie & D. Metcalf, 1998) and provoking worker resistance in response (Taylor & Bain, 1999). Strangely, although Bain et al. (2000) support the view of Taylor and Bain (1999, described in the introduction) that the "Satanic Mill" image is exaggerated, the four case studies they present appear to strengthen the view of call centers as sweatshops, agents in one call center receiving nuisance calls from supervisors if their calls exceed three minutes or if they are not on calls. Assessment is based on targets (such as numbers of calls, sales or quality in terms of adherence to scripts), and rewarded with promotion or bonuses. A common practice, Bain et al. found, was to publicly display information on individual employees in terms of targets reached, and numbers of calls completed within the prescribed time, placing

pressure on agents to accept targets. Call centers in the company were similarly compared to stimulate intra-company competition. Another practice common to these centers was tying team leaders' bonuses to agents' performance, in an attempt to bind them to management goals. This practice, they note, caused widespread anger. The conclusion of Bain et al. and the subjects of their study was that a service originally intended to provide customer service was now sales driven and target oriented. This causes call workers to experience high levels of stress.

While the word "stress" occurs frequently in call center studies, it is often used without definition, implicitly requiring none. Knights and McCabe (1998) criticize the view of stress that sees it as an "individual phenomenon, the symptoms of which can be treated by equally individual means such as exercise, time management or changes in one's diet." They write that "our case study locates stress within a framework that emphasizes the interrelationships between structural relations of power and the subjective interpretations and actions of employees." To Knights and McCabe, a vicious circle is created between management control and worker resistance.

Taylorism and the monitoring of agents

Tension between service and efficiency are a recurring theme in call center literature. Houlihan (2002) conducts a case study of four British call centers, finding that "low discretion, high commitment" (LDHC) management varied in degree of low–high commitment management (HCM) and control–enablement. High control (coercive) management and low commitment produces compliance-oriented work, with stress managed through teams and

training, but places greatest weight on efficiency. High commitment with coercive control produces an "alleviation" model, with compensatory measures such as childcare and a "fun" environment. Enabling combined with control places greater weight on relationship support for agents, but places greater emphasis on repairing psychological impacts rather than empowerment or career development. The fourth option, high commitment and enablement, allows for redesign of call center work to make it more fulfilling, however the technological measures in call centers tend to create pressure towards standardization.

This theme of standardization is taken up by Batt and Moynihan (2002), who classify call center management regimes into three models: mass production, professional service and mass customization. The former corresponds to the Taylorist model in which the primary driver of service is cost and productivity, with coercive human resource practices such as fear of job losses or commission pay to boost efficiency. At the opposite extreme, professional service models emphasize quality and the enhancement of relationships between callers and agents. This model occurs in areas where ongoing relationships enhance the quality of service by allowing "firm-specific social capital," the investment in relationships among colleagues in the call center and between agents and clients. Examples of such centers are found in call centers that deal in products such as health or legal services. Finally, the mass customization model is a compromise between agent performance and mass production models, with service and efficiency both held as expected performance outcomes. Batt and Moynihan note that this last is growing in

popularity, but while Taylorist monitoring methods may be compromised or softened in the interests of quality, it seems unlikely that they will disappear in the foreseeable future.

One result of this pressure to standardize and monitor agents is that it apparently embodies a culture of mistrust, reducing the scope for the development of self-efficacy among agents and adding to stress. Bartram and Casimir (2007) investigate trust of call center agents from the theoretical standpoint of transformational leadership, which is "articulating a compelling vision for followers, behaving self-sacrificially, intellectually stimulating followers, and providing them with individualized consideration" (Bass, 1985; Klein & House, 1995 cited in Bartram & Casimir, 2007). They found that the effects of transformational leadership on agents were mediated by empowerment and the agents' trust in the leader, while its effect on satisfaction was also partially mediated by trust. This finding of low correlation between empowerment and satisfaction is supported by Holdsworth & Cartwright (2003), who found that call center workers perceived themselves as less empowered—in terms of the four dimensions of meaning, impact, self-determination and competence—than other workers and consequently were less satisfied with their lot, feeling higher levels of stress, poorer mental or physical health than others in the community. Meaning, in this context refers to the sense of performing a task that is worth the effort. Impact is the feeling of making progress; competence is an agent's confidence in his/her own ability and self-determination is the sense of freedom to act according to his/her own will (Spreitzer, 1995). For call center agents, Holdsworth and Cartwright

conclude that self-determination is the empowerment dimension that is most lacking in this work.

That empowerment improves service is also the theme of Gilmore (2001), who notes that as call centers become ubiquitous as the primary mode of customer service, customer expectations of call quality are exerting a stronger influence on management through demands for better service. This is creating pressure for empowerment of agents in preference to the production-line approach that seeks to maximize savings from centralized (and possibly offshore) call centers. Gilmore (2001) and Gilmore & Moreland (2000) list aspects of call center service delivery in terms of tangibility. The more tangible dimensions appear to be those that are measurable: number of calls answered, speed of response, length of call, standardized response, and problem resolution in a limited, specified time. The intangible aspects of interest in Gilmore's study are as follows.

1. Individual customer service.
2. Accessibility to relevant help.
3. Responsiveness to individual help.
4. Empathy / courtesy.
5. Seeing problem to completion.

Call centers with an emphasis on low cost, routine transactions with few surprises and simple caller needs seem best suited to the production line approach. Call centers where the interactions are unpredictable, nonroutine and personalized favor the empowerment approach, as these centers require agents that have growth needs and possess strong interpersonal skills. However, the

agents interviewed in Gilmore's study appeared to be frustrated with manager's preference for tangible measures, which have the virtue of being easily monitored. Gilmore calls for a blend of approaches to improve service without sacrificing efficiency, but concedes that this is a problem for managers.

Holman, Chissick, & Totterdell (2002) studied the relationships of anxiety and depression with performance monitoring in addition to a long list of organizational and workload factors. Monitoring by superiors in their study was positive in relation to wellbeing if perceived to be beneficial, in the form of developing rather than punishing. Intense monitoring, however, did impact on psychological wellbeing in terms of job satisfaction and depression and was mediated by job control and supervisory support. Perceived intensity had a direct effect on emotional exhaustion. They also note emotional dissonance as a strong contributing factor to anxiety, depression and loss of job satisfaction.

Stress as a result of an agent's role

In addition to management practices, the nature of call center work also has an impact. Stress, exhaustion, anxiety and depression may be a result of management practices that prioritize speed and rapid throughput of calls, as discussed above but are also a product of a fast-paced job with little scope for variety or control. A call center agent is under pressure to yield to the demands not only of his/her managers but also those of callers. Displays of feelings on the part of agents have a strong bearing on the quality of customer service. By virtue of their jobs, call center agents must comply with certain rules concerning the appropriate display of feelings: these rules concern which feelings are appropriate, to what extent and for how long. These unspoken rules

are called *feeling rules* (A.R. Hochschild, 1983) or *display rules* (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993; L. S. Goldberg & Grandey, 2007). While contributing to customer service, such rules increase strain on agents because the agent must control his/her own emotions to respond appropriately to callers, and engender a positive emotional state in the caller. This practice has a particular name in service work, *emotional labor*.

Ashforth and Humphrey (1993) define emotional labor as "the act of displaying socially desired emotions during service encounters" and note, following Hochschild (1983) that this enforced hypocrisy may negatively impact the agent's self image. Hochschild (1979; 1983) distinguished surface acting from deep acting in service roles. Surface acting is similar to theater acting: the actor adopts a role for the benefit of the audience, and fakes the appropriate action or response as required. In service encounters, this may be an emotional expression of concern for a customer or contrition for something over which the customer expresses anger. Deep acting, in contrast, involves assumption of the identity to a greater extent. The call center agent (in this case) does not fake the emotion but actively engenders it in him/herself, attempting to adopt the perspective of a caller. In a sense, this requires a degree of self-deception in that the agent understands the feelings that society expects in such circumstances and must imagine a situation in which they face a similar problem or remember such a situation in the past. That is to say, their personal identity becomes intermeshed with the service role.

Ashforth and Humphrey (1993) note that while there may be general norms of customer service, the strength and intensity of expectations of these

norms may vary according to industry and culture. They draw on social identity theory to explain the consequences to a worker's identity when such expectations cannot be met. Dysfunctions may occur in task effectiveness, when the agent is unable to provide what is demanded because of the service situation. There may be emotional dissonance when the agent feels obliged to display emotions that are at odds with his/her own (contrition in response to caller anger, for example, when a more natural response may be anger) (Lewig & Dollard, 2003). Emotional impacts on a worker depend on whether the emotional labor is consistent with a valued social or personal identity. If it is consistent, it will lead to enhanced psychological wellbeing. If not, the consequences are emotional dissonance and a loss of an authentic sense of self. Ashforth and Humphrey (1993) propose that deep acting improves psychological wellbeing by allowing the worker to identify more closely with the role, creating an identity consistent with the desired emotional responses, although they note that this has limits. Workers simply become exhausted after displaying emotions to such an extent, their self-esteem suffers from any separation from or criticism of the group, and their response to negative feedback or job stressors may be exacerbated by a lack of detachment from the role.

The consequences of threats to identity are particularly noticeable in call center work because the technology imposes a certain remoteness between caller and agent, and allows outsourcing of services between regions and countries. Pal and Buzzanell (2008) discuss the changes that Indian call center agents negotiated to conduct business with callers from the US. The agents

changed accents, names and even arranged their lives around American celebrations and styles of communication. Although Pal and Buzzanell depict this in positive terms, Das, Dharwadkar and Brandes (2008) note that such work suits those who are not high in national identity centrality. For those Indians to whom being Indian is an important part of personal identity and source of pride, call center performance is likely to suffer and burnout is more likely. From a sociolinguistic perspective, Rahman (2009) makes the same point with regard to call center agents in Pakistan. The agents led a "nocturnal, make believe" existence posing as US or British customer service assistants, and were generally apolitical and therefore unconcerned with national identity norms, even when, as Rahman notes, they could even be fined for speaking their local language.

It should be noted at this point that identity is not constructed simply by nationality, but also by factors such as professional affiliation. Snelgrove (2009), for example, notes that nurses dispensing health advice in a call center identify strongly with the traditional values of nursing, and insist on being regarded as nurses rather than call center workers. This impacted their professional duties in, for instance, the fact that the nurses did not feel bound to convey the advice on the computer screen but to make autonomous "nursing decisions." As the range of call centers expands, it may be expected that conflicts of profession practice with call center norms will occur.

Conflicts of identity and requirements for emotional labor occur when previously expressed management expectations of control collide with employee needs for personal and employee autonomy. Mulholland (2002)

draws on labor process theory and work on emotional labor in examining resistance among call center agents to management. There is an obvious disjunction between the expectations of service at these levels. Customer service requires emotional labor for agents to establish rapport with callers and work towards meeting their needs. However, management expects only "the standard pat," especially in busy periods.

Belt (2002), Belt et al. (Belt, Richardson, & Webster, 2000) and Belt, Richardson, & Webster (2002) also comment on 'soft' skills in relation to the preponderance of women in call center agent positions (a proportion of 70%, according to Belt, 2002), a phenomenon that may be attributable to social skills and empathy, which are generally regarded as more feminine than masculine (Belt et al., 2002). However, these soft skills are less likely to be recognized or valued, and call centers do not provide these workers with career or advancement prospects, making call centers a dead-end job for many women and a 'female employment ghetto" (Belt, 2002). Indeed, in the study by Belt et al. (2002), managers remark that mature women returning to the workforce after raising families are desirable employees precisely because they do not have career aspirations. In addition, call centers are concentrated in former industrial areas with high unemployment, contributing to inequality among geographical regions (Belt, 2002). It must be noted, however, that issues of inequitable female job prospects in comparison to men is not confined or unique to call centers, and has been attributed to other factors than sheer discrimination, such as an unwillingness to use ingratiation or impression

management tactics to gain favor with superiors (Singh, Kumra, & Vinnicombe, 2002).

Mulholland (2000), like Belt (2002), notes a perception of call center work as "women's work," which adds to the tension between the male-dominated hierarchy and the mostly female staff of the call center. Mulholland charges that gender stereotypes and sexual banter are manipulated to make control less obvious and emphasize social aspects of work. However, this and attempts by management to fraternize with agents are perceived by the staff as cynical manipulation and met with tacit resistance in the form of jokes and mild subversion.

The theme of resistance is explored further by Houlihan (2000), who described "workarounds," or methods used by staff to subvert the behavior expected and mandated by their managers. This included denial of service to or even hanging up on obnoxious callers, avoiding calls and making unauthorized changes to scripts. Knights and McCabe (1998), in a discussion of Business Process Reengineering—a form of quality management—comment that "the advocates of BPR are oblivious to the conflicts of interest within employment and the opportunities and resilience of labor to resist and retain autonomy in the face of management control." To some extent this is a reaction to stress, and inconsistent management in the form of changes in priorities may be responsible. There appears to be a question concerning the degree to which managers understand the job: Houlihan notes that performance assessments in her research site were based on superficial "friendliness of voice" rather than on genuine attempts to satisfy caller needs. Houlihan concludes that positive

performance management is often subverted by performance monitoring, which has a punitive and suspicious nature.

Aside from organizational expectations, emotional labor creates considerable strain on agents faced with customer aggression. Wegge, Vogt, and Wecking (2007) measured several physical indicators of stress, such as tiredness and saliva immunoglobulin and found that unfriendly caller behavior had a greater impact in the absence of visual contact. Goldberg and Grandey (2007) in an experimental manipulation found that display rules for positive emotions and caller hostility increased exhaustion and reduced task accuracy. Surface acting as an emotional regulation tactic exacerbated the effect of display rules on exhaustion, but deep acting did not. They conclude that display rules and customer hostility lead to increased exhaustion. This supports previous work by Grandey et al. (2004) who found that frequency and stress appraisal of customer aggression had a significant impact on both emotional exhaustion and absences, in addition to their choice of emotional regulation strategy, with deep acting apparently breaking down under greater strain to be replaced by surface acting or venting.

Emotional exhaustion—'state of emotional exhaustion caused by excessive psychological and emotional demands made on people helping people' (Jackson, Schwab, & Schuler, 1986, cited in Deery, Iverson and Walsh, 2000)—is an aspect of burnout. According to conservation of resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 2001) it occurs when workers do not have enough resources to meet the demands of their jobs. It is characterized by feelings of frustration, anxiety and tiredness and is associated with turnover and absenteeism. Deery,

Iverson, & Walsh (2002) find evidence that number of customer interactions, scripted conversational rules, management focus on quantity, workload, role overload, monitoring, average length of calls and management of wrap-up time all increase reported emotional exhaustion. It was reduced by team leader support and opportunities for promotion. Again, the question of conflicting caller and manager expectations is mentioned, with agents remarking that taking time to help a caller results in punishment from supervisors for poor wrap-up time. This supports the findings of Witt et al. (2004) that conscientiousness moderates the relationship between emotional exhaustion and call volumes. They found that at low levels of emotional exhaustion, agents high in conscientiousness achieved higher call volumes than less conscientious colleagues, but at high levels of emotional exhaustion, the reverse was true. However, conscientiousness was a predictor of quality, so it may be that conscientious employees in the face of exhaustion sacrifice quantity rather than quality, while the less conscientious did the reverse.

Wilk and Moynihan (2005) attributed emotional exhaustion to the supervisor rather than job level, on the basis that workers in similar jobs varied in terms of emotional exhaustion according to supervisor emphasis on interpersonal job demands. They found that self-efficacy was not a significant factor in resisting exhaustion. Career identity, on the other hand, tended to reduce exhaustion, a fact which they note has not yet been fully explored under COR theory.

Some scholars examine individual and group responses to the strain of call center work. One such response to stress and caller aggression is for agents

to turn to each other for support, in what Korczynski (2003) refers to as "communities of coping." Korczynski argues that the collective nature of a workplace is a neglected aspect of the emotional climate, and this has particular meaning in a call center because agents are recruited for their pro-customer attitudes and find positive interaction a pleasant part of their jobs.

Other personality predictors of quality—emotional stability and locus of control—were also mediated by emotional exhaustion, according to Sawyerr et al. (2009). Locus of control (LOC) is the degree to which people believe themselves to be in control of their lives. Internal LOC is the belief that control resides within and one can control actions and consequences. External LOC is the belief that control is elsewhere, and one is controlled by luck or fate. It is a predictor of job satisfaction and performance (Judge & Bono, 2001). Sawyerr et al. found that internal LOC is negatively correlated with emotional exhaustion, while external LOC is positively correlated. In their study, both forms of LOC predicted turnover or absenteeism in bivariate correlations but emotional exhaustion was correlated with turnover (r = .22).

