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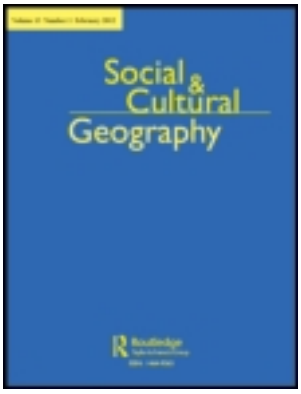

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Talking class, talking race: language, class, and race in the call center industry in South Africa

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Talking class, talking race: language, class, and race in the call center industry in South Africa

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Against a backdrop of declining manufacturing employment, this article uses a study of the call center industry to argue that English language proficiency is central to new service jobs in post-apartheid South Africa. Drawing on research in Durban, we in this study show that access to call center work—especially the highest paid niches—is heavily mediated by English language skills generally attainable only at the most elite high schools. In doing so, we argue that access to English-medium education can challenge racial disadvantage, but simultaneously that English can help to consolidate white privilege through the continued association of a 'prestigious' accent with whiteness. The study accordingly reveals the importance of language in the changing intersectionality of race and class and, in doing so, underlines the value of social and cultural perspectives in labor geography.

Key words: South Africa, call centers, class, language, labor geography, intersectionality.

In a bustling office block in downtown Durban, the facilitator of the call center training course says in a forceful voice 'Now in your groups, begin preparing role plays to sell a cell-phone contract.' The 'dolphins'—the name given to our group of six—look at one another. Eyes fall quickly on me (first author) as the only native English speaker. I shake my head and say 'No, no, I'll watch.' Then a young woman in her early twenties turns to another woman and says in highly proficient English 'let's do this together.' When it becomes evident that this second woman's English falls short of what is required, a young man takes over from her. But he too looks nervous and loses his lines. Eventually, he is replaced by a confident young woman whose fluency in English signals that she studied at a former 'white' school, an attendance that would—by virtue of her classification as 'African'—have been disallowed in the apartheid era.[1] The type of prestigious English bequeathed by this institution is somewhat

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akin to 'a South African version of Southern British English' (Mesthrie 2008).

This vignette refers to a three-week training course in Durban, South Africa, aimed at those wishing to work in call centers—centralized offices where large volumes of telephone calls are received and/or transmitted. At a time when a staggering 72 per cent of women and 58 per cent of men aged between 15 and 24 years were recorded as being unemployed in South Africa (Department of labour 2006: 18), the attendees knew that call centers are one of the few growing areas of work: over 1,000 call centers are now in existence (Benner Lewis and Omar 2007). Around thirty people attended the course, nearly all women, and all (except the first author, a 'white' man) having been categorized as 'African' in the apartheid era. In the first week of the course, the trainers discussed 'inbound' work (for instance, how to deal with customers who telephone a help desk). The second week—which the first author attended—addressed 'outbound' work, and was divided into two sections: sales (basically cold selling) and debt collection. The third week was dedicated to computer training.

The training course brought into stark relief the different prospects of young South Africans in the post-apartheid period. It captured a sense of social mobility: some young black South Africans are embracing careers unheard of in the apartheid era when racial discrimination limited the prospects of those not designated as 'white.' But the training course also revealed the centrality of English language proficiency to employment and thus to emerging class inequalities in the country. While differing secondary school pass rates are stark confirmation of educational inequalities in South Africa, the way that schools produce 'acquired dispositions' (Bourdieu 1991) is particularly relevant here. Bourdieu's (1991) work has been influential in showing how certain groups come to command the 'dominant' and 'legitimate' language that results in material and symbolic rewards. In the apartheid era, English and Afrikaans were the two official languages, but South Africa's post-apartheid constitution sought to democratize language policy by recognizing eleven official languages (English, Afrikaans, and nine African languages). Despite this change, at an aggregate level, household data confirm the importance of English language to earnings: studies show that those who are proficient in English have an earnings advantage of almost 55 per cent over those who are not proficient (Posel and Casale 2010: 17).