It would be fair at this point to suspect that emotional exhaustion and a need for emotional regulation occurs in all jobs to some extent, and in particular to customer service roles, irrespective of whether communication is mediated by technology. Indeed, customer stress has been discussed in face-to-face roles, for example by Dorman and Zapf (2004). In fact, there is evidence that call center work is more demanding. Grebner et al (2003) compared 234 call center agents with 572 workers in other customer service roles, finding that call center agents had less job control, less variety and complexity of tasks and

higher uncertainty. However, task related stressors were for the most part (with the exception of uncertainty) found to be higher for the comparison sample. There must be a suspicion that this relates to a lack of variety, given that monotony has been offered as a reason for high turnover elsewhere (Dorman & Zijlstra, 2003). Grebner et al. find that call center agents are subject to a higher rate of psychosomatic complaints than the comparison sample, but had a more resigned attitude and less intention to quit. They also find that a major source of stress was emotional dissonance, the result of displaying emotions that are at odds with those that one is actually experiencing.

In conclusion, call center work is highly routine, typically monitored to a high degree and subject to stress from both management and callers. Call centers vary in terms of the amount of job control and autonomy that agents are permitted, and agents likewise differ in their reactions and resilience in the face of these problems. The question of whether call centers are more stressful than other workplaces is unresolved, but turnover is unquestionably high in the industry as a whole and work practices often seen as unfair and discriminatory (Belt et al., 2000). Consequences for call center agents include problems such as anxiety, depression and emotional exhaustion, vulnerability to psychiatric problems (Smith et al., 2004) in addition to physical problems such as muscular and back pain (Sprigg, Stride, Wall, Holman, & Smith, 2007).

Management can reduce the incidence of these problems by means of support and a lower degree of monitoring, as well as by providing autonomy and job control to agents. However, many managers may be reluctant to do so because this would compromise the efficiency and cost benefits that make call

centers such a popular method of service delivery (Dorman & Zijlstra, 2003). In any case, the manipulation of quality by means of such blunt instruments as team organization or hiring policies is difficult when managers use a healthy bottom line or positive employee/customer feedback as measures of performance. Such measures infer good performance from results, but do not entail direct observation. The measurement of performance and the missing link in the research is discussed in the next section.

2.2.2 Agent performance

This section concerns the second preoccupation of call center literature, the measurement, assessment and creation of quality in call center agent performance. The assessment of performance in call center work is approached from a number of perspectives, which in turn influence the factors that researchers rely upon to predict performance. From the Taylorist management point of view, performance is measured in call handling time, abandonment rates, call volume and wrap-up time (Feinberg, Kim, Hokama, de Ruyter, & Keen, 2000). From the customer service viewpoint, quality is customer satisfaction, repeat business, and the assistance offered by agents to callers (e.g. Pontes & Kelly, 2000; Rafaeli et al., 2008). Other measures are supervisor ratings (e.g. Higgs, 2004; Ohja & Kasturi, 2005) or self ratings of quality, performance or related notions (e.g. Ko de Ruyter, Wetzels, & Feinberg, 2001). Perhaps the most obvious and, to the researcher, the most accessible measure of service quality or individual agent performance is supervisor rating.

The quality versus productivity problem is discussed in a qualitative study by Mahesh and Kasturi (2006), who investigated intrinsic motivation,

reward/recognition, customer stress and stress management as factors in performance of call center agents in India. Intrinsic motivation emerged as an important factor in effectiveness rated by supervisor, but reward did not appear to influence it directly. Managing stress appeared to be an important factor, if customer stress was not directly significant. Performance was supervisor-rated volume of calls, quality of call and behavior within the team. Quality of performance during the call is not explained. This supports a previous study (Ohja & Kasturi, 2005) in which intrinsic motivation and being a team player were the only significant predictors or call center agent performance. Again, performance ratings on different scales were combined and "assumed to reflect the quality of performance of the agents accurately." Extrinsic motivation, confidence of knowledge, desire to learn, empathy, stress and avoiding bad customers all emerged as insignificant, although it is difficult to assess the importance of this finding without a clear definition of performance in the study.

Individual agent variables

Some authors have sought to explain agent performance in terms of individual variables such as self-evaluations, emotional intelligence or personality. Grant & Wrzesniewski (2010), for example, used supervisor ratings, self ratings and fundraising success in three case studies investigating the role of core self-evaluations on performance. This research emerged from earlier research into other-orientation, which states that an individual's reaction to self-evaluation may depend on his/her concern for the wellbeing of others. That is to say, some motivation for their work derives from the guilt they

anticipate if others are dissatisfied from their work, or anticipated gratitude if the work is satisfactory. Core self-evaluations are beliefs that people hold about themselves and how they relate to the world. The prediction that these would improve performance in terms of supervisor rating or financial productivity was not supported by Grant and Wrzesniewski's studies, although some interactive effects were observed. Anticipated gratitude and guilt did, however, show significant correlation with sense of duty.

Another construct thought to predict communication skill is emotional intelligence (EI). Higgs (2004) used the EI construct to predict call center agent performance. EI, according to Dulewicz and Higgs (2000) is a combination of seven factors: self-awareness, emotional resilience, motivation, interpersonal sensitivity, influence (i.e. ability to influence others), intuitiveness and conscientiousness/integrity. Higgs found that five EI scales were indeed significant (with the exception of influence and self-awareness), but performance was unrelated to tenure. Performance in this study was a single five-point scale from unsatisfactory to outstanding. This lack of detail limits the usefulness of the results, as Higgs acknowledges.

In a study by Sawyerr, Srinivas, and Wang, (2009), the independent variables were the five-factor model of personality (L. R. Goldberg, 1999), an often-cited model comprising conscientiousness (a tendency toward hard work), agreeableness (cooperation and caring), emotional stability (resistance to stress and being relaxed), extraversion (being outgoing) and openness to experience (being intellectual and open-minded). All of these have previously been found to be correlated with work performance (M. K. Mount, Barrick, & Stewart,

1998). Performance was measured by "accuracy of information provided to customers, speed of response to customer requests and ability to solve problems." Surprisingly, in this call center study only openness to experience was a significant predictor of service performance. There must be a suspicion that the particular nature of call center work explains the discrepancy with previous work (reviewed in the meta-analysis by Mount et al. 1998). These studies, as Sawyerr et al. note, were conducted in contexts where work relied on team cooperation rather than lone agents in communication with customers.

Witt et al. (2004) examined conscientiousness in interaction with emotional exhaustion, finding that on the basis of bivariate correlations, highly conscientious individuals indeed had higher call quality, and interaction with emotional exhaustion was not significant for quality, although it was significant for call volume. They measured quality using the scale at the company where the study was conducted, a simple scale from "fails to meet expectations" to "significantly exceeds expectations" in addition to call volume.

The emotional exhaustion to which Witt et al. refer may stem from a recurring theme in call center literature, the role stress caused by the position of call center agents as boundary spanners. When a person is in a position where he or she must satisfy mutually contradictory demands but lacks sufficient power to exercise his/her own discretion, the resulting dissonance produces the phenomenon known as *role stress*, which results in role ambiguity and role conflict (Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, Snock, & Rosenthal, 1964, cited in De Ruyter, Wetzels and Feinberg, 2001). De Ruyter et al. (2001) studied the effect of role stress on performance at a call center in the Netherlands. Their model shows

(self-rated) performance, as well as turnover and organizational commitment, fully mediated by job satisfaction.

Nicholls, Viviers, & Visser (2009) in a study in South Africa used the Customer Contact Styles Questionnaire to predict agent performance in terms of call handling time and quality (supervisor rating). Their findings were that while most of the items were not significant, the personality scales predicted quality rather more accurately than they did handling time. The trait of "results oriented" significantly predicted both of these, while call handling time was also predicted by persuasiveness, participation and sociability. Quality was predicted by consistency, sociability, structure detail consciousness and conscientiousness. Two other scales, basic and audio checking, showed significant correlations with both measures. However, the correlations were negative in the case of call handling. These results tend to suggest that the agent has a lower degree of control over handling time, which depends as much on the caller as on the agent, and the caller has less vested interested in shortening call times.

Customer expectations

As discussed in Gilmore (2001) and in Gilmore & Moreland (2000), the production line approach to call center management is very common, emphasizing quantitative metrics such as handling times and abandonment rates. But do these improve customer satisfaction? Feinberg et al. (2000) studied a number of these metrics and concluded that they did not. The metrics were average speed of answer, queue time (duration of wait), percentage of callers whose call is resolved on the first call, abandonment rate (number of callers

who hang up before their call is taken), average talk time, adherence (of agents to work schedule), average work time after call, percentage of calls blocked (percentage of callers who receive a busy signal), time before abandoning (average time caller held on before abandoning call), number of inbound calls each agent receives in eight hours, agent turnover (annual), total calls and service levels (calls answered in less than target time divided by number of total calls). Of these 13 variables, only percentage of calls resolved on first contact and average abandonment proved significant predictors of customer satisfaction, and then only weakly. The implication of this finding is that such "production line" thinking may be profitable in the sense of efficiency, but not in terms of retaining customers or attracting new ones.

This rather depressing finding (at least to a call center manager) is to some extent supported by Wood, Holman, & Stride (2006) who tested the strategic human resource management (SHRM) approach, which postulates a chain of links from strategy to operational requirements, work design and human resource management, and that the fit between the market and a company's HRM determines its performance. Their examination of call centers was conducted in seven areas: market segment, market strategy, the nature of the customer–worker interaction, work design, performance monitoring, human resource practices, and performance outcomes. However, they found little of significance, and again, customer satisfaction appeared impervious to management interventions.

In the literature discussed to this point, the principal actors have been call center agents and managers. The third party in the call center is the caller,

who in most cases is also customer of the firm. Bolton and Houlihan (2005) criticize the depiction of customer service as "docile service workers offering (de)personalized care and attention to sometimes aggressive but otherwise not much more agential customers." Instead, they emphasize the social and relational nature of customer service. They argue that customers can be seen as "mythical sovereigns" demanding service and servility, as "functional transactants" who want their transaction to be as quick as possible and as "moral agents" who engage on a social and interpersonal level with agents, and may shape or refine the rules of the market. Ultimately, however, both managers and agents are led by the market and driven by quantitative imperatives to complete calls with expediency. Korcynski (2003) describes customer sovereignty as "an enchanting myth" that may be shattered by perception of the real bureaucratic market-driven nature of a call center, resulting in hostility from the caller that will be vented at the first point of contact, the hapless call center agent.

An obvious starting point to a discussion of customer service is studies of what customers want. Customer perceptions of service quality have been found to have a positive influence on retention rates, attraction of new customers, repurchase intentions and reduced intention to complain (Bearden, Malhotra, & Uscátegui, 1998; Sharma, Mathur, & Dhawan, 2009). In practitioner journals, customer satisfaction is often recognized as a function of agents' personal qualities. Thus, customer preferences should be of central concern to managers.

In recognition of the ever-present market forces, there are rules of talk that call center agents are expected to follow. Sometimes these rules may appear quite manipulative, such as the call center mentioned in Sturdy and Fleming (2003), which issued lists of forbidden words (such as "sorry" or "I can't") and mandated the use of words deemed by management to be "sexy," such as "rest assured" and "immediately." While these may appear to be positive words, Sturdy and Fleming are quick to point out that their purpose was to increase sales rather than generate positive affect.

Despite such measures, complaints about call centers are frequent. Helms and Mayo (2008) investigate customer dissatisfaction among call center customers and the reasons for the defection of former customers. For both categories of customer, the four main reasons for defection were rude employees/poor attitudes, overall poor service, slow service and employees socializing/disregarding customers. These four areas were reported by 77% of the respondents. Recall also Gilmore (2001), a study already discussed in reference to agent empowerment, who lists the intangible features of quality as individualized service, accessibility to relevant help, responsiveness to individual problems, empathy/courtesy and seeing a problem through to completion.

One attempt to classify customer expectations for voice-to-voice encounters was made by Burgers, Ruyter, Keen and Streukens (2000). Their study draws upon two previously published instruments for assessing service quality in retailing (although not specifically call centers), RECOVSAT (Boshoff, 1999) and SERVQUAL (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1988).

Burgers et al. refer to the four SERVQUAL factors of customer service in a call center. These are "adaptiveness," "assurance," "empathy," and "authority." Adaptiveness refers to the ability of an agent to adapt his/her behavior to a caller's "constitution" (such as mood and social behavior); Assurance refers to the reassurance of the customer when agents explain the steps of the procedure and security precautions in the call center; empathy means a demonstration that the customer is important to the firm and authority means that an agent has permission and competence to perform the requisite task. The four SERVQUAL dimensions (without the fifth dimension of 'tangibles") were also found to predict customer loyalty to a brand (Keiningham, Aksoy, Andreassen, Cooil, & Wahren, 2006).

Customer loyalty is earned through trust of agents. Ayios & Harris (2005) based on case studies of three call centers, conclude that a relationship based on competence and empathy between caller and agent is a source of competitive advantage for a call center. They emphasize three levels of trust: low or calculative trust based on law or formal job descriptions, intermediate or knowledge-based trust based on prior interactions and consistency of service and strong or affect-based trust based on emotional ties and reciprocal care. They further distinguish three models of call center organization. The economic efficiency model has productivity and control as the major drivers, with highly routine work operations and high turnover. Then there is the "make love not war" model, with person-centered norms and values as the central concerns. Finally, the "what computers can do for you" model prioritizes the use of computers to maximize economic efficiency.

Finally, it should be noted that attributes favorable to customer service are not necessarily inborn, but can be inculcated through training. Concerning training in individual knowledge, Rowold, Hochholdinger, & Schilling (2008) test the career-related continuous learning (CRCL) model in a call center in a longitudinal study. They conclude that CRCL had an impact on agents' job performance after one year both directly (explaining 28% of the variance) and as a mediating factor between learning climate and final job performance. Surprisingly, however, initial performance was not significant as a predictor of final performance. This supported the findings of Rowold (2007) that training impacted later performance to a significant extent. In the 2007 longitudinal study, Rowold demonstrates that nontechnical training impacts soft skills while hard skills are improved by training in technical aspects.

Management of knowledge

Call centers are in the business of providing service to customers and achieving sales, all though the delivery of information (Houlihan, 2000; Koh, Gunasekaran, Thomas, & Arunachalam, 2005). Much of this information resides in computer systems if it is in a form that may be recorded in the form of text or in systems and procedures (respectively embedded or encoded knowledge, according to the typology of Blackler (1995)). These are the forms that are most easily accessible to management. However, the value of a call center agent resides equally in the use of tacit knowledge, such as socially or culturally constructed knowledge (Blackler's encultured knowledge), embodied or practical knowledge of a specific situation gained through experience, and embrained knowledge or metacognition—the ability to reflect upon one's own

thinking, and in this context general organizational thinking. A simpler distinction was that of Nonaka (1994) between explicit (recorded, specific) and tacit (unwritten) knowledge. The management of these forms of knowledge contribute to collective competency (Clergeau, 2005).

The management and processing of knowledge is central to a call center's operations. Koh, Gunasekaran, Thomas, and Arunachalam (2005) conducted a case study of a call center from a knowledge management perspective, questioning the validity of established models such as the established theories of Nonaka (1994) and Edvinsson and Sullivan (1996) which they saw as inapplicable or impractical for call center work. Following observation of a call center, they discuss the three forms of personal knowledge of agents (explicit, tacit and cultural) and conclude that effective management of the five roles of knowledge (acquisition, utilization, adaptation, distribution and generation) was very beneficial to the company studied.

Knowledge is discussed by Batt and Moynihan (2002) with reference to the cognitive model. Noting that affective states such as satisfaction and positive attitudes have mixed affects on performance, they remark that self-directed teams may perform better in terms of quality and productivity (Batt, 1999). Further, total quality management (TQM) is based on the assumption that workers actively and closely involved in production have tacit knowledge that aids in their work, and that sharing or spreading this knowledge boosts productivity. The cognitive view, therefore, is that performance is a function of knowledge of others' expertise and use of that knowledge. Batt and Moynihan (2002) find evidence that both forms influence performance and job satisfaction,

although impact on call handling time is not significant. The use of teams, and indeed the concern with satisfaction is symptomatic of a move in some call centers toward empowerment, autonomy, and employee-centered management.

Burns and Light (2007) focus on the knowledge component in the development and use of ICT systems. From a theoretical standpoint that knowledge is practice shaped by society, Burns and Light seek to extend the description of types of knowledge offered by Blackler (1995), stressing instead how such knowledge is constructed. They emphasize that development and use are interwoven and not always clearly distinguishable. ICT is developed in a process of social shaping of technology (SST). In the Burns and Light study, agents were asked about the extent to which they used scripts, shared knowledge or influenced practice. Agents reported that they did not always find scripts of great value; they brought their own knowledge from previous jobs and to a greater or lesser extent shared knowledge at their desks and at meetings. Such knowledge is not always (nor can it be) shared or combined into scripts, because it is a source of professional identity and power. Knowledge is not always shared in ways that managers hope. Burns and Light conclude:

> "Moreover, the case is of interest as a site of work relying on complex knowledge practices in what is often, despite managerial rhetorical efforts, a highly routine knowledge deprecating environment. We gain insights into a different call centre working model which rejects ICT process and socio-

> geographic configurations based on scientific management principles."

Similar to Burns and Light, Das (2003) studies the role of knowledge in productivity in technical support roles. His particular focus is on "problem-solving moves" and the behaviors that contribute to this, such as "looking up organizational databases" or "finding precedents". His view of effectiveness among call center agents is one of access to knowledge either directly through technology or vicariously, through colleagues. However, he discusses calls as technical problems rather than as interpersonal communication, which must also be considered for a complete picture of call center agent performance.

Agent behavior during calls

The most direct form of customer service research is the study of agents' telephone behaviors as reflections of qualities such as customer orientation or helpfulness. These variables are predictors of customer loyalty, satisfaction or service quality. Quality of customer experience has been linked to firm financial success. Lywood, Stone, and Ekinci (2009) used an empathy index to demonstrate that various aspects of a call—opening salutation, putting on hold, preparing for the call, offering further assistance and number of calls—were correlated with profitability.

Listening is essential to the agent's role. De Ruyter and Wetzels (2000) focus specifically upon listening, and find attentiveness, perceptiveness and responsiveness as the key factors in listening skill. Listening in this context refers to verbal and nonverbal behavior as well as perceived attitudes and

responses. Attentiveness refers to the verbal and nonverbal signals that a customer receives, while perceptiveness is the degree to which an agent attempts to understand what is said. Responsiveness is "level of understanding and agreement between the call center agent and the customer." De Ruyter and Wetzels find positive relationships among these factors, customer satisfaction and trust, both of which are antecedents to customer intention to call again. Attentiveness and responsiveness emerged as predictors of satisfaction, while perceptiveness and responsiveness increased trust. The importance of this research, in the authors' view, is that listening skills can be taught, improved and assessed.

Does the pressure for productivity, efficiency and rapid wrap-up in call centers discussed in previous sections impact customer experience? Dean (2002) notes that given the efficiency bias of call center management is often discussed in the literature, it would be reasonable to expect relatively low levels of service quality. Her definition of service quality is that of Parusuraman (1988):

> Perceived quality is the consumer's judgment about an entity's overall excellence or superiority. It differs from objective quality…it is an attitude, related but not equivalent to satisfaction, and results from a comparison of expectations with perceptions of performance.

She uses the four dimensions of SERVQUAL—adaptiveness, assurance, empathy and authority—to assess customer perceptions of quality. Dean also refers to customer orientation, in this study defined as "the degree to which the organization emphasizes meeting customer needs and expectations for service

quality." She finds that both perceived quality and customer orientation engender loyalty to the company. Customer orientation had two components: "understanding and meeting customer needs" and "organizational activity related to soliciting and using customer feedback." The perception of customer orientation of callers stems largely from their experience on the telephone with agents. In a later study, Dean (2004) investigated the origins of customer expectations of and predictions for call center service. This was based on the "zone of tolerance" or the gap between adequate and desired levels of service (Parasuraman, Berry, & Zeithaml, 1991). Dean found that customer expectations of quality were higher than might be expected given the emphasis on efficiency so often reported in the literature. She found that predicted and adequate quality levels were very close (and the zone of tolerance thus very narrow), that customer orientation did not affect customers' attitudes but did influence their expectations for service levels.

In a third study, Dean (2007) further investigated the effects of customer orientation on service quality, and how this influences loyalty and affective commitment from the customers. In this study, quality is conceptualized as interaction (agent behavior) and outcome, which included the result of the call and waiting time (Brady & Cronin, 2001). Customer orientation consists of customer focus (the organization's attempts to meet their needs) and feedback (attempts to solicit evaluations). Customer focus predicted service quality and loyalty, while feedback affected affective commitment. Perceived quality had a positive impact on both affective commitment and customer loyalty.

Pontes & Kelly, (2000) investigated the particular competencies of call center agents that led to repurchase intentions, using an observational measure of quality on the basis that customer ratings may change over time, and thus be unreliable. These were matched with caller data from a mailed survey to determine repurchase intentions. Pontes and Kelly offer six behaviors for managing customer interactions. These are personalize the service interaction, allow the caller to speak, acknowledge the emotion of the caller, be nondefensive, offer additional services and thank customer for calling. However, the derivation of these behaviors is unclear. The competency measures that contributed to repurchase intentions were "speech free of vocalized pauses," "spoke confidently," "personalized the call" and "offered the caller additional services." "Explained information clearly" proved nonsignificant.

Customer orientation behaviors are also the basis of a study by Rafaeli et al. (2008), this time from the perspective of the agent rather than the organization. Customer orientation in this study is defined as "an employee's tendency or predisposition to meet customer needs in an on-the-job context" (T. J. Brown, Mowen, Donovan, & Licata, 2002). Like organizational citizenship behaviors, customer orientation behaviors further customer goals. Rafaeli et al. identify five customer orientation behaviors, which are "strings of speech in which employees offered customers assistance that was not explicitly requested by the customer but that could promote resolution of customer needs." These behaviors were then categorized into "(a) anticipating customer requests, (b) offering explanations/justifications, (c) educating customers, (d) providing

emotional support, and (e) offering personalized information." These were then compared with customer ratings of call quality in 166 calls from different agents, the rating of quality being a single item from "poor" to "excellent." It emerged that customer orientation behaviors had a significant impact on perceived quality when the conversations were longer than three minutes but not for shorter calls. While the presence of COBs was significant, surprisingly only one type of behavior—offering personalized service—was a significant predictor of perceived quality.

Assessing agent performance

A barrier to the pooling of results in the above studies or any sort of meta-analytical examination is the lack of consensus regarding quality of agent performance, or even regarding the perspective from which quality is assessed. Call center managers see quality in terms of compliance with rules, handling times and abandonment rates (e.g. Batt & Moynihan, 2002; Dwyer & Fox, 2006; Wegge et al., 2007). Callers answers to their questions, an empathetic listener and a prompt response (e.g. Axtell et al., 2007; Ko de Ruyter & Wetzels, 2000; Keiningham et al., 2006). Agents rating their own performance may consider their own confidence and satisfaction with the job (e.g. Mukherjee & Malhotra, 2006; Nicholls et al., 2009).

Researchers may take any of these perspectives or none. They may rely on quality ratings by customers or supervisors without investigating the basis upon which such judgments are made (e.g. Rafaeli et al., 2008; Witt et al., 2004), or infer quality of service from subsequent observations such as brand loyalty, satisfaction or intention to purchase the firm's products again (e.g.

Feinberg et al., 2000; Pontes & Kelly, 2000). Curry and Lyon (2008) find that level of customer complaints and observations of calls to monitor politeness are the major methods of determining service quality in the Scottish centers they studied.

In summary, service in a call center derives from the efforts of people at different levels in the hierarchy managing knowledge, quality of interactions with callers and the individual abilities of agents. Clergeau (2005) identifies five factors that comprise the collective competency of a call center. These are an individual factor (motivation and desire to cooperate); a collective factor in the coordination of routines among employees; an interactive factor by which consensus is reached concerning representation of problems and appropriate solutions; an organization factor that allows agents to meet caller needs through established processes and a technical factor, the information and communication technology (ICT). However, her study suggested that ICTs had the effect of limiting organizational flexibility by encouraging the movement of individual competencies to a common collective base. She calls for human resources management that will restore the balance between individual and collective.

2.3 The need for further research

Above, influences on call center agent performance have been discussed. Organizational features such as planning, performance appraisal and compensation influence performance by identifying the agents that are best able to relate to callers and providing them with training and information that

improves their performance. Next there are the influences of teams: feedback and knowledge sharing. These provide motivation and peer support, reducing stress and turnover, which in turn retains expertise within the company. Finally, the individual qualities or personalities of agents are important: this includes factors such as emotional intelligence and personal commitment.

While these are all significant, the review of literature presented above suggests a number of areas in which call center research remains lacking. First, there is little original theory that specifically considers the call center as a unique customer service environment. Although many aspects of customer service—such as product or brand—remain constant, the technology-mediated nature of a call center and the intangible nature of the service, which from the caller's point of view is encapsulated entirely in the disembodied voice of a call center agent, create challenges unlike those in a face-to-face environment.

There is a substantial body of literature concerning the relationship of the organization to the agent, and the impact of management policies on performance and on the wellbeing of agents, but relatively little on the final step in the service chain: the interaction of the agent with the customer. Such research as exists generally focuses on survey and interview data rather than on actual interaction of agents with customers. There are exceptions to this, such as Rafaeli et al. (2008) and Dean (2004), yet there remains a suspicion of tautology in interpreting constructs such as "customer orientation" or "customer focus" when used with quality ratings that rely on undifferentiated judgments of a general nature. Recall that the definition of "customer orientation" is "an employee's tendency or predisposition to meet customer needs in an on-the-job

context" (Brown et al. 2002), suggesting that customer orientation behaviors must by definition be those that please customers. However, while lavishing attention on each caller may create a favorable impression in the minds of callers, it must be balanced against the needs of the other stakeholders: the agents and the company. It remains to be demonstrated that pursuit of quality is in the financial interest of the company. True, some authors such as Pontes and Kelly (2000) have tied call quality to repurchase intention, and Rafaeli et al. (2008) praise customer orientation behaviors, but they do not consider the opportunity costs of such strategies. On balance, does a single long call of high quality yield more financial gain for a company than a greater number of medium or low quality calls under greater time pressure? Call quality based purely on criteria such as friendliness or helpfulness adds a social judgment to a business practice, and risks a prosocial bias (discussed in communication studies such as Adams, 2001; Burgoon, 1995).

A considerable number of the studies discussed above mention the theme of quality versus quantity—that call centers are managed not for caller satisfaction but for speed and efficiency (e.g. Dean, 2002; Houlihan, 2002; Russell, 2008). The implication in such studies is that agents must sacrifice caller's needs for the benefit of the company, or those of the company for that of the callers, and endanger their own sanity by standing between these parties. There appears to be no study that takes a balanced view of quality and examines how call center agents satisfy, or at least balance, apparently divergent needs.

In summary, call center agents must provide information that is accurate, useful and complete. Second, this must be done in an appropriate way with regard to the social positions of agent and caller (Bolton & Houlihan, 2005) and create a positive relationship between them. Finally, the hitherto neglected area of efficiency must be explored. This is of course far from "neglected" in call center studies generally, but is never considered at the subjective conversational level. None of the previous studies have examined how call center agents shorten or wrap up calls, or why some calls drag on. Objective efficiency is considered in metrics such as call times and abandonment rates, but subjective efficiency, considering the complexity of the caller's problem and the tenor of the call has yet to be investigated.

The missing area of research is a comprehension examination of conversational moves that form strategies in call center agents' responses to callers. This entails listening to the text of calls rather than relying on participants' memories or general impressions. It should be textual rather than abstract and data rather than theory-driven. In Studies 1 and 2 below, a list of strategies employed by call center agents is derived and compared with dependent variables expected by a call center in Singapore.

3 Methods: Overview and Qualitative Study

The site of this research was in a financial services company in Singapore. It is an inbound call center, meaning that the agents usually handle calls that come in rather than making calls themselves. All calls are first screened by an interactive voice response system, which allows some account information to be accessed by callers without going to a live agent.

The callers presented agents with a variety of problems related to life and health insurance, such as enquiries about missed payments or policy conditions, requests for information on surrender values and maturity terms, and routine matters such as registering changes of address and updating details. The call center does not handle claims or sell products; these functions are handled by the respective departments.

The company identified courtesy, effectiveness and efficiency as key performance outcomes but did not identify specific behaviors or conduct training focused on prescribed communication techniques. Annual performance reviews are based on general criteria, including teamwork and calls in addition to observed calls.

This research was divided into two studies. The first was a qualitative study in which categories of response strategy—conversational moves with a unitary bearing on the conversation (Goffman, 1981; cited in Pentland, 1992)—were derived and described. The second study introduced a response scale to the strategies and related them to the dependent variables of courtesy, effectiveness and efficiency. In Study 2, it was also necessary to rule out

alternative sources of variation in call quality, so agents were surveyed and variables of a demographic, psychological and cultural nature were included to assess their impact. This allowed the definition of agent performance according to particular communication strategies and to assess how this may be measured. In this case, the researcher collected instances of call strategies that were felt to contribute to the levels of courtesy, effectiveness and efficiency.

Multimethod designs have become widespread, particularly in sociological research and offer the researcher the advantage of complementarity (Small, 2011). Complementarity means that the weakness of one method is compensated by the strengths of the other. In this case, the grounded theory approach of Study 1 enables the development of theory informed by data, rather than theory as a starting point. The quantitative methodology in Study 2 permits the testing of the communication strategies against dependent variables of courtesy, effectiveness and efficiency, and moreover the consideration of control variables—emotional intelligence, communicative competence and cultural orientations of high and low context.

Outline of Studies 1 and 2

The research proceeded as follows. The method of Study 1 followed a standard grounded theory approach, summarized in Miles and Huberman (1994, pp. 87-88) based on earlier work by Chesler (1987). Six raters were asked to rate calls using the instruments presented below. These were all people with master's qualifications in linguistics and business, and are labeled A–F to distinguish them in the text. All were approached for assistance in the project.

No rater scored both dependent and independent variables in either study. The responsibilities of each rater are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Tasks of raters

Rater	Responsibility
	Study 1
Raters A and B	Derive communication strategies
Raters A, B and C	Q-sort
	Study 2
Raters A and D	Agent's social stress
Raters B and E	Score Communication strategies
Raters C and F	Dependent variables (Courtesy, effectiveness, efficiency)

Study 1 outline

Step 1—Identify key phrases in the text: Two raters, A and B, listened to 75 calls selected by the call center manager consisting of 25 from the top performing agent, 25 from the most inexperienced agent and 25 from an agent representing the average, with these levels based on the opinion of the manager. These calls were collected over a week and ranged from 30 minutes to 37 seconds, with a mean of 3 minutes and 20 seconds. Calls were downloaded in the form of .wav files, identifiable by agent extension number and time stamp.

Step 2—Reduce the phrases and create clusters: With key phrases and conversational moves identified, raters A and B listed the phrases of interest and discussed why those particular moves were of interest. In this phase, the phrases were grouped as strategies, and descriptions were developed of their role in the conversations. Their role, in this case, refers to the "unitary bearing on the conversation" in Goffman's definition of a conversational move (above).

Step 3—Reduce clusters and attaching labels: The clusters in Step 3 were named "communication strategies" and examined to amalgamate those that could not be reliably distinguished, eliminate those that could not be defined clearly. The strategies were labeled according to function in the conversation, such as "show attentiveness" or "identify caller preferences." Discussion and practice rating identified the strategies that were indistinguishable in practice or too similar in definition. This resulted in a list of 10 strategies.

Step 4—Make generalizations about the strategies: This extended the labels and required a third rater to identify the strategies using calls from the corpus. The clusters, now called strategies, were grouped by means of a Q-sort procedure (Block, 1961) by Rater C to form "metaclusters," as Miles and Huberman (1994) call them. The allocation of strategies to categories was discussed with Raters A and B. This divided the strategies into two groups that appeared to serve divergent purposes.

Step 5—Integrate theories in an explanatory framework: Steps 1–4 suggest that agents' use of the strategies thus far identified should correlate with perceived performance. The remainder of this thesis, Study 2 and the discussion, relate the strategies to the literature and problems of call center agents and compare the strategies with the outcomes of quality and performance.

Study 2 outline

Study 2 was quantitative research that related the communication strategies identified in Study 1 to the agent performance, as well as comparing

these with competing constructs such as emotional intelligence and communication competence.

Step 1—Select a sample: A number of the original 1560 calls were eliminated on the basis of incompleteness, inaudibility or irrelevance. Interrater reliability of the remaining 587 was established by a subsample of 200 calls, divided by Raters A and D into stressed and unstressed. Reliability was acceptable (Cohen's $\kappa = .86$), the remaining calls were assessed by Rater D (who had not previously been engaged in the study). The final sample of 289 calls were those in which the agent was under a degree of social stress, resulting from aggression or ambiguity on the part of the caller (Dorman & Zapf, 2004).

Step 2—Measure dependent variables: Based on the company's criteria, and the study by Helms and Mayo (2008), the dependent variables of courtesy, effectiveness and efficiency were selected. The scales were developed based on previous literature, and two raters (a business communication tutor and a graduate student and not previously engaged in the study) were trained by the author and asked to code the calls on these variables.

Step 3—Code the independent variables: Raters A and B scored the 289 calls on a seven-point scale for each of the 10 communication strategies defined in Study 1. Rater F scored the dependent variables of courtesy, effectiveness and efficiency. A subsample of 60 was scored by rater C for reliability.

Step 4—Analyze the data: With data gathered, model fit was established through confirmatory factor analysis. Hierarchical Linear Modeling was

employed to correct for nesting of demographic and psychological data within agents (this information having been gathered through surveys) and separate agent-level and call-level data. This HLM analysis related the communication strategies to the dependent variables.

Table 2 provides a comparison of the two studies in terms of research question, sample and variables.