English-language competencies are therefore implicated in the oft-stated shift from racial to 'class apartheid' (Bond 2004). However, language and selling skills are not as pliable as suggested by the course trainer when he stated that anyone could change their accent and communication style, improve their ability to sell, and—so he floated with a suggestive air—earn enough to buy a Lamborghini. Noticeably, those who came to the course speaking the most proficient English performed the best in class exercises and exuded the most confidence: they initiated and dominated the conversations and spoke with the ease common among speakers who command a (second) language and its 'legitimate' accent. For all course participants English was a second, sometimes third, language, spoken with a level of fluency generally dependent on a person's schooling. Yet those in South Africa speaking the most prestigious English are generally white. Hence, as we show, the dominance of English can help to retain white privilege, albeit in reworked ways.

The attention to call centers and language addressed in this paper has wider relevance to contemporary geographical debates. The fields of comparative industrial relations and labor geography have now converged on the verdict

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that 'globalization' does not simply sweep wantonly across territories but that geography (e.g. national or regional) is *constitutive* of global restructuring processes (Castree 2007; Huws 2010). The rapid expansion of the call center industry—part of a shift in many countries from manufacturing to service work—has yielded rich comparative analysis, including a Cornell University-based study of thirty nations which shows significant national and regional differences in industrial relations, wages, and working conditions (Holman, Batt and Holtgrewe 2007; see also Huws 2009). Studies by sociolinguists have noted the importance to call center work of language and accent (Cameron 2000; Heller 2007). South Africa, however, offers a particularly prescient window into the interaction between language, work, and geography for three reasons. First, until the 1990s, schools were segregated by race, and those reserved for Africans typically mixed African-language instruction with English; in contrast, today, former 'Indian', 'colored', and 'white' (but not 'African') schools have become racially mixed. Second, racial desegregation has meant that people previously segregated either residentially or through the ethnic 'Bantustan' homeland system are now interacting with one another as fellow workers or as workers and customers/clients. And, third, in a deindustrialized setting, the service sector employs an increasing proportion of workers and this work typically demands linguistic and communication competencies that include a focus on speech style: an 'accent-free' English as well as a more rapport-oriented interpersonal communication style (on 'emotional labor', see Hochschild 1983). For these reasons, South Africa's rapidly changing social and labor landscape is fertile terrain to bring social geography into greater tension with labor geography: to bring together 'work and the reproductive sphere, class and non-class identities . . . ' (Castree 2007: 859).

Just as social geography can enrich the study of labor and industrial geographies, the reverse is true. There is a growing acceptance in social geography—and the academy more widely—that race, class, gender, sexuality (and other constructed forms of difference), all interact and must, in many respects, be considered together (Collins 1990; McClintock 1995; Valentine 2007). The language of 'intersectionality' is frequently used to express this point with geographers arguing that the 'wider social science theorization of intersectionality has paid scant attention to the significance of space in processes of subject formation' (Valentine 2007: 14). In this paper, we suggest that changing intersections of race and class create dynamic new geographies that include the heightened mobility of students to non-local schools—a movement of children banned in the apartheid era when it crossed racial zones.

This paper focuses only on the relationship between race and class inequalities. Gender, sexuality, age, and other forms of differences of course intersect with race and class, and therefore there is no conceptual justification for ignoring these multiple links (one of the authors has in fact explored these connections at length in relation to the AIDS pandemic; Hunter 2010a). It is space limitations, and the need to keep the discussion focused, that lead to the limiting of our analysis in this paper.[2] In the next section, we review the post-apartheid desegregation of education and the growth of service work, including the call center industry. We then provide a note on method, before outlining findings from our interviews and observations with managers and workers, and ending with our conclusions.

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Education, the growth of service work in South Africa, and the call center industry

The twentieth century saw the rapid growth of high-quality public schooling for whites, a heterogeneous group that education policy helped to unify. In contrast, following the National Party's election victory in 1948 under the banner of apartheid, the passing of the 1953 Bantu Education Act aimed to equip 'Africans' for only menial work and made it compulsory that schools teach in vernacular languages at the primary school level. Related, the greater emphasis on the language of Afrikaans undergirded the political-economic rise of white Afrikaners. In the realm of the labor market, the color bar reserved for whites the highest status jobs.