Table 2: Comparison of Studies 1 and 2

	Study 1	**Study 2**
Type of study	**Qualitative**	**Quantitative**
Research Question	What are the strategies in call agents' conversations with callers?	What is the effect of the strategies on agent performance?
Sample (# Calls)	An initial sample of 75 calls, comprised on 25 from the best performing agent, 25 from a medium performer, and 25 from an inexperienced agent.	A sample of 289 calls not overlapping with that in Study 1, judged to have an element of stress.

Variables	Derived during the study:
	
	<u>Solidarity building</u>
	
	• solicit caller's collaboration
	• anticipate caller needs
	• show attentiveness
	• Offer emotional support
	• Identify caller preferences
	• Emphasize positive viewpoint
	• Educate caller
	
	<u>Conversation control</u>
	
	• Accelerate turn taking
	• Paraphrase
	• Summarize
		Level 1 Control
		• Call duration
		
		Level 1 Predictors
		• Solidarity building
		• Conversation control
		
		Level 2
		
		• Gender
		• Age
		• Qualifications
		• Emotional Intelligence (EQ)
		• Communication competence:
		  o Planning cognition
		  o Modeling cognition
		  o Presence cognition
		  o Reflection cognition
		  o Consequence cognition
		• High context
		• Low context
		
		Dependent variables
		• Effectiveness
		• Courtesy
		• Efficiency

3.1 Study 1

The research proceeded as follows. The method followed a standard grounded theory approach, described in Strauss and Corbin (1990) and presented in a form summarized in Miles and Huberman (1994, pp. 87-88) based on earlier work by Chesler (1987).

For Study 1, the company supplied:

- Recordings of authentic calls received by the call center.
- Demographic data on staff: age, gender, ethnicity, length of service and qualifications.
- Performance evaluation data.
- Access to managers and agents for interviews and observations.

3.1.1 Sample and procedures

In the first phase, two researchers, here identified as Raters A and B, followed an inductive approach to the analysis of data, outlined in Miles and Huberman (1994) citing Chesler (1987), and in Strauss and Corbin (1990). The study was driven by observation rather than apriori categories, because while many scales and constructs related to interpersonal communication competence exist (Spitzberg and Cupach, 1989), none exist that address the unique challenges of the call center environment at the level of specificity that was desired in this study. Grounded theory was a suitable approach to this field because it is an emergent method that develops categories from the data.

Seventy five calls were selected by the call center manager consisting of 25 from the top performing agent, 25 from the most inexperienced agent and 25 from an agent representing the average, with these levels based on the opinion of the manager. These calls were collected over a week and ranged in duration from 37 seconds to 30 minutes, with a mean of three minutes and 20 seconds. Calls were downloaded in the form of .wav files, identifiable by agent extension number and time stamp.

The process begins with open coding, the identification of key phrases within the data until theoretical saturation (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) is achieved; that is, no new categories emerge from the data. This approach adopts a similar method of developing clusters of phrases/behaviors from a corpus before assigning labels.

Two raters listened to these calls without preconceived notions of effective strategies and noted moves by the agents that appeared to assist in resolving the call. The raters discussed these strategies, standardized their descriptions, and agreed on a preliminary list.

Raters A and B listened to the calls according to conversational move, defined as "any full stretch of talk or its substitutes which has a distinct unitary bearing on some set or other of the circumstances in which participants find themselves" (Goffman, 1981; cited in Pentland, 1992). For example, in one conversation the agent responds to a caller's question with "No problem, you still can send back to us today but you have to actually photocopy the bank account book." This has three distinct moves: and acknowledgement of the caller's concern ("no problem") a piece of information ("you can send [it] back

today") and a qualification ("but you have to actually photocopy the bank account book").

The calls were examined in audio rather than transcript format because this most closely approximates the experience of callers and nuance may be lost in transcript form. The researchers listened to each call move by move, noting the apparent contribution of each to the conversation. The list of key phrases was developed and systematically compared for points of similarity and difference. Calls were compared in terms of presence of absence of particular categories of moves. This allowed the researchers to assess the impact of each type of mood. In addition, holistic notes were made of the nature of the call, the type of resolution (resolved, agent promises to call back, escalated to supervisor) and whether the caller appear satisfied. In addition, they noted general impressions of the agent's handling of the call in terms of good, fair and poor.

Two questions were born in mind in this process.

1. If I had the opportunity to consult with the agent on his/her communication strengths, weaknesses and areas to improve, what key observations would I make?
2. What specific strategies can be identified that contribute to the three goals of efficiency, task completion and courtesy?

Reducing phrases to clusters

Reducing the number of clusters was an iterative process. The raters first reviewed the phrases identified above, consulted and listened again. The aim at this point was to reach agreement on conceptual categories of

communication strategies. The raters alternated between independent and consultative investigation until agreement was achieved on a list of communication strategies. Theoretical 'saturation' (in the sense of Strauss and Corbin, 1990) was deemed to have been achieved when no further categories were added.

The coding process was necessarily slow and painstaking, requiring some 50 hours per researcher to listen to each call in sufficient depth, checking and rechecking concepts, with consultations between researchers leading to further refinements and definition of categories, associating categories of moves with communication strategies and agreeing on final category membership.

The process and the results were then discussed in terms of clarity, distinctness, practicality and ease of use. The development of grounded theory was reevaluated and verified through the process of interviews and consultations with call center agents. The 26 agents were interviewed individually and played a selection of their own calls. They were then asked to rate their performance in terms of how well they had completed the task, how efficiently they had performed and how appropriate or courteous their contribution had been. During the call, the agents were quizzed about their responses through questions such as "Why did you ask that?" "Do you think [the caller] understood you?" The agents' responses were used to verify, extend or challenge the definitions and categorization of the communication strategies that had been proposed.

In this stage, the responses of the agents to the evolving of events must be discussed, to gain a sense of how the communication strategies relate to the

overall ‘flow’ of a call. This situates the strategies within the context of a call, and as the result of deliberate choices by agents. The goals of a call are to provide an answer or negotiate an outcome to the problem of the call. This may not be the same as resolving the problem, because there are company-mandated guidelines that agents cannot violate. If a caller requests something that is not possible or not permitted, the agent must mollify the caller and persuade him/her to accept the situation, even if he/she does not like it.

The interview process allowed the researchers to understand the process and gain some insight into the internal factors of calls—what agents are thinking when they talk to callers. The intent of this is to set the communication strategies within their context: the possibly unseen or unspoken factors that have an effect on the calls. The interviews were to determine the extent to which these contexts and other considerations influenced the process of achieving a successful call.

The agents were asked to attend a meeting with the principal researcher (and supervisors as available) and the purpose explained. It was explained that the meeting was not a performance review and that their comments would be used for research but would not be linked to the person with whom they originated. All but three agents (who had left the company) were interviewed. These interviews took 20–30 minutes.

Based on these consultations with agents and between researchers, definitions of the emerging constructs were developed and refined. Items on the list were merged if they proved to be indistinguishable in practice from another item.

Below is an example of a call that is concluded well by the agent. The communication strategies and typical comments are shown in the right hand column.

Example: Call # 1426

Caller: I used to have an insurance agents, she's already left XYZ. After she left I was assigned three different agents for different policies. This is inconvenient for me, and so far none has contacted me. I'm not sure that this is the service they are supposed to provide in the sense that they don't follow up with me, they don't check the status of my policy and then in fact when I once tried to call them one of them never ever pick up her phone and she says what I requested, but then she never follow up. I thought agents would check on their customers from time to time to see what they need and what they want.	
Agent: Yeah, usually they will follow up	Agent shows attentiveness (by agreeing and repeating key words).
Caller: I'm really terribly unhappy with the service I'm getting from XYZ.	
Agent: okay	Shows attentiveness
Caller: Furthermore, I want to be assigned just one agent for all my policies.	
Agent: But do you actually have any agent in mind?	Identifies caller preference
Caller: Oh, I don't have but I just want one.	
Agent: "don't mind giving me your IC number?"	Seeks collaboration (by seeking information to work on problem)
Caller: *gives IC* (identity card) *number*	
Agent: Okay, check, one moment	Shows attentiveness
Caller: Yeah,	
Agent: You actually have three policies with us, right?	Seeks collaboration
Caller: Yes	
Agent: So you want one common agent for all, any preference like in gender? (soft chuckles from Agent: and C)	Anticipates needs Identifies caller preferences
Caller: Any preference?	Paraphrases question
Agent: You have no requirement about that?	

Caller: I guess.. preferably a female	
Agent: female, okay, don't mind can have your contact number so that we can arrange for a female agent to give you a call to take over all the three policy?	Shows attentiveness, Accelerates turntaking (by switching to new topic).
Caller: *gives number*	
Agent: this one is your office number?	Anticipates needs (by promising a call).
Caller: Yes	
Agent: Then maybe any mobile number so that they can reach you?	Identifies caller preferences
Caller: Mobile is not on all the time the can call the office line and leave a message I call them back	
Agent: Ah, okay	Shows attentiveness
Caller: I would like an agent who is contactable and when I need any help I can get her easily (Agent: okay) and maybe someone who bothers enough to like call up and check	
Agent: I understand what you mean. So what I'll do is that I shall inform your agent who servicing your needs that she'll assign you a female agent for all your three cases and we should also get the agent to give you a call as soon as possible. It may take a few days because I'm sure she need to read through all your policies first.	Offers emotional support ("I understand") Summarizes. Educates caller
Caller: Who am I speaking to?	
Agent: Susan,	
Caller: Susan?	Solicit collaboration, offering personal help.
Agent: Yeah, mhm, anything you need you can always get back to me but the agent should actually be able to contact you around next week. Thanks for calling, good bye.	Educating caller
Caller: Thanks, good bye.	

This call is collaborative, with both agent and caller active. Of some 15 Agent turns, four are acknowledgement ("Okay," "Alright," "Yah, I understand"), and eight are questions ranging from obtaining basic information to the kind of agent the caller wants. A particular strength of this call is the thorough summary at the end, in which the agent creates a 'verbal contract' about the action to be taken.

With the list of communication strategies prepared and examples identified, the descriptions were edited for clarity. These are presented in the Results section below.

3.1.2 Results

Ten communication strategies were identified and are listed and described below.

1. *Seeking caller's collaboration* is the primary strategy in the solidarity building process. This involves the use of a friendly tone, shared joke or expression of interest in the caller's point of view, signaling willingness to cooperate.

If expressed skillfully, seeking collaboration goes beyond polite interest to engender reciprocal desire to cooperate or to accept adverse news on the part of the caller. In this example, there is confusion between whether the bank or the company is responsible. The agent accepts that the caller has been shuffled between the two, and even prompts a shared laugh at his predicament.

Agent "this is the only channel so you might want to just give us a letter and then wait for a reply, because even if you call the bank I don't think they can assist you much as well."

Caller: "so it's a bit of a hassle"

Agent: "…because even if call ABC BANK call their hotline, I think they'll just forward as well (A and C laugh together) whoever speaks to you they won't know you'll then have to tell us then we'll have to handle the case on our side here."

In this call there is a sense of the agent sharing the caller's cynicism about the process, and appearing in a minor way to take the caller's side against the company. The agent acts not just as the company's agent with the caller but as the caller's agent with the company.

2. *Anticipating caller needs* refers to an agent's ability to delve beneath what is said to address underlying fears or desires, allowing the caller to avoid potentially face-threatening questions or admissions.

For example, in one call, the caller is in financial difficulties and requires a loan against a policy. The agent asks "How much do you need, sir? Can, I prepare for you. Sir, do you know the interest rate is 6% a year?" This contains an unsolicited offer to help and a reminder that the loan carries interest. The agent conveys information and demonstrates concern for the caller's situation.

Caller: "[How can I get] payment of cash benefit into [my] bank account."

Agent: "Okay, cash benefits are due on 4th June if you all want to bank into account you just need to fill in the form."

Caller: "Yeah but I fill in already, but is the last day."

Agent: "No problem, you still can send back to us today but you have to actually photocopy the bank account book."

Anticipating needs means answering not only the question asked but offering further information to facilitate the process or to allow the caller to make a more informed choice. It often arises from the agent's understanding of the system and the likely problems that a caller will face.

3. *Showing attentiveness* refers to vocal responses that signal engagement in involvement throughout the call.

Showing attentiveness may be as little as an acknowledgement token "mm hmm," but more effective forms may involve repetition or partial repetition, adding comments or interposing expressions of surprise. Recall the caller who wants a new sales agent. The agent responds "so you want one common agent for all…" or another case in which the caller is disturbed by a reference to a particular plan in a policy.

Caller: "Hello good afternoon, I want to make enquiry. You all sent a letter on the Extra Plan, the retirement fund to my son…. But what I want to ask is that we also insure him with Health Extra. Are you all in charge of Health Extra?"

Agent: "No, no, it is a different part of the plan. Health Extra is for hospitalization…"

Caller: "Yeah I know, I know but but you all don't cover Health Extra, or what. Is it Company Y, because … ah Company Y wrote to me?"

Agent: "Ah, yeah so yours should be with Company Y, lah"

Caller: "Then what about my son's one?"

Agent: "Your son's one…if he has Health Extra he has to buy a hospital plan from any other company like our company or Company Y that means then it'll be integrated, lah."

The repetition of "company Y" and "your son's one" reassures the caller that the question has been understood. In the call below (#2022) the agent is asked a question and replies with a complete sentence rather than simply saying "two weeks."

> Caller: "…so issue the letter this week okay, how long will this take?"
>
> Agent: "If you issue the letter this week give us two weeks to actually investigate the whole case."
>
> Caller: "Two weeks, hah?"
>
> Agent: "Yeah, correct."

4. *Offer emotional support* is the expression of empathy, recognizing that a caller is scared, angry or in a difficult position. It is seldom overt, but expressed in a manner that responds to the caller's feelings rather than just his/her words.

Emotional support may involve expressions of understanding, apology, regret or sympathy. In this example, the agent achieves this through accepting criticism of the company and confirming the validity of the caller's complaint that a word is frightening. In the first agent response, the agent achieves a reassuring tone by voice and by using the caller's name.

> Caller: "Now the question here, what is very alarming here… why is it there is a clause, that's stated very frightening, which I want to clarify, because otherwise I don't want XYZ. Do I have to declare my health condition for coverage?"
>
> Agent: "Mr. Joseph, you do not have to."
>
> Caller: "Ah that's very…, whether insuring for the first time by auto-cover, is very frightening word 'auto-cover.' "

Agent: "Okay, maybe there is some misunderstanding…" (Agent wants to explain, is cut off by the caller, who is upset by the term. The agent does not pursue the explanation)

Caller: "no"

Agent: "Maybe there is some problem with our phrasing"

5. *Identify caller preferences* is a questioning strategy by which an agent explores the caller's issue before prescribing a solution.

Identifying caller preferences may be probing for new information or clarifying information already given. In a sense, this builds a picture in the agent's mind, not just of the problem but of the significance of the problem to a caller, and personal factors that may color the caller's perception of the incident or problem. In one call, a caller is upset that an expected maturity value has not materialized. The agent seeks to understand where the caller got this inflated notion.

Agent: "who promised that to you?"

Caller: "by the ABC bank staff"

Agent: "ABC staff?"

Caller: "yeah, in Jurong."

Agent: Have you spoken to the ABC bank staff about this?

In the call above regarding the complaint about an insurance agent, the agent asks a clarifying question.

Caller: "Furthermore, I want to be assigned just one agent for all my policies"

Agent: "But do you actually have any agent in mind?"

Questions serve the purposes of allowing the caller to have his/her say while enabling the agent to respond to the problem with full information, demonstrating attention and signaling understanding.

6. *Emphasizing positive viewpoint* refers to an agent's technique of indicating benefits and rewards in place of concerns, often emphasizing a long-term perspective in place of short term financial sacrifice.

An example of emphasizing a positive viewpoint is "It's quite attractive, $80,000 [in a few years if you keep the policy] compared to $50,000 [if you cash it in now]." Often this involves encouraging a caller to see a problem in context, such as the case where a caller has encouraged his brother to take up an endowment (investment) policy only to have the interest rate drop. However, the agent points out that the drop is a result of market forces rather than cupidity on the part of the company.

Agent: "Just like in… you bought in 1980s. Why 1980s? The bank interest… how much are they giving and now you compare how much are they giving."

7. *Educate the caller* is often required. Call centers are gatekeepers of information that is frequently complex, difficult to understand and controlled by legislation, thus it is necessary to give complete information and to clarify it where necessary.

For example, in one call a caller has a very unusual question regarding whether a policy may be retained even in the event of a major illness even if no claim is made.

Agent: "Thanks for waiting ma'am. My encouragement is that you have submit the claims us now because five years later the… will the bonus be up to 5 years, the answer is no. We'll base on the event date, when the heart condition was diagnosed that was five years back, so we take out all the bonuses collected along the five years, so there is no use ah."

Caller: "Then you refund me the premium for the five years."

Agent: "No, that means the policy will keep going because as long as the policy."

Caller: "er…"

Agent: "the bonus will be much less than the premium so there is no use the premium will not able to refund, the bonus will take it out, so there is no point to not declare lah, frankly speaking." (chuckles)

Thus the agent educates the caller on the rules of the company while demonstrating concern for her by giving advice.

8. *Accelerating turntaking* is the practice of disallowing silence or hesitation by breaking in, speaking or attempting to terminate the call (for example with questions such as "is there anything else I can help you with?").

Caller: "… if, if, let's say ha, if I'm still alive I have the money to claim, but this one (life insurance) I claim nothing you know and that's like … and then I don't take any money you see, so this is not worthwhile. Why like this la?"

Agent: "Ok, ok can you let me explain before you like carry on like that OK. You just let me explain first ma'am. Because this one if you let's say um, that means that if later on you feel like you don't want to continue the policy you can still cancel this policy, you will still have some money back"

Caller: "Yeah, but it's not worth the money, it's just ….. a bit"

Agent: "Yeah but ma'am there's nothing we can do at this moment, your policy has already been purchased"

9. *Paraphrasing* is the use of rephrased words to clarify or confirm what is said.

Used correctly, paraphrasing helps to minimize misunderstandings that may create frustration on the part of the caller or waste time. In one call, the caller is complaining about his bank and the insurance company, so the agent must paraphrase to clarify the basis of the complaint.

> Caller: "I mean I'm really at a loss; What was being conveyed to me was very different and it was telling me it's capital protected investor and at the time I invested this they told me actually that this amount whatever is being invested you get back at the end of the maturity if you don't make [money]".
>
> Agent: "I think your complaint is more on the misrepresentation of the personal financial consultant that when he sold you the plan he misrepresented to you, right?" (Call #138)

10. *Summarizing* involves repeating and organizing all that a caller has said, or that the agent has agreed to do.

This is a clarifying technique that creates a 'contract.' Recall the caller who wants a new sales agent. The call center agent summarizes the action to be taken and what this entails.

> Agent: "I understand what you mean. So what I'll do is that I shall inform your agent who servicing your needs that she'll assign you a female agent for all your three cases and we should also get the agent to give you a call as soon as possible. It may take a few days because I'm sure she need to read through all your policies first."

Reducing clusters and attaching labels

This step required a "Q-sort" procedure (Block, 1961), in which Rater C was asked to participate, in addition to Raters A and B. The rater considered the relationships among the strategies and searched for common elements. Two distinct trends were evident in the communication strategies that we had listed. The sorting procedure required the raters to group the strategies according to the apparent motivation for the move. Examples of these strategies and level 2 categories are presented below.

The first level 2 category of solidarity building refers to the process of partnering between caller and agent to work on a problem or issue as a team. This is a subtle process of shifting the relationship from that of customer–assistant to one of collaborators combining to achieve a shared outcome of mutual benefit. The agent aligns—or appears to align—his or her interests with those of the caller, signaled in such subtle ways as referring to the company as "they" and the caller/agent dyad as "we." The agent achieves this in seven distinct ways, which are discussed below.

Seven of the ten strategies engender collaboration on the task at hand. Caller and agent must cooperate and collaborate to identify the purpose of the call and reach a solution that satisfies the caller while remaining within the policies of the company and the limitations of the product. This process of working together as a team requires acceptance by both parties that constraints exist but outcomes will be maximized by partnering and collaboration. For this level 2 category the term *solidarity building strategies* was adopted. Solidarity is a concept not unlike that of Brown and Levinson (1987), who referred to

"positive politeness" or "redress directed to the addressee's perennial desire that his wants or actions should be thought of as desirable" (1987, p. 106).

The concept of solidarity includes that of courtesy, but is an active and dynamic process. It goes beyond politeness because it creates content as well as form of words, and involves "the substance of speech actions" (Tracy, 1998). Schuster and Danes (2003), refer to the need of the service provider to build relationships through socio-emotional efforts termed "solidarity comments," examples of which are "…laughing at a customer's joke, acknowledging a customer's response, …or showing approval of a customer's choice" (p.23). The term *customer orientation behaviors* has been used by Rafaeli, Ziklik & Doucet (2008). However, Rafaeli et al. define these as "strings of speech in which employees offered callers assistance that was not explicitly requested by the customer but that could promote resolution of customer needs." Such behaviors are certainly desirable in the call center context, but do not entirely capture the range of responses observed in our calls. Even when assistance is directly requested, there was observable variation in the promptness and completeness with which it was offered. Customer orientation behaviors as defined above may contribute to effectiveness in terms of resolving a problem, but their relationship with solidarity is less clear. Solidarity is not just the offering of help (although it might include this) but the establishment of a relationship based on collaboration rather than strict deference. Solidarity is reciprocal, based on the identification of common interests and may ameliorate those situations when desired actions are withheld, as may occur when caller desires clash with company policy.

Questioning strategies (soliciting collaboration and showing attentiveness) are fundamental to the early stages of the call. Nearly all agents remarked on the difficulty of understanding some callers: "I took a while to understand what was wrong—in the end I gave him everything (unrequested information) because I didn't know what he wanted" (Agent 1005). However, the raters all noted that questioning was not as prevalent as perhaps it could be, and in fact a number of misunderstandings occurred because information was not requested. Perhaps this is because questions appear to lengthen the call, but the results of Study II do not support this view. The use of questions allows the agent to address the correct issue and avoid misunderstandings, or redirect the call to another if the question is beyond the scope of the call center. If the issue is not clarified, it is common for the caller to spend some time explaining the situation before the agent realizes that he/she is unable to help. Some calls even descend into an almost farcical back-and-forth exchange while the query is negotiated. In call 1796, for example, the agent does not give full information at the start, thus making it necessary for the caller to prod the agent into the desired action.

Agent:	"Hello… good afternoon sir"
Caller:	"Yah yah.. no I was asking well lah… I dunno why I have to ask so many people. Ahh, can you email me the ahh ABC _____ premium surrendering form."
Agent:	"ABC?"
Caller:	"Yah"
Agent:	"Ah, send it to you lah? You give me the real policy number?"
Caller:	"No no. Email me the surrendering form"
Agent:	"I cannot email sir, if you want us to email then you've got to email to

	us. If you want I can send the form to you."
Caller:	"How come you all do not email to me ah?"
Agent:	"No, for surrender I think you've got to request ah. If you want I can send the form to you."
Caller:	"Yah lah, I'm requesting whether you just email to me and I can just print out."
Agent:	"But I cannot email from here. Email will be done by backroom."
Caller:	"Then, ah lah, you will ask the backroom guy to email to me lah."
Agent:	"You email to accounts to email to you lah. I couldn't ask them to email because they need the client to, to request"
Caller:	"Yah, which I'm requesting right now ah."
Agent:	"Ok, I'll send it to you if you want"
Caller:	"Huh? (sigh) You… You don't understand English or what? I said you email to me and…"
Agent:	"I cannot email to them they need the client to email to them in order for them to send out. If it's surrendering a policy, we discourage surrendering."
Caller:	"Personally, so I'm not ah, aiyah, so you'll not email to me."
Agent:	"I can email for you."
Caller:	"And who, who can I speak to? For, For them to email me"
Agent:	"No, you email it to our email address. They will send to you via email. I give you our email address…"
Caller:	"(long silence) huh… (sigh) Okay, you give me your email address..."

At the same time as explicit questioning, an experienced agent learns to identify unspoken needs, which may go beyond the presenting problem to include a need for emotional support. This is known as emotional labor (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993), which is essential to customer service but potentially a threat to the agents sense of identity and self (Wharton, 2009). The agents interviewed commented on this aspect, and one remarked that agents evolve strategies to cope with unreasonable customers, such as putting the call

on hold while the agent vents frustration to his/her colleagues: "everyone in a call center does that" (agent 1006).

In summary, solidarity is the sacrifice of a degree of control of the call to achieve a personalized and collaborative rather than strictly deferential relationship with a caller. It is achieved by an agent allowing a caller a degree of control over the tone and objectives of the call, which is ascertained by a process of questioning, anticipation and checking needs. The agent must achieve common ground with the caller and not only cooperate but develop a social, collaborative or even conspiratorial bond for the duration of the call.

Conversation control

Building solidarity is not the end of the agent's responsibility. Call centers are high pressure environments in which speed of call handling and high throughput of calls is valued, and indeed agents are rated primarily on such metrics (Feinberg, Kim, Hokama, de Ruyter and Keen, 2000), which persists even against a growing realization that human factors are also essential. In part this is perhaps because such data are easily gathered by means of software, but also because agent time is of monetary value, and callers grow impatient in a queue (Deerie & Kinnie, 2002, Deery, Iverson & Walsh, 2002).

Thus, the second factor that emerged was *conversational control strategies*. These are strategies through which an agent manages the call to expedite the conclusion. The agent uses techniques of active listening—paraphrasing and summarizing—to check understanding and crystallize the caller's problems, at the same time accelerating turntaking by preventing downtime, asking questions and if necessary interrupting a meandering caller.

This aspect is a significant addition to previous discussions of call center communication because it addresses the particular nature of a call center and recognizes the difference of this customer service environment from others. In contrast to solidarity building, conversation control strategies are used to press ahead with a call, with an agent taking and retaining conversational turns. This involves longer speaking turns, breaking in on a caller, disallowing interruptions or silences in the call, and seeking to terminate the call with questions like "can I help you with anything else?" It may involve the narration of what the agent is doing, avoiding awkward silences. More than other environments, in a call center speed is of the essence. This is seen in comments such as "Ah, OK I go to another I know what you mean.…I go to another screen OK?"

Occasionally this may be abrupt, and this makes it a conversational control strategy, distinct from a solidarity building strategy.

A summary of communication strategies, according to these categories is presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Summary of Communication strategies

Solidarity Building Strategies: Partnering to complete the task	**Examples**
1. **Solicit caller's collaboration**—Approach the caller as a teammate to identify and resolve a shared issue or problem.	"What we might do is ABC. Do you think that would work?" "How about I send you the form, you submit it and when it comes back 'denied' you can use the denial as evidence for your argument." (some noise in the background) Agent: "Some building going on your end?"
2. **Anticipate caller needs**—Perceive unstated needs or concerns and offer help or information without being asked or pushed by the caller.	"So you want one common agent for all, any preference for gender?" "Do you want me to send you a copy?" "Yes, that's true. In addition, you need to call your bank. Their customer service number is…."
3. **Show attentiveness**—Acknowledge verbally caller's comments to demonstrate engagement and listening throughout the call.	(Caller): [if the deduction is not successful] will you terminate the policy?" (Agent) "No, we won't terminate the policy, we'll…" (#1724) I understand what you're saying,… That's right, every year we….
4. **Offer emotional support**— Show understanding of the caller's predicament, point of view or feelings.	"I understand what you mean, so what I'll do is that I'll inform your agent who is servicing your needs that she'll assign a female agent for all your three cases…" "I'm sorry, can you hear me now?"
5. **Identify caller preferences**—Ask what action is desired or whether a particular approach is acceptable	"Is there anything else I can help you with?" "How is it if I ask your agent to call you?" "Would you consider changing your payments from monthly to annually?" "So you want a common agent for all, any preference like for gender?"
6. **Emphasize positive viewpoint**—Promote positive aspects, opportunities, benefits and what can be done.	"The good thing is, we're open all day." "If you keep it to maturity you get more back." "But with this policy, you are covered if anything happens." "It's quite attractive, $80,000 [if you keep the policy] compared to $50,000 [if you cash it in now]"
7. **Educate caller**—Teach the caller by giving and interpreting information, often elaborated by examples, comparisons, statistics and data analysis.	"When you look on the right hand side of the statement, you can see…." "Compare the interest rate now with what it was in the 80s, it's different, right?" "That won't work because…."

Table 3 (Continued)

Conversational Control Strategies: Managing interaction to expedite the call.	**Examples**
8. Accelerate turn taking— Speed up the call by disallowing gaps, interrupting, changing topics and finishing caller sentences or thoughts.	So you mean...? Caller: So my mother-in-law has a problem. Her health is deteriorating... Agent: What is your ICD number? Agent: Just let me explain first, OK? (Agent interrupts) "So basically, what you need to know is your due date, correct?"
9. Paraphrase—Rephrase the caller's words or phrases to ensure understanding as a listening or summary technique.	"So you want to know if you 'top up' now, how much you can get, right? (Caller) "So it will be credited tomorrow, right?" (Agent) "Correct, we'll do the crediting tomorrow." "Yes, as you say, payment would be about $2,200"
10. Summarize—Organize the content by juxtaposing, listing, and reviewing the information received.	"So you have three questions. Let me look up your record and provide you with answers." "To review the answers to your questions…" "Let me list the steps for you again…First you…" "So I shall inform the agent that is servicing your needs that she should assign a female agent to give you a call as soon as possible." #1426

4 Study 2: Quantitative study

In Study I, a list of communication strategies was identified and described. In Study II, the empirical confirmation of the effect of these strategies on courtesy, effectiveness and efficiency required a larger representative sample and the consideration of a number of study variables. This section presents the method of sample selection, measures and tests, concluding with the results of these tests.

The variables in this and their derivation are described below, followed by a description of the sampling process. The section concludes with a description of empirical findings.

4.1.1 Sample and procedures

The sample for Study 2 consisted of calls in which the agent was under a degree of stress gathered over a period of one year. The extended period was considered necessary because the call center agents had reported that their work had a degree of seasonal variation, with sales campaigns, end of financial year and certain periods producing a rush of calls on particular subjects.

To counter this seasonal effect, five calls were collected from each agent for each month over the previous year. Five calls for each of 26 agents per month for one year amounted to 1560 calls.

A number of the original 1560 calls were eliminated on the basis of incompleteness, inaudibility or irrelevance. Once interrater reliability was established by agreement with rater A, the remaining 587 were assessed by

Rater D (who had not previously been engaged in the study). Of the 587 calls, those 289 in which the agent was under social stress resulting from aggression or ambiguity on the part of the caller (Dorman & Zapf, 2004) formed the final sample.

English calls were chosen because pragmatics in the other languages used, primarily Mandarin Chinese, are considerably different to those of English (See, for example, Chen, 1993; Du-Babcock, 2006; Woo & Prud'homme, 1999).

As an example of a call that was excluded, the following provides no scope for the agent to respond in any substantive manner.

Agent: XYZ, this is Julie speaking. How may I help you?

Caller: Just want to check your address is number 10 PQR Street, is that correct?

Agent: yes, that's right

Caller: Thanks (abruptly hangs up)

With these calls eliminated, a sample of 587 usable calls remained. The mean number of calls per agent was 11.16, with a standard deviation of 5.71. Many of these were entirely routine transactions, and in some cases the agent said little more than "yes, that's correct." To focus the study on calls that required some element of skill on the part of the agent, Raters A and D listened to a sample of 100 of these and identified those that showed an element of social stress for the agent, defined in this case as customer aggression or ambiguity (Dorman & Zapf, 2004). Interrater reliability was acceptable at 96 percent agreement. Rater D, not otherwise involved in the study, then listened to the entire corpus with this criterion in mind and selected 289 calls of interest.

To ensure fair representation of each agent, a chi square test was conducted to test for change of relative frequency of the numbers of calls by each agent. A chi square test for independence was not significant ($\chi = 390.00$, df = 325 p = .286), suggesting that the reduction of the sample did not affect the overall proportion of calls handled by each agent.

4.1.2 Measures

Dependent variables

Courtesy, effectiveness and efficiency are the criteria considered important by the XYZ company where the study was conducted, although the company did not define them. These were selected as dependent variables and are supported by the findings of Helms and Mayo (2008), who found four principal reasons that call center customers complained about service. These factors were (1) lack of courtesy, manifested as rude employees/poor attitudes, (2) low effectiveness in responding to caller needs, evident in overall poor service (in terms of mistakes and lack of information), and (3) a lack of efficiency, manifested as slow service. The fourth factor, agents socializing, was not relevant in this study because the cubicle design of the call center work stations inhibited such behavior. The notions of courtesy, effectiveness and efficiency are lay constructs that fit well with the literature, but in the absence of suitable existing scales it was necessary to develop items specifically for this study.

Raters F and G, who were not previously involved in this research, scored the dependent variables of courtesy, effectiveness and efficiency on

seven-point scales anchored by *strongly agree* and *strongly disagree*. Interrater reliability was established using Cohen's Kappa (Landis and Koch, 1977) and ICC (Shroud & Fleiss, 1979).

Courtesy. Courtesy involves display rules of polite self-presentation (Grandey et al., 2004; Wilk & Moynihan, 2005), while politeness requires the satisfaction of face wants, in the form of an adequate degree of respect, and negative face wants or avoidance of disrespect (P. Brown & Levinson, 1987). In addition, emotional labor requires that an agent show restraint and avoid violating face rules, even when provoked. Thus, the third item was included to measure self control. The items were "the agent showed politeness & deference to the customer"; "the agent demonstrated that he/she respected the caller" and "the agent controlled his/her temper and handles difficulties rationally." Mean interrater reliability was acceptable (Cohen's $\kappa = .71$, ICC = .88), as was scale reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = .88$).