From around the 1970s, however, labor shortages allowed black South Africans to progress into some higher status work (Crankshaw 1997). Sustaining this, the government greatly expanded public education, though it continued to grossly underfund black learners in relation to white learners. From the perspective of employers, the English (and Afrikaans) gained in these institutions enabled communication between managers and workers though, in this predominantly manufacturing and mining setting, little emphasis was placed on proficiency in English (i.e. where a black speaker's accent and intonation must closely approximate English-speaking South African's accent). Moreover, while the apartheid homeland/'Bantustan' system—that devolved power to ten homelands along ethnic/ethnolinguistic divisions—also facilitated some social mobility for black South Africans, it encouraged interactions mainly *within* ethnolinguistic groups. Thus, when a isiZulu-speaking black South African rose into higher status work in the KwaZulu homeland structure, for instance into an administrative post, she/he would interact on a day-to-day basis with other isiZulu speakers.

As apartheid crumbled in the 1990s, schools and (to a lesser extent) residential location became gradually desegregated. Key to a general move from race to class inequality was the late-apartheid government's requirement that schools introduce and collect fees if they opt for greater autonomy, as was envisaged especially in the case of former white schools. This policy of semi-privatizing public education was continued by the post-1994 government that saw it as a way to channel greater resources into previously disadvantaged public schools. One of the challenges this policy faced, however, was that schooling inequalities were manifest in more than simply the financing of schools. Importantly, the teachers of former African schools—themselves the product of the failed Bantu Education Act—often lacked the requisite competence in English (Lanham 1967; Mesthrie 2002a). Consequently, as formal racial discrimination ended in the 1990s, guardians who lived in former African areas often sought to send their children to better-resourced Indian, colored, and white schools, with the latter generally being the most expensive, and most able to impart a high-status ('white') English accent. Since housing in white areas is often unaffordable, thousands of African, colored, and Indian students now travel enormous distances to attend out-of-area schools in former white areas (for Cape Town, see Lemon and Battersby-Lennard 2009; on Durban, see Hunter 2010b; for a general overview of education policy changes, see Chisholm 2004).

These changes in schooling have interacted with shifts in the labor market and political power. Specifically, from the 1970s and continuing after the apartheid era, a series of important changes took place. First, unemployment rose making work for young people

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especially scarce. This began after the economic crisis of the 1970s and continued after 1994 when trade liberalization exposed South African industry to greater competition. Second, after apartheid the 'Bantustan' system and other formal forms of segregation were scrapped: though geography still divides South Africa linguistically, previously divided ethnolinguistic groups became more likely to mix in residential areas and in the workplace. Related, in this milieu, one reason why English became favored in government circles is that the liberation movement saw it (in contrast to Afrikaans) as a way to unify South Africans and thus challenge the apartheid state's ethnic 'divide and rule' strategy. Third, there was a progressive shift from manufacturing to service employment. Longitudinal figures have not been compiled for the Durban area because boundary changes associated with the democratic transition make this a difficult task. But such an analysis has been completed for South Africa's largest city, Johannesburg, and reported by Crankshaw (2008: 1696) who notes that 'By 2001 … tertiary-sector employment (commerce, FIRE, community, personal and social services) amounted to 73 per cent of all employment.'

Enter call centers …

Until recently, service work, almost by definition, necessitated the co-presence of customers and workers. However, the information technology revolution enabled a geographical separation of the two, i.e. call centers can connect people by telephone who previously had to be co-present. This radical separation, in turn, has facilitated the mobility of the industry within or across national borders. Indeed, the rapid recent offshoring of service work in the last two decades has been dubbed a 'second global shift,' the first having been manufacturing's move to the Global South from around the 1970s (Bryson 2007). To date, India is by far the biggest offshore destination for call centers: in 2006, 409,000 people were employed in India's English-medium industry (Taylor and Bain 2008: 132). Herein lies the opportunity that was said to be offering themselves to South Africa. Indeed, one Durban-based Business Process Outsourcing call center (a company to which other businesses outsource call center work) advertises itself by saying that Durban has 'high levels of diction and dialect proficiency in English' in addition to excellent telecommunications and technology and relatively cheap labor.[3] The hope of the South African government, which has given some support to the industry, is that the country can develop a niche in the global call center industry based on both the quality of workers' English accent and relatively low labor costs.

However, despite the government's attempts to attract foreign business, the majority of call centers in South Africa, especially in Durban where this research was conducted, service the South African market [nationally this figure was 91 per cent according to Benner, Lewis and Omar (2007), although more international call centers have been established since then]. If an Indian-style boom in offshored call center work has yet to materialize in South Africa—though there have been some recent big-name relocations to the country such as Amazon and British Telecom—this national focus should not be taken as a sign of the industry's insularity. Indeed, call centers show precisely how technology and labor markets cross national boundaries today: centers utilize cutting-edge technology often developed outside the country, employ some senior personnel trained in other nations, and

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follow work organization models pioneered elsewhere.

Today, however, black 'Africans', the group that the government wants to promote most in the industry, form a minority of Durban's call center workers. Indentured laborers from India were recruited to KwaZulu-Natal's sugar plantations in the nineteenth century and, consequently, the province today has a large 'Indian' population whose first language today is English (see Mesthrie 2002b for the shift from Indian languages to English among South Africans of Indian origin). Like Cape Town's large 'colored' (very broadly 'mixed race') population, whose first language is often Afrikaans but nevertheless has a high proficiency in English, Indians play a leading role in the industry in Durban. Only in Johannesburg do black Africans form the majority of the employees (the city has the largest black middle-class and numerous call centers linked to company headquarters located in this area). Nationally, a 2007 survey estimated that the industry employed around 80,000 people and that 27 per cent of call center workers were African (compared to 79 per cent of the population), 35 per cent colored (though there was a possible oversample of this group), 26 per cent white, and 11 per cent Indian (Benner, Lewis and Omar 2007). Despite black Africans' relative underrepresentation in the industry, we give most attention to this group since in the apartheid era it faced the largest employment and schooling disadvantages, and government policy is especially aimed at redressing these inequalities.

Method

In studying a dynamic new industry in a relatively new democracy, we followed a qualitative/ethnographic approach: as Burawoy and Verdery (1999: 2) argue in respect of postsocialist countries: 'It is precisely the sudden importance of the micro processes lodged in moments of transformation that privileges an ethnographic approach.' Specifically, between June and August 2010, the first author interviewed twenty-nine people who had worked or still work in a call center, mostly at their homes in Umlazi Township, although at times several people gathered in a single home or were met in a public place. Umlazi—Durban's largest township with a population of over half a million people (eThekwini Municipality 2008)—was established in the apartheid era as part of the apartheid government's plan to segregate urban areas. Durban, located in the province of KwaZulu-Natal, is South Africa's third most significant city for call centers, after Johannesburg and Cape Town. Its main locational advantage for call centers is its low labor costs, whereas Cape Town is best able to attract international businesses because it has direct international flights and a perceived 'European' culture; Johannesburg benefits from the location of many South African companies' headquarters in this city.

Interviewees' average age was twenty-four years and we talked with twenty-four women and five men. This bias toward women is probably due to the fact that the research assistant was female. In recruiting people to interview, the research assistant (who had herself worked in a call center) asked friends to introduce us to a network of three or four workers with whom they were well acquainted; a second friend to another three or four workers and so on. This meant that present at all times with the interviewee was someone they knew well and a research assistant, both from the area, and this familiarity allowed a generally relaxed and open conversation. Interviews were conducted in isiZulu or a mixture of isiZulu and

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English and the fact that the first author, though not a native speaker, also spoke fairly fluent isiZulu helped to partially reduce the inevitable social distance engendered by his whiteness and maleness. We tried to achieve as much variation as this method allows and did conduct interviews in several parts of Umlazi. Interviewing workers or former workers in Umlazi likely had several advantages over meeting workers at the premises of a firm. It allowed for more time to chat with informants, for us to observe their place of residence, and for us to observe and communicate with other household members. In addition, it also facilitated a more candid interview than would have been possible had the researchers been associated with the interviewees' place of employment, and thus employer.