Effectiveness. Effectiveness is the ease of goal accomplishment (Spitzberg, 2003), and goals in turn are the objectives of the conversation and personal goals (Canary, Cody, & Manusov, 2003). Call centers must provide accurate and concise information (Conrad & Haynes, 2001) and Singapore customers want first call resolution and knowledgeable agents (Contact.net, 2007). The three effectiveness items were "the agent identified and met the real needs of the caller." Mean interrater and scale reliability were acceptable (Cohen's $\kappa = .78$, ICC = .87, Cronbach's $\alpha = .86$).

*Efficiency.*Efficiency is guided by a caller's "duration appropriateness belief" (Froehle & Roth, 2004). While in call centers mean handling times is a common metric for evaluation of agent performance (Feinberg et al., 2000), efficiency of a particular call depends on the complexity of the call and the demands of the caller, and thus must be a subjective assessment rather than resting on duration alone. Agents are called to account if a call drags on (Bain & Taylor, 2000), and are expected to resolve calls quickly, even at the expense of courtesy (Belt et al., 2002). The efficiency items were therefore "the agent allowed call to drag on unnecessarily" Mean interrater and scale reliability were acceptable (Cohen's $\kappa = .72$, ICC = .91, Cronbach's $\alpha = .83$). In all analyses below the first item is reverse-coded.

Independent variables

While most of the categories, or communication strategies that were identified were present in most calls, for further analysis and later quantitative work it was necessary to assign dimensions to them. This requires the creation of "dimensional continua" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In the case of the communication strategies in this study, the dimension of interest was in the degree of impact on the call of each type of move. In Strauss and Corbin's method, the dimension of interest depends on the property by which the phenomenon is measured. In this case, mere frequency or duration are misleading, as a behavior may be frequent but have no notable impact on the quality of the call. Conversely, a particularly adept or maladroit move on the

part of an agent may have a result out of proportion to the time that it takes. The critical dimension in this case is extent (in Straus and Corbin's term). In this study, each response strategy was considered according to the degree of use in terms of its impact upon the course of the call. This was considered in terms of "no use" "moderate use" or "extensive use." This was because degree of use must be considered in terms of opportunity for use, which in turn is driven by the nature of a specific call.

Raters B and E scored the communication strategies as independent variables. The communication strategies described in Table 3 were scored on a seven point scale anchored by "not used" to "extensive use." These were aggregated as *solidarity building strategies* and *conversational control strategies.*

Solidarity building strategies. Solidarity building was measured by "solicits caller collaboration" (Cohen's $\kappa = .69$, ICC = .93); "anticipates caller needs" (Cohen's $\kappa = .70$, ICC = .90); "shows attentiveness" (Cohen's $\kappa = .70$, ICC = .81); "offers emotional support" (Cohen's $\kappa = .80$, ICC = .98); "identifies caller preferences" (Cohen's $\kappa = .68$, ICC = .96); "emphasizes positive viewpoint" (Cohen's $\kappa = .76$, ICC = .81); and "educates caller" (Cohen's $\kappa = .74$, ICC = .91). Interrater and scale reliability was acceptable (Mean Cohen's $\kappa = .72$, Mean ICC = 0.90, Cronbach's $\alpha = .93$).

*Conversation control.*Conversation control was derived in a similar manner to solidarity building according to three strategies, which were "accelerates turntaking" (Cohen's $\kappa = .71$, ICC = .88), "paraphrases" (Cohen's $\kappa = .73$,

ICC = .91) and "summarizes" (Cohen's κ = .68, ICC = .93). Interrater and scale reliability was acceptable (Mean Cohen's κ = .71, ICC = .88, Cronbach's α = .75).

Examples of scored calls are provided in the appendix.

Control variables

This study concerns call-level measures of performance rather than agent-level trait or competence measures. However, given that 26 agents of varying degrees of experience and personal communication skill are represented in the sample of calls, it may be charged that differences in call quality are more easily predicted by existing instruments for psychological constructs known to affect communication skills. To test this possibility, the analysis included a survey of two frequently used constructs, cognitive communication competence and emotional intelligence. Cognitive communication competence has proven useful in predicting workplace performance (Algren & Eichhorn, 2007). The widely used construct of emotional intelligence is considered a valuable predictor of work performance (Van Rooy & Viswesvaran, 2004), making it a logical choice for the investigation of agent service performance. In addition, because previous studies in English-speaking call centers have most commonly been conducted in the US, Europe or India, it was of interest whether cultural orientation was a significant factor in handling calls. Thus, measures of high/low context were included because this is the most widely cited model of intercultural differences (Cardon & Okoro, 2010).

Cognitive communication competence. Cognitive communication competence (Duran & Spitzberg, 1995) is a measure of five mental processes with regard to communication. These are as follows. *Planning cognition* was measured by three items concerning whether the individual reflects upon what he/she intends to say (Cronbach's α =.62). *Modeling cognition* was assessed by three items concerning whether the individual sizes up the event or studies people (Cronbach's α =.86). *Presence cognition* was measured by four items concerning the individual's observations of a topic, such as knowing when to change topic or realizing when the conversation is off track (Cronbach's α =.62). The *reflection cognition* measure consisted of four items about the individual's reflections following the completion of the conversation (Cronbach's α =.85). *Consequence cognitions* were measured by four items concerning the individual's reflections about the results of what he/she says. (Cronbach's α =.85)

*Emotional intelligence (EQ).*Emotional intelligence (Wong & Law, 2002) is another cognitive construct associated with success in interactions with others. This concerns the ability to regulate one's own emotions and influence those of others, and has been linked with call center agent performance in previous studies (Higgs, 2004). In this study it was measured with 16 items on a seven-point scale (Cronbach's α = .87).

*High context and low context cultural orientation.*High context (four items, Cronbach's α = .78) and low context (four items, Cronbach's α = .95) variables were included as possible measures of success in culturally diverse Singapore. Culture has emerged as an element in call center agent performance in previous

studies (D. Das et al., 2008; Pal & Buzzanell, 2008). In culturally diverse situations, verbal skills are likely to be highly prized when socially relevant information is not assumed, as would be the case in a low context culture. However, in a high context culture, verbal skill may arouse suspicion (Okabe, 1983). The instruments are from Van Dyne & Ang (2010).

*Call duration.*This level 1, or call-level, control variable was assessed for each call by the raters. Duration was measured in minutes. Calls in the final sample ranged from 1 minute 9 seconds to 46 minutes 6 seconds, with a mean of 5 minutes 30 seconds.

Agent level (level 2) control variables in this study were collected by pencil and paper questionnaire completed by agents before the interview. Work experience in call centers was not included in the analysis because it was strongly correlated with age.

*Age in years.*This was added to allow for the possibility that call center expertise is simply a function of life experience.

Gender. Gender was included because it has emerged as a potential confound in call center work (Belt et al., 2000; Belt et al., 2002).

*Qualifications.*Qualifications were coded as the highest level of education attained: Secondary ("O" levels); Pre-university ("A" levels); Diploma; Bachelor's degree; and Master's degree. This was included as a measure of education.

4.1.3 Analysis

Before proceeding with other analyses, it was necessary to establish discriminant validity of the above constructs. A confirmatory factor analysis was conducted to confirm the five-factor hypothesized model (solution with solidarity building, conversation control, effectiveness, courtesy and efficiency) and compared with plausible alternative models. To correct for possible violations of assumptions of normality in the data (Bandalos, 2002), Box–Cox transformations were applied using STATA v.11 (Statacorp, 2009). The hypothesized model appeared to be a good fit to the covariance matrix, $\chi 2$ (142) = 337.96, CFI = .90, TLI = .88, RMSEA = .05. All standardized loading were significant (.66–.94, $p < .001$). The comparison data are shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Summary of Model Fit Indices

							Comparison with Model 1	
Model	χ^2	Description	*df*	TLI	CFI	RMSEA	$\Delta\chi^2$	Δdf
Model 1	337.96	Five-factor model[a]	142	.88	.90	.05		
Model 2	418.96	Three-factor model[b]	149	.84	.86	.07	81.00***	7
Model 3	404.17	Three-factor model[c]	149	.85	.87	.06	66.21***	7
Model 4	436.95	Three-factor model[d]	149	.83	.85	.07	98.99***	7
Model 5	461.16	Two-factor model[e]	151	.82	.84	.07	123.2***	9
Model 6	594.20	One-factor model[f]	152	.74	.77	.09	256.24***	10

Note: n = 289, CFI = Comparative fit index; TLI = Tucker–Lewis index; RMSEA = root-mean-square error of approximation. [a] Hypothesized five-factor solution with solidarity building response strategy, conversation control response strategy, effectiveness, courtesy and efficiency. [b]Three factors: Both communication strategies combined, courtesy and effectiveness combined, and efficiency. [c]Three factors: Both communication strategies combined , efficiency and effectiveness combined, and courtesy. [d] Three factors: Both communication strategies combined, efficiency and courtesy combined, and effectiveness. [e] Two factors: Combinations of all independent variables (responses strategies) and all dependent variables (courtesy, effectiveness and efficiency). [f] Single factor.

Factor and item correlations

Means, standard deviations, correlations and reliability (Cronbach's α) statistics for the five constructs are presented in Table 5. Cronbach's α reached or exceeded the generally accepted value of .75 for all constructs, thus confirming acceptable reliability.

Table 5: Correlations and Descriptive Statistics of Main Constructs

Scale	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. Solidarity building	3.54	1.42	(.93)				
2. Conversation control	2.75	1.19	.64**	(.75)			
3. Effectiveness	5.59	1.07	.36**	.36**	(.86)		
4. Courtesy	5.46	0.95	.44**	.15**	.41**	(.88)	
5. Efficiency	4.78	1.39	.20**	.34**	.55**	.16**	(.83)
6. Duration	5.50	4.18	–.05	–.22**	–.30	–.01	–.52

N = 289, *significant at 0.5 level, **significant at .01 level. Cronbach's alpha scale reliability shown in diagonal.

Table 6 shows descriptive statistics and correlations of control variables.

Table 6: Correlations and Descriptive Statistics of Control Variables

Scale	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Gender	.24	.43											
2. Age	29.86	6.98	.25**										
3. Qualification	3.32	1.06	.07	–.23**									
4. Planning cognition	3.37	1.06	.33	–.12*	–.40**	(.62)							
5. Modeling cognition	3.44	0.68	–.46**	–.04	–.17**	.10	(.86)						
6. Presence cognition	3.93	0.51	.08	–.05	–.17**	.09	–.09	(.62)					
7. Reflection cognition	3.65	0.62	–.11	–.11	–.06	.17**	.41**	.34**	(.85)				
8. Consequence cognition	3.64	0.57	.02	–.12*	–.32**	.22**	.30**	.36**	.59**	(.85)			
9. Emotional intelligence	4.96	0.52	–.08	–.13*	.13	–.18**	.55**	.05	.16**	.14*	(.87)		
10. Low context	5.22	0.68	–.24**	.40**	.11	–.22**	.06	.05	–.19**	.05	.32**	(.95)	
11. High context	3.64	0.61	.08	.35**	–.06	–.51**	.05	.04	.23**	.23**	.33**	.39**	(.78)

N = 289, *significant at 0.5 level, **significant at .01 level. Cronbach's alpha reliability shown in diagonal.

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Hierarchical Linear Modeling

An analytical problem in this data is the fact that the 289 calls were drawn from calls made by 26 agents. This means that there is a nested structure, which is a problem for standard OLS analysis because it requires that data be independent. Because the control variables such as age and qualifications are common to many calls, it was necessary to ensure that there was no significant variation at level 2.

A one-way ANOVA, treating the agents as groups, found significant effects at level 2 in the null model, violating the assumption of independence of data under OLS.

Courtesy ($F = 1.58$, $p < .05$: ICC = .05)

Effectiveness ($F = 1.68$, $p < .05$: ICC = .06)

Efficiency ($F = 1.56$, $p < .05$: ICC = .05)

ICC refers to the proportion of the total variance that can be explained by group membership. In this context, "group" refers to the agent. The results show that there are significant differences between agents in courtesy, effectiveness and efficiency (accounting for 5–6% of the total variance), indicating that the data is not independent. Thus, agent differences are controlled for using multi-level modeling.

To assess effect sizes of communication strategies (level 1 variables) on courtesy, effectiveness and efficiency, HLM was performed using version 3.0 of the Nonlinear and Linear Mixed Effects (NLME) program for S-Plus and R

(Pinheiro & Bates, 2000), with time of call in seconds and customer social stress as level 1 variables, and age, gender and qualifications as level 2 variables. In addition, measures of communication competence and emotional intelligence were introduced as level 2 variables.

In this analysis, raw metric scaling was used for level 1 variables without centering (Hofmann & Gavin, 1998). In this method, the intercept of the dependent variable is the value when the predictor is zero. In HLM, reduction in unexplained variance following the inclusion of level 1 predictors may be measured by pseudo R^2 (Singer & Willett, 2003). The model specified below is a random intercept model with fixed slopes.

Initial results suggest significant level 2 results for courtesy and efficiency (with marginal significance for cognitive communication competence for effectiveness). To determine if the non-significant results are due to inadequate degrees of freedom, the analyses were repeated with only control variables that were significant. The pattern of results remained unchanged. The nonindependence of the results indicates that HLM is the appropriate method, and thus only these results are presented here.

The results of hierarchical linear model analyses are presented in Tables 7–9. The variables in this study were of a multi-level nature, with some control variables at the agent level of analysis (level 2), and some at the level of the call (level 1). One control measure, duration of call, was at level 1. The predictor variables, solidarity building and conversation control strategies, were at the call level of analysis (level 1). The calls were nested under agents, and thus nonindependent, so it was possible that stable agent-level variables such as

emotional intelligence or communication competence would cause a systematic bias in the results. This nested structure gives rise to the possibility of nonindependence of data which violates an underlying assumption of ordinary least squares estimation (Cohen, Cohen, West, & Aiken, 2003). Therefore, this study included hierarchical linear modeling (HLM) to avoid potential type I and II errors (Bliese, 2002).

Hierarchical Linear Model 1 was compared with a baseline null model without controls or predictors. The pseudo-R^2 in Model 2 could thus be calculated as a measure of the variance in the data accounted for by addition of predictors, after accounting for the effects of control variables. In this analysis, raw metric scaling without centering was used (Hofmann & Gavin, 1998). In this method, the intercept of the dependent variable is the value when the predictor is zero. The variables were not centered according to the criterion of Enders and Tofhigi (2007) because the variables of interest—conversation control strategies and solidarity building strategies—do indeed have a meaningful zero point (i.e. strategy not used). Note that common HLM notations are employed, indicating the unstandardized call level estimates using beta (β) coefficients and the unstandardized agent-level estimates using gamma (γ) coefficients. Although estimates of effect sizes are tenuous in cross-level models, Snijders and Bosker's (1999) pseudo-R^2 for the models are reported. This is a statistic that is based on proportional reduction of level 1 and level 2 errors because of predictors in the model. It should be noted that this statistic should not be interpreted as a measure of model fit, as the intention of HLM is to eliminate control variables, included on the basis of prior literature, as

sources of variation.

The effect size of each step was computed by comparing its new value of σ^2 (within-group variance) with that of the preceding model as follows.

$$\text{Pseudo-}R^2_{\text{level 2}} = \frac{\sigma^2_{\text{level 2}}\ (\text{preceding model}) - \sigma^2_{\text{level 2}}\ (\text{subsequent model})}{\sigma^2_{\text{level 2}}\ (\text{preceding model})}$$

$$\text{Pseudo-}R^2_{\text{level 1}} = \frac{\sigma^2_{\text{level 1}}\ (\text{preceding model}) - \sigma^2_{\text{level 1}}\ (\text{subsequent model})}{\sigma^2_{\text{level 1}}\ (\text{preceding model})}$$

Initial results suggested that there are no significant agent level (level 2) effects for courtesy and efficiency (with marginal significance for cognitive communication competence for effectiveness), so the analysis was repeated with ordinary least squares hierarchical regression analyses.

Equations

The equations to be estimated are as follows (r_{ij} and U_{0j} are error terms).

Level 1: Courtesy/ effectiveness / efficiency = $\beta_{0j} + \beta_{1j}$ (time) + β_{2j} (solidarity building) + β_{3j} (conversation control) + r_{ij}

Level 2: $\beta_{0j} = \gamma_{00} + \gamma_{01}$(gender) + γ_{02}(age) + γ_{03}(qualifications) + γ_{04}(emotional intelligence) + γ_{05}(planning cognition) + γ_{06}(modeling cognition) + γ_{07}(presence cognition) + γ_{08}(reflection cognition) + γ_{09}(consequence cognition) + γ_{010}(low context) + γ_{11}(high context) + u_{0j}

As shown in Table 7, none of the variables in Model 1 proved significant as a predictor of courtesy. Model 1 did not significantly increase the variance explained in comparison with the null model (pseudo-$R^2_{level\ 2}$ = .00); however, addition of the predictors in Model 2 decreased the proportion of unexplained variance compared with Model 1 by 21% (pseudo-$R^2_{level\ 1}$ = .21). In Model 2, both solidarity building ($\gamma = .38$, $p < .001$) and conversation control ($\gamma = -.16$, $p < .01$) were significantly related to courtesy, the negative coefficient for conversation control suggesting that attempts on the part of the agent to curtail the call may be perceived as discourteous.