The first author also interviewed seven call center managers as well as three representatives of employment agencies which call center companies use to hire workers; his international affiliation and accent probably helped in securing interviews in a setting in which most managers are white.[4] Though we visited firms, we did not observe informants in the workplace beyond a brief tour provided by all of the call center managers. While workplace participant observation is a well-recognized research method (e.g. on direct selling, Bone 2006), and a potentially fruitful way to explore intersectionality, our emphasis is primarily on how certain people attain certain call center jobs, a dynamic that rests crucially on household-related matters such as schooling and language acquisition. Participation in a call center training course came about after a number of informants mentioned that they had undertaken a three-week training course with this company in central Durban. The first author then contacted the company, told them about his research, and asked for permission to enroll for a week. His position as the only white attendee on the training course described above no doubt added status and legitimacy to the course and therefore helped to secure his access. This is in part because whites still manage most South African companies, and perhaps also because his foreign affiliation worked to endorse the company's claim that it was 'internationally recognized'.

Language and class

Our interviews found that a high level of English proficiency is usually necessary for call center employment, but not in all instances. Indeed, one surprising finding was that several low-paying call center companies—those that had a relatively low expectation of English skills—appeared to be involved in fraud. A number of informants mentioned these companies or had worked at these companies and they are relevant to this study because they represent the bottom of the call center hierarchy. Before detailing the ways that the call centers seek to select workers with high English skills, therefore, we outline briefly the lowest paid (and most likely illegal) call center work, which requires relatively limited English proficiency.

The small number of companies involved in fraud did so by taking people's bank account details on false pretenses. These firms are mainly located in premises with cheap rent located in downtown Durban. One twenty-two-year-old woman, Thuli, who worked at one of these firms, was born and educated in Umlazi township. Her English accent was heavily influenced by isiZulu, her first language. In other words, Thuli does not speak with the type of fluency of someone who had attended a former white, Indian, or colored school.

Most call centers operating in Durban require at least a matriculation qualification (the final exam at the end of high school with a

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61 per cent pass rate in 2009). However, Thuli had failed this exam. She worked at the call center for four months and earned 300 or 400 Rand per week, considerably lower than informants' typical salary which was around R1,000 a week. Specifically, she was paid R50 commission for every person's bank account details she managed to acquire, for instance by telling them that they had won a competition but had to pay a small fee for the prize to be released. The archetypal person who might be persuaded to give their bank details, she said, was an elderly isiZulu-speaking person living in a rural area, someone to whom Thuli would speak in her mother tongue. She clearly did not like undertaking fraud, and this motivated her to quit. It is relevant to note that Thuli and the other three people we interviewed who had been involved in fraud had all attended local schools in the Umlazi township. While the link between poor schooling, a low level of English proficiency, and employment at illegal call centers requires further scrutiny, it certainly seems to be the case that young people schooled at 'better' schools generally had a higher chance of attaining more desirable call center employment.

Slightly more than half of our informants were educated in schools outside Umlazi: fifteen of the twenty-nine call center employees (or former employees) we spoke with were schooled in former white, Indian, and colored schools, as opposed to fourteen educated in local 'African' schools. Detailed statistics on the proportion of Umlazi children educated outside the township are not available but previous work undertaken by the first author suggests that it is still a small proportion of Umlazi's children, given that the township houses over half a million people (see Hunter 2010b). Indeed, though hundreds of taxis do take children out of the township for schooling, a more significant movement of students to schools outside Umlazi is prevented by both the high cost of transport and school fees, as well as outside schools' legal obligation to take students who live locally. Supporting there being a connection between call center work and English-medium education, interviewees themselves often stated that call center workers tended to be schooled at out-of-township institutions at a much higher rate than is common for the township.

The colloquial name for children who attend 'multiracial' schools, *amamulti*, is itself revealing of connections between English language proficiency and new class divisions. The term implies a mixing of 'races' in schools in ways banned under apartheid. However, this is not always the reality: some former white schools now teach almost all African students. This happens in the case of 'white flight', i.e. when white students move into 'better' white schools in a different suburb. In this case, only the majority of teachers remain white (Hunter 2010b). The term *amamulti* therefore suggests that students benefit from native English-speaking teachers or, put another way, that students are escaping the apartheid-designated African schools, those that mix English and African languages on a daily basis. Indeed, when asked to give reasons why children attend schools outside the township, the most common reason is 'to learn English'.