Results of HLM

Table 7: Hierarchical Linear Modeling and Regression Analyses for Courtesy

	Hierarchical Linear Modeling		Regression	
Variables	**Model 1**	**Model 2**	**Model 1**	**Model 2**
Level 2 controls				
Gender	0.27 (0.28)	0.27 (0.25)	0.30 (0.19)	0.27 (0.16)
Age	0.00 (0.02)	–0.01 (0.02)	0.00 (0.01)	0.00 (0.01)
Qualifications	–0.04 (0.12)	–0.13 (0.10)	–0.06 (0.08)	–0.13 (0.07)
EQ	0.26 (0.40)	–0.01 (0.36)	0.27 (0.28)	0.00 (0.26)
Communication competence				
Planning cognition	0.05 (0.26)	–0.15 (0.23)	0.07 (0.18)	–0.11 (0.16)
Modeling cognition	0.00 (0.31)	0.04 (0.27)	0.03 (0.21)	0.09 (0.19)
Presence cognition.	–0.06 (0.34)	0.07 (0.31)	–0.09 (0.23)	0.07 (0.21)
Reflection cognition	–0.14 (0.42)	0.06 (0.38)	–0.12 (0.27)	0.08 (0.24)
Consequence cognition	0.00 (0.36)	–0.04 (0.32)	–0.10 (0.23)	–0.14 (0.21)
Low Context	–0.06 (0.16)	–0.05 (0.14)	–0.05 (0.10)	–0.04 (0.09)
High Context	–0.21 (0.18)	–0.08 (0.16)	–0.18 (0.13)	–0.07 (0.11)
Level 1 control				
Call duration	–0.01 (0.02)	–0.01 (0.01)	0.00 (0.01)	–0.01 (0.01)
Predictors				
Solidarity building		0.38 (0.05)***		0.39 (0.05)***
Conversation control		–0.16 (0.06)**		–0.18 (0.06)**
Pseudo-R^2 level 2	0.00	0.00		
Pseudo-R^2 level 1	0.00	0.21		
R2			0.00	0.24
Δ*R2*				0.24

n = 289 calls and 26 call agents; standard errors are in parentheses.
* $p < .05$
** $p < .01$
*** $p < .001$

Remarkably, none of the control variables emerge as significant in either the hierarchical linear or regression model. The regression model for courtesy was significant ($F = 6.25$, $p < .001$).

Table 8 reports results of HLM and regression for effectiveness.

Table 8: Hierarchical Linear Modeling and Regression Analyses for Effectiveness

	Hierarchical Linear Modeling		Regression	
Variables	**Model 1**	**Model 2**	**Model 1**	**Model 2**
Level 2 controls				
Gender	0.54 (0.24)*	0.51 (0.19)*	0.54 (0.20)**	0.51 (0.18)**
Age	0.01 (0.02)	–0.01 (0.01)	0.00 (0.01)	–0.01 (0.01)
Qualifications	–0.04 (0.10)	–0.12 (0.08)	–0.05 (0.08)	–0.12 (0.08)
EQ	–0.67 (0.36)	–0.61 (0.31)	–0.62 (0.30)*	–0.60 (0.29)*
Communication competence				
Planning cognition	–0.09 (0.23)	–0.24 (0.19)	–0.08 (0.19)	–0.24 (0.18)
Modeling cognition	0.72 (0.27)*	0.61 (0.22)*	0.70 (0.22)**	0.61 (0.21)**
Presence cognition	0.71 (0.30)*	0.65 (0.25)*	0.71 (0.25)**	0.66 (0.24)**
Reflection cognition	–0.04 (0.36)	0.15 (0.29)	0.07 (0.29)	0.16 (0.27)
Consequence cognition	–0.71 (0.31)*	–0.66 (0.25)*	–0.76 (0.25)**	–0.67 (0.23)**
Low Context	0.04 (0.14)	0.09 (0.11)	0.04 (0.11)	0.09 (0.10)
High Context	–0.16 (0.16)	–0.06 (0.13)	–0.13 (0.13)	–0.05 (0.13)
Level 1 control				
Call duration	–0.08 (0.01)***	–0.07 (0.01)***	–0.08 (0.01)***	–0.07 (0.01)***
Level 1 Predictors				
Solidarity building		0.17 (0.05)**		0.17 (0.05)**
Conversation control		0.13 (0.07)*		0.13 (0.07)*
Pseudo-R^2 level 2	0.25	0.00		
Pseudo-R^2 level 1	0.09	0.10		
R2			0.16	0.26
Δ*R2*				0.10

n = 289 calls and 26 call agents; standard errors are in parentheses.
* $p < .05$
** $p < .01$
*** $p < .001$

As with courtesy, effectiveness shows a significant effect for both solidarity building ($\gamma = .17$, $p < .01$) and conversation control ($\gamma = .13$, $p < .05$), although it appears from the level of significance that the influence of solidarity building is stronger. This is consistent with the view that solidarity aids in transmission of information, although efficiency too is related to effectiveness (witness the negative coefficients for call duration in Model 2: $\gamma = –.05$, $p < .001$). Pseudo-$R^2_{level\ 1}$ for the HLM model is positive in Model 2 with predictor variables included (pseudo-$R^2_{level\ 1} = .10$) and the R^2 in the regression model with predictor variables included is increased to a similar degree (ΔR^2

= .10). Unlike the results for courtesy, some communication competence subscales appear significantly related to effectiveness. In Model 1, modeling cognition (β = .72, $p < .05$), presence cognition (β = .71, $p < .05$) and consequence cognition (β = –.71, $p < .05$) are significant. In Model 2, modeling cognition (β = .61, $p < .05$), presence cognition (β = .65, $p < .05$) and consequence cognition (β = –.66, $p < .05$) show a positive relation with effectiveness.

Among the control variables, the gender effect on effectiveness is significant in both models, (in Model 2, β = .51, $p < .05$). The 219 calls made by female agents had a mean courtesy score of 5.7 as opposed to 5.39 for males. Neither emotional intelligence (β = .61, *ns*) nor high context (β = –.06, *ns*) or low context cultural orientation (β =.09, *ns*) appear to have a significant relation with effectiveness. Duration of call was significant with a negative coefficient (in Model 2, β = –.07, $p < .001$).

Addition of the predictors decreased the proportion of unexplained variance of Model 2 compared with Model 1 by 10% (pseudo-$R^2_{level\ 1}$ = .10). The regression model for effectiveness was significant ($F = 3.68$, $p < .001$).

Efficiency is *a priori* expected to show a significant relationship with conversation control, and these models are presented in Table 9.

Table 9: Hierarchical Linear Modeling and Regression Analyses for Efficiency

	Hierarchical Linear Modeling		Regression	
Variables	**Model 1**	**Model 2**	**Model 1**	**Model 2**
Level 2 controls				
Gender	0.08 (0.30)	0.05 (0.26)	0.05 (.23)	0.02 (.22)
Age	0.02 (0.02)	0.01 (0.02)	0.02 (.01)	–0.01 (.01)
Qualifications	0.05 (0.12)	–0.02 (0.11)	0.04 (.10)	–0.02 (.09)
EQ	–0.23 (0.44)	0.06 (0.39)	–0.12 (.35)	0.12 (.34)
Communication competence				
Planning cognition	0.21 (0.28)	0.09 (0.25)	0.23 (.22)	–0.11 (.21)
Modeling cognition	0.48 (0.33)	0.27 (0.29)	0.42 (.25)	0.25 (.25)
Presence cognition	0.80 (0.37)*	0.56 (0.33)	0.74 (.29)*	0.53 (.28)
Reflection cognition	–0.07 (0.45)	–0.09 (0.39)	–0.12 (.34)	–0.13 (.32)
Consequence cognition	–0.71 (0.38)	–0.53 (0.33)	–0.70 (.29)*	–0.53 (.28)
Low Context	–0.10 (0.17)	–0.03 (0.14)	–0.11 (.13)	–0.04 (.12)
High Context	–0.01 (0.20)	0.03 (0.17)	–0.02 (.16)	–0.02 (.15)
Level 1 control				
Call duration	–0.17 (0.02)***	–0.15 (0.02)***	–0.17 (.02)***	–0.15 (.02)***
Level 1 Predictors				
Solidarity building		–0.02(0.06)		–.02 (.06)
Conversation control		0.34 (0.08)***		0.34 (.08)***
Pseudo-R^2 level 2	0.14	0.00		
Pseudo-R^2 level 1	0.27	0.08		
R2			0.31	0.38
Δ*R2*				0.07

n = 289 calls 26 call agents; standard errors are in parentheses.
* $p < .05$
** $p < .01$
*** $p < .001$

In Model 1, only presence cognition emerges as significantly related to efficiency ($\beta = .80$, $p < .05$). In Model 2, none of the agent level (level 2) controls were significant. As may be expected, coefficients for call duration were significant and negative in Model 1 ($\gamma = –.17$, $p < .001$) and Model 2 ($\gamma = –.15$, $p < .001$). Of the call level (level 1) predictors, only conversation control was significantly related to efficiency ($\gamma = .34$, $p < .001$). Solidarity building was not significant ($\gamma = –.01$, *ns*).

The results for regression analysis are similar, although in Model 1 consequence cognition is significant ($\beta = -.70$, $p < .05$). The model for efficiency is significant ($F = 11.1$, $p < .001$).

The addition of conversation control decreased the proportion of unexplained variance of Model 2 compared with Model 1 by 8% (pseudo-$R^2_{level\ 1} = .08$). The significance of conversation control confirms the view that such strategies serve to increase subjective efficiency.

Overall, solidarity building appears to contribute to courtesy and effectiveness but not efficiency, while conversation control strategies have a negative impact on courtesy, a positive relation with effectiveness, but exert the strongest effect on efficiency. Taken together, these Tables 7–9 strengthen the view that courtesy and control strategies are to some extent opposed (witness the negative coefficient for conversation control strategies in Model 2 in Table 7: $\gamma = -.16$, $p < .01$) while both contribute to overall effectiveness of a call. The influence of communication strategies appears to outweigh any of the individual considered.

In the next section, the significance of these findings and the comments from agents are discussed.

5 Discussion

This study was intended to investigate the relationships among call agent communication strategies and the performance variables of courtesy, efficiency and effectiveness. Although customer service is not a new area of research, the call center environment, with its integration of technology and telephone communication, is a new trend in business and has mainly arisen both as a form of workplace and as a target of academic research since approximately 1990.

In this academic research there are two major preoccupations. The first is the stressful conditions under which call center agents operate. They work in a repetitive job with rather poor promotion or advancement prospects, often dealing with less than pleasant customers. Agents are expected to follow "display rules" of conduct (Grandey et al., 2004) and deny not only their personal identity but perhaps even that of their culture or ethnicity (D. Das et al., 2008; Poster, 2007). The result of this is turnover, absenteeism, loss of job satisfaction, emotional dissonance and stress (Lewig & Dollard, 2003; Schalk & van Rijckevorsel, 2007). Human resources and management studies have proposed remedies such as empowerment (Holdsworth & Cartwright, 2003) team-based organization (Jouini, Dallery, & Nait-Abdallah, 2008) or compensation (Crone, Carey, & Dowling, 2003) which have enjoyed some success, but the problem remains.

The second related problem is that presumably the resulting instability of the workforce and low motivation of agents has an impact on service quality, which is reflected in the number of complaints from customers. Call center

customers tend to complain more than those receiving face-to-face service (Bennington et al., 2000; Sharma et al., 2009). This study is concerned with examining call center service and determining how impressions of service quality are formed during caller–agent interactions.

The relationship between call center agents and teams, managers and colleagues has been studied extensively. Likewise, the service literature investigates customer and caller reactions. The "black box" of call center research is the point of contact between firm and customer, the telephone conversations in which service is enacted. This is a novel area of study in this context and one that has much to teach agents and managers.

Because of this novelty, this study was guided by the data and those involved rather than impose existing theories or expectations. The list of communication strategies in Table 3 was derived by listening directly to recorded calls and discussing them with agents. The list of responses was then quantified in the form of scales and compared with dependent variables from the company concerned, the managers' desired outcomes of courtesy, efficiency and effectiveness.

5.1 Main findings

This study reveals something of the nature of call center work that provides insight into the second problem above, the difficulties of customer service. In turn, it is apparent why the work can be stressful. The performance criteria revealed in this study go beyond friendliness, politeness or customer

orientation. The requirements for call center customer service are not unidimensional, but rather multidimensional.

There are three considerations in call center service. The first is courtesy, by which an appropriate degree of respect and deference is shown to a caller. This to some extent supports lay views of the importance of deference in customer service; in academic research, the view of the customer as "mythical sovereign" persists (Bolton & Houlihan, 2005). Such views appear to be the basis upon which constructs such as customer orientation (Dean, 2007; McNally, 2007), perspective taking (Axtell et al., 2007) and accommodation (Helms & Mayo, 2008) rest, that quality is in some sense a product of deference and submission to customer expressions of needs and wants. The word "mythical" is used here because the true sovereign is not the customer but mandated service levels. As Bolton and Houlihan note:

> "The demands of the market mean that the achievement of quantifiable targets, rather than quality service, is a priority, leading to intensification of work demands but also, confusion and conflation of objectives. Here lies the major contradiction in the notion of the 'culture of the customer'."

However, this sovereign view disregards the role of call center agents as conveyers of bad news, as persuaders and as gatekeepers. There is a distinct social dimension to customer service that is not captured by such constructs.

In this study, it was apparent that call center agents did indeed fulfill roles that appear deferential, but aside from offering help and providing information had more active assertive roles as well. Importantly, it was insufficient for the

agent to be courteous; they had to be effective at providing a service in terms of information or actions. The agents did not only take the perspective of a client but actively shaped those perceptions.

In many calls, the agents and customers complete the business rapidly without significant interaction beyond the purely functional level of exchanging information or noting requests. In the terminology of Bolton and Houlihan, this makes callers "functional transactants," a role in which both agent and customer opt for speed and convenience over a social relationship. Such transactions are unproblematic and brief. This study, however, focuses on stressed calls with an element of difficulty for agents. This requires agents to relate to callers as human beings presenting a problem rather than as customers to be served. In this situation, courtesy or deference may be compromised in the interests of efficiency and effectiveness.

Finally, and despite the concerns over "Satanic Mills" raised by Frenkel (1998), considerations of efficiency cannot be disregarded in any meaningful assessment of call center quality. However, efficiency in this study emerges naturally from conversational techniques rather than the management pressure or call monitoring that Feinberg et al. (2000) criticized as having no impact on customer satisfaction. Further, management pressure is liable to create exhaustion and superficial efficiency by tacitly encouraging call center agents to terminate a call before the problem is fully resolved, thus requiring a second call. A subjective, conversation-based method is a truer representation of actual efficiency.

Efficiency in this study is driven by a number of strategies that allow the agent to maintain control of a call in terms of agenda and content: accelerating turn taking and providing feedback (paraphrases and summaries). Unlike social communication, call center conversations are one-sided in terms of responsibility, because agents are held accountable for wasted time by both organization and callers. To reduce "down time," agents must restrict the range of topics and seek to exit the call as soon as possible. High performing call center agents seek to remain in control of calls throughout a conversation (Eveleth & Morris, 2002). However, some of these tactics are perceived, even by agents, as being discourteous, particularly accelerating turntaking: "you can't let [the callers] think you're trying to get rid of them, or they'll get annoyed" (agent 1012).

Communication strategies

Two overall categories of communication strategies emerge for this study: solidarity building and conversation control. These have complementary roles, and are both multidimensional.

The first of these categories of communication strategies is solidarity building, or the process of partnering between caller and agent to work on a problem or issue as a team. Previous studies on call center communication have referred to concepts such as empathy (Lywood et al., 2009), customer orientation (Rafaeli et al., 2008), emotional labor (Holman et al., 2002) customer-oriented perspective taking (Axtell et al., 2007). To these concepts this study brings the notion of solidarity, which emerges not as a willingness to

display routine speech acts such as greetings or endings of calls, but apparently as a willingness to engage with a caller as a team.

It emerged from our study that while an agent may follow the greeting script ("good morning, XYZ corporation, Joe speaking, how can I help you?") and use words such as "please" "thank you" "sir/madam," this was so routine as to be meaningless. Solidarity, in contrast, means investing effort in the call to identify a problem and resolve it. This is consistent with previous studies that politeness depends on content more than politeness strategies (Craig, Tracy, & Spisak, 1986).

The concept of solidarity differs from related constructs such as customer orientation (Rafaeli et al., 2008) or oral competencies (Pontes & Kelly, 2000) in that it establishes a collaboration between caller and agent rather than being solely behaviors of the agent. While agent behaviors establish solidarity, the agent cannot achieve higher levels of solidarity without securing the collaboration of the caller. Further, it may take different specific forms according to the caller: polite and respectful (reflecting status difference) in some cases, and relaxed and familiar in others. This is perhaps the reason for the high correlation with attentiveness; solidarity requires the observation of cues. In short, solidarity reflects personalized service (Ford & Etienne, 1994), a focus on individual needs.

Both from the data and the interviews with agents it appears that an important element of solidarity is questioning and setting of goals before the call proceeds. Agents interviewed were clear that this is often difficult: "You have to work out how much information callers need…or how much they can

understand." (Agent 1001). When discourtesy occurs it may be because the agent and caller cannot agree on an appropriate level of service, and the agent finds the caller unreasonable or unwilling to negotiate: "If a customer is so ridiculous, the call will be a bit negative—sometimes you just can't help it" (Agent 1005). There is a point where the agent comes under such pressure to satisfy demands that cannot be met that the agent's façade of courtesy begins to crumble. This is perhaps the cognitive dissonance referred to by Ashforth and Humphrey (1993). It should be noted in this context that while many studies assume that the causation of courtesy and positive outcomes is unidirectional (courteous service makes satisfied callers), the reverse is also plausible: friendly and cooperative callers obtain better service through their willingness to establish solidarity.

The second category of communication strategies is conversation control. This is defined as the practice of speeding up the pace of the call and expediting its resolution. The strategies identified to achieve this are accelerating turntaking, paraphrasing and summarizing. Accelerating turntaking involves disallowing down time: breaking in on a caller, completing sentences for someone them or preventing periods of silence. Paraphrasing means repeating the callers (or one's own) ideas in different words (usually to ensure understanding), and summarizing means repeating key points of the conversation to create a "psychological contract" with the caller. Summaries can be internal, to establish the nature of a query and the desired action, or they can be final, to stipulate what is to happen subsequent to the call. Such tactics

reduce ambiguity by checking assumptions and preventing misunderstandings, avoiding meandering conversations or call backs.

Both conversational control and solidarity building contribute to effectiveness—meeting caller needs, providing information and answering questions—in approximately equal measure. However, they have opposite effects on the remaining two components of performance, efficiency and courtesy. From the data it appears that retaining control of a call by paraphrasing or summarizing, or accelerating turntaking by interrupting or talking over a caller may appear discourteous. However, failure to do so prevents speedy resolution and creates inefficiency. Together, these contribute to the efficiency, described by one communication theorist as a neglected aspect of message production (Berger, 2000). It could be argued, however, that in the call center environment efficiency is almost an obsession, and has been the focus of a number of studies (e.g. Garnett, Mandelbaum, & Reiman, 2002; Green, 2000; Hart, Fichtner, Fjalestad, & Langley, 2006). Indeed this is the major point distinguishing call centers from other forms of communication, that it is communication under time pressure (Taylor & Bain, 1999).

The harmonization of solidarity and conversation control strategies is a major contribution of this study. There appear to be no studies that consider these aspects in juxtaposition. Although Nicholls et al. (2009) examined quality and handling times, few of the customer styles had a significant impact on handling time. Rafaeli et al. (2008) considered customer orientation and satisfying the caller's needs, but not the needs of the organization for speedy resolution (Hart et al., 2006). This is entirely appropriate when the

communication occurs for a commercial rather than social purpose. While there is a considerable body of research on the managerial and psychological aspects of call center service, the most basic level of practice, speech, is neglected. As Alvesson and Karreman (2000) note:

> "To describe the language use in a specific interaction between two persons in some detail is certainly not unproblematic but may still be a more rigorous exercise than any attempt to study peoples' beliefs about the world or their actions. A relatively high degree of empirical accuracy may be said to characterize this sort of research."

5.2 Theoretical implications

The findings in this study have several theoretical implications for research on call center communication between agents and callers. Previous research has explored the relationship of call center agent performance to individual traits such as job resourcefulness (Ashill et al., 2009) or emotional intelligence (Higgs, 2004). In contrast, this study examines the "black box" of call center research, the verbal interchange between interlocutors that is the basis of a call center's existence.

The first implication concerns the relationship between the traits discussed in previous literature and the communication strategies in this study. While this research did not suggest a strong link between the communication strategies and emotional intelligence, communication competence or cultural orientation, this could be explored in a larger sample and in other contexts.

There are many other instruments for assessing communication skills or related constructs, such as social skills (Riggio, 1989), communication apprehension (McCroskey, Beatty, Kearney, & Plax, 1985) and personality traits (L. R. Goldberg, 1999; McCroskey, Heisel, & Richmond, 2001). However, none of these were developed with call centers or even remote telephone communication in mind. Many people, and presumable many customers, suffer from a degree of telephone apprehension (Rheinsch, Steele, Lewis, & Stano, 1990) and it is unknown how this impacts customer service delivered through call centers. There is considerable scope for further exploration or adaptation of such instruments as selection tools for agents if their relationship with telephone communication strategies were better understood.

Second, it remains to be examined how the use of these communication strategies relates to the stress, absenteeism and turnover that plague call centers. Houlihan (2002) suggests that management insistence on maximal efficiency combined with the expectation of maximal courtesy creates stress for call center agents. Witt et al. (2004) even suggest that conscientiousness can result in faster burnout for the same reason. However, whether these findings reflect the actual nature of the work in terms of agents' communication strategies or simply anxiety about perceived management oversight remains to be explored.

Third, the findings presented in Studies 1 and 2 in this thesis provide empirical support for Bolton and Houlihan's assertion that the cult of the customer is over-represented in studies of call center communication. The view of the "customer as king" appear to be the basis upon which constructs such as customer orientation (Dean, 2007; McNally, 2007), perspective taking (Axtell

et al., 2007) and accommodation (Helms & Mayo, 2008) rest, that quality is in some sense a product of deference and submission to customer expressions of needs and wants. The notion of solidarity, in particular, poses a challenge to traditional models of customer service, or "docile service workers offering de-personalized care to sometimes aggressive but not much more agential customers" (Bolton & Houlihan, 2005). Building solidarity is the skill of working with a caller as a team in which both partners are actively engaged in a common task toward a common goal.

There are some areas of this study that would benefit from further research. It should be replicated in other call centers, and the ideas tested in other contexts such as sales, helpdesks or telemarketing. Another point of interest might be the role of stress. If the study were repeated in a call center where higher levels of stress were present (such as a debt collection or help desks), it could focus on strategies used in mollifying callers. The use of communication strategies in conversations with customers emerges as an important avenue for research, which should not just consider measures of global individual differences such as emotional intelligence or communicative competence.

Additionally, it would be interesting to conduct research on the use of (or coaching in) conversation strategies to reduce the emotional costs of call center work. This possibility remains to be substantiated empirically.

Finally, this study considers interactions between agents and callers. Other studies (A. Das, 2003; Pentland, 1992) consider the moves made by agents in relation to the call center computer technology and in cooperation with other

agents in the management of knowledge. An interesting extension of this research would be to study the combination of these factors with conversational communication strategies.

5.3 Implications for practice

The implications of this study are significant for research into service at call centers, particularly in terms of evaluation and training.

First, in contrast to trait approaches to evaluation of agent competence, this study has emphasized discrete skills that are accessible to training, feedback and repair. Training can be an effective means of improving performance (Armistead et al., 2002) organizational effectiveness (Halliden & Monks, 2005) and adequate training reduces anxiety and levels of depression (Holman 2002).

It may be useful to select staff on the basis of emotional intelligence or trait communication competence. However, this study shows that such measures are weaker predictors of call quality than observation of recorded calls, and their abstract level of assessment makes them less useful as a feedback or training aid.

Given the paucity or research into relationships between communication strategies and outcomes of customer satisfaction it seems likely that a large proportion of training budgets are misdirected or invested in training in techniques that are poorly researched or based on anecdotal evidence rather than systematic study. In addition, while awareness of service quality has improved since call center research began in earnest in the 1990s, there remains

an imbalance in service priorities in favor of management considerations. This study goes some way to correcting this imbalance.

Second, the use of conversational strategies for conflicting purposes has implications for problems that bedevil call centers: stress, emotional exhaustion, anxiety and consequent turnover and absenteeism. It is suggested here that these are at least in part symptoms of the agent's uncomfortable position between managers who demand both courtesy and efficiency and callers who desire solidarity. Although the considerations are in conflict, examination of communication strategies allows agents to optimize the balance and maintain control within a positive relationship with callers.

Training, this evidence suggests, should emphasize content and engagement in preference to social skills or following standard scripts. Listening, questioning and checking must be encouraged. This may actually increase call times for inexperienced agents in initial stages of training, but will ensure that repeat calls and misunderstandings of customer requests are minimized. Agents must be trained to judge the level of explanation that is required from vocal cues and questions regarding the depth of explanation required and whether the caller has other concerns that may not be voiced.

Courtesy must be viewed in the context of a collaborative relationship, and in effective calls has an optimum rather than maximal level. That is to say, a caller may prefer honesty and directness rather than deferential submissiveness. Call center agents must strike a balance between facilitating customer conversation and limiting it to issues that the agent can actually address. Frank discussion of problems is positive, and helps to mollify callers

(D. J. Mount & Mattila, 2003; Wright, 2000) but wider ranging discussions of company failings waste time and are likely to engender ill feeling if the agent cannot address them. This balance requires that the agent manage the interaction and protect the relationship between agent and customer, if necessary by separating the image of the company from that of the agent.

Finally, call center managers should make it a priority to listen to agents taking calls. This is the main purpose of call centers and it is at this most basic level that the future trends of call center practice and customer service are likely to emerge.

5.4 Limitations of this study

There were a number of limitations to this study that must be acknowledged. First, this study is that it is confined to a single call center in the area of financial services. This limits the generalizability of the findings, as it cannot be assumed that agents servicing other industries or in contrasting organizational cultures would behave in the same manner or rely on the same strategies. Future research could seek to examine call center interactions in a variety of contexts and in industries such as information technology or debt collection to assess the value of these strategies in other situations.

Second, the call center was rather small at 26 seats, which created an atmosphere in which all agents knew the managers and colleagues personally, engendering a particular working culture. This may limit the validity of the

instrument when it is applied to large call centers with numbers of agents extending to hundreds and employing different management styles.

Third, this call center only dealt with financial services. Call centers now service many industries in a number of roles, such as processing payments, handling complaints, providing technical support or personal advice. Each field may be expected to have its own challenges. Some are more technically demanding; others (such as debt collection or telemarketing) place greater stress on the agents. It cannot be assumed that the findings of this study can be generalized to these contexts.

5.5 Conclusion

This study addresses two research questions.

3. What are strategies in call center agents' conversations with callers in a call center that help them achieve key performance outcomes?
4. What is the effect of these strategies on the performance of call center agents?

The questions were addressed using a multi-method design, combining qualitative with quantitative methodologies. In Study 1, from an initial sample of 75 calls, a list of ten communication strategies was derived from a grounded theory method. These ten strategies were divided through a Q-sort procedure into two categories. Strategies in the first category, solidarity building, create a collaborative approach to resolving a caller's problem or need. Strategies in the second category, conversation control, manage the call to expedite its resolution. In Study 2, hierarchical linear modeling analysis of a sample of 289 calls from

26 agents reveals that while control variables such as communication competence and emotional intelligence showed only weak significance as predictors of courtesy, effectiveness and efficiency, the communication strategies were strongly associated with these dependent variables. Solidarity building predicted courtesy, conversational control strategies were significantly correlated with efficiency, and both impacted effectiveness. However, conversational control strategies had a negative effect on courtesy, while solidarity had no significant effect on efficiency. These findings shed light on the achievement of service quality in call centers and provide implications for the selection and training of staff. As the use of this form of customer service is extended, the insights obtained here will become increasingly important.

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7 Appendix: Scoring calls

The use of these scales is demonstrated in the example calls below.

Sample calls

Call 340	**Comment**
Agent: Good Morning, XYZ Company. How can I help you?	
Caller: Good morning; I like to find out some details on this policy (gives number)	
Agent: Mr Poon, right	Minimal token of shows attentiveness
Caller: Yeah	
Agent: Can I have your IC number (repeats number) This is for Mdm Poon hah, how can I help?	Shows attentiveness (minimal) Identifies preference
Caller: I'd like to find out some time in December, we sent out this cheque for policy 2 , but what was this policy, because if it expired the same day another policy, yah 1003 (sighs)	
Agent: You mean you sent a cheque for the endowment policy?	Paraphrase
Caller: I don't know what is it lah, under the name of Poon Jia Hua, am I right?	Gives information (volunteers little).
Agent: Well, I can see two other policies that she has, so you are referring to the other two lah?	Identifies preference
Caller: How much is the payment, I don't know what is the policy, but I know the sum that we paid	Gives information, without explanation.
Agent: Quotes number	
Caller: Yeah, what was that actually?	Educates caller when prompted.

Agent: That was the endowment plan one year's endowment Caller: And then this one, the one I've given to you? Agent: This one is actually also an endowment, just like over 18 year. Caller: So is a repeated one lah? Agent: This also endowment, but maturity is different dates lah Caller: Only different dates, lah? I see, because all the while I think she only has one endowment plan. How come the other one is so much cheaper? 600+ and this one is 800+ Agent: Depending on the age ah, because she bought that one earlier Caller: Aha Agent: And also depending on the sum assured also Caller: I see, I see. Okay, thanks very much ah. Agent: Thanks, bye.	Agent passively responding: little anticipation. Educates caller Educates caller

In call 340, the agent does the minimum necessary to satisfy the customer. The agent plays a generally passive role, while the caller must extract the information question by question. The caller is puzzled about the policies his wife owns and surprised that she has two. The call ends without explanation of the benefits of maintaining two policies. The agent does not anticipate the obvious questions: Is it beneficial for the caller to have more than one endowment plan? If not, why not cancel one? This was scored as follows.

Solicit caller's collaboration: 1 (not used)

Anticipate caller needs: 1 (not used)

Show attentiveness: 3 (Some use)

Offer emotional support: 1 (Not used, although the caller's puzzlement created an opportunity for reassurance)

Identify caller preferences: 2 (Minimal use, to clarify enquiry)

Emphasize positive viewpoint: 1 (no use—the agent could have explained the benefits of two policies)

Educate caller: 4 (Some use, although all in response to direct questions, not volunteered)

Accelerate turn taking: 1 (No use, no attempt to expedite or wrap up the call)

Paraphrase: 2 (Used once, to clarify. Further use to show engagement with the caller may have been helpful)

Summarize: 1 (No use, although an overall summary of the caller's position and options may have been useful)

Call 258 : The caller is checking a "deduction" ("deduction" meaning outstanding payments on policy).	**Comment**
Caller: Hello, I'm calling to check the status of my policy	
Agent: "how do I address you ma'am?"	Identifies preference, "ma'am" seeks collaboration.
Caller: Da Costa	
Agent: Sorry, Da Costa, Ms Da Costa? This is an XYZ policy you are holding. What would you like to know?	Shows attentiveness, educate caller, identifies preference.
Caller: I'd like to know, how many months has it been since the deduction was made.	
Agent: …ah it was actually, how many what again?	Identifies preference
Caller: Whether deduction has been made or not last month, October and November	
Agent: No ma'am, deduction not made for quite some time already	Seeks collaboration (passive voice), educates caller
Caller: how long, ah?	
Agent: quite some time ma'am, now total outstanding is 6300$, ma'am.	Respectfully educates caller. Anticipates needs (how much owing).
Caller: Okay, when was the last deduction, ah?	Educates caller
Agent: The last deduction come in September,	
Caller: okay	Educates caller (Agent: volunteers

Agent: but before September there was also some outstanding, so the September premium that come in also did not cover up the full outstanding	information not requested by the caller, but which helps her to understand situation better)
Caller: Oh	
Agent: "mmm, so ma'am right now the total outstanding… is 6300 (sixty three hundred) dollars, inclusive of December one ah. 378. point 90 cents, ma'am.	Shows attentiveness, anticipates needs (pay $378.90 immediately). Seeks collaboration, use of ma'am but avoids "you must"
Caller: 378, ah	
Agent: mmm, Correct. Of course, you can choose to pay a bit slowly lah, ma'am	Shows attentiveness ('Correct") Positive emphasis
Caller: okay	
Agent: that's right	Shows attentiveness
Caller: okay, then, I will try to make a partial payment	
Agent: sure	Shows attentiveness
Caller: then I can make the rest next year, right	
Agent: No problem, ma'am. Thank you for calling XYZ, bye bye.	Shows attentiveness, accelerates turntaking by wrapping up call.
Caller: bye.	

This call was scored as follows.

Solicit caller's collaboration: 3 (Moderate use, the agent used a respectful form of address while avoiding accusatory phrasing)

Anticipate caller needs: 5 (Moderate to extensive use)

Show attentiveness: 4 (Moderate use, mostly short minimal tokens of agreement)

Offer emotional support: 1 (Not used)

Identify caller preferences: 2 (Some use, to clarify enquiry)

Emphasize positive viewpoint: 2 (Minor use, with regard to payment options)

Educate caller: 5 (Considerable use, volunteered to explain)

Accelerate turn taking: 2 (Minor use, in wrapping up the call)

Paraphrase: 1 (Not used)

Summarize: 1 (No used, although a summary of the caller's options may have been useful)