Showing in more detail the connection between education and service employment is the case of one of our interviewees, Zodwa, who was schooled in a prestigious former-white school and spoke impeccable standard South African English. She worked for ten months at a call center that serviced one of South Africa's large cellphone companies but quit after complaining that the work was repetitive and stressful. Her employer was a generally desired one because it responded to 'incoming' calls (i.e. customers phoning in)

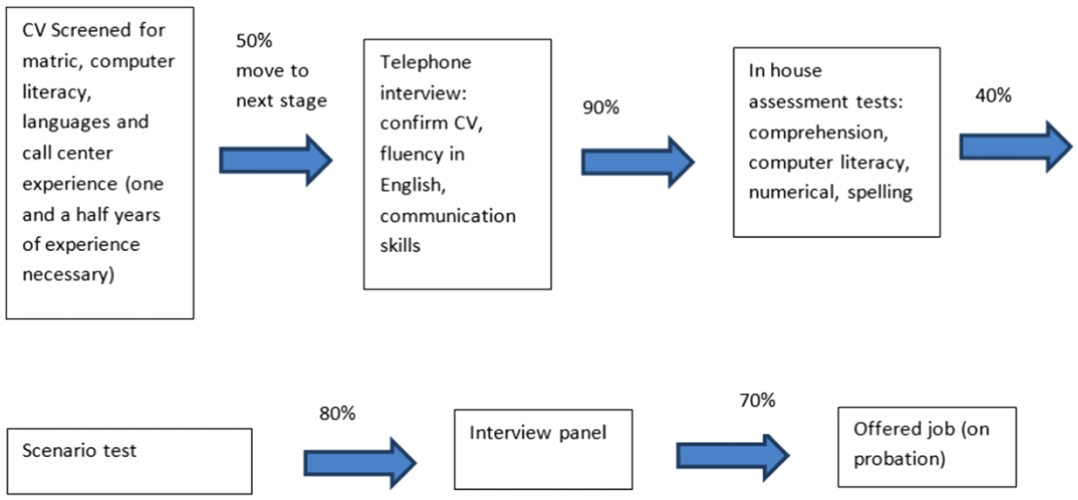

Figure 1 Interview process for an inbound call center.

and the work was generally thought to be less stressful than target-driven 'outgoing' work (sales or debt collection). Zodwa acknowledged that the company paid its generally young workforce well by Durban's standards [a starting salary of R30 (USD 4) an hour for a permanent worker, though she had worked through an agency and earned R22/hour]. Most of the employees at this firm, she said, were African and had attended former white schools, and to a lesser extent former Indian schools. Revealing of the hierarchies created by English competencies, those who had attended township schools, she said, were often asked to work the unpopular 'graveyard' shift—from 10 pm to 7 am. She says that this was because English was commonly used less in calls received at this time: there were more isiZulu callers at night, since informal shops in townships (such as shebeens and Spaza shops) stay open late and sell air time that can generate customer queries.

Companies' demand for English proficiency and communication skills (as well as computer and numeracy skills) is also demonstrated by Figure 1 that shows five recruitment stages used by a cellphone call center visited by the first author. Constructed following interviews with several managers from this firm, Figure 1 gives the estimated proportion of people who pass each interview stage. In this firm—one of the most desirable to work for—only 10 per cent of people pass all of these stages and were offered a job on probation. Indeed, this 'incoming' call center, similar to that at which Zodwa worked, has relatively high-paying salaries and, as such, could demand a year and a half's call center experience as a prerequisite for an interview. This company, it should be noted, owns call centers not only in Durban but also in other cities in South Africa; since call volumes can be switched between centers at the flick of a switch, prospective employees are, in effect, competing with others from quite distant geographies.

As Zodwa's case shows, a middle-class background can lead, through schooling, to a higher level of English proficiency. In turn, employment in the call center industry can lead to above-average earnings for school

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leavers (tertiary qualifications are not needed for most call center work). This is close to what Bourdieu (1991: 49) has argued in the case of France as 'the dialectical relation between the school system and the labour market … which played the most decisive role in devaluing dialects and establishing the new hierarchy of linguistic practices.' What is notable about call center employment, however, is that it is often seen as a stepping stone to better paid work rather than as a final career choice (see also Motseke 2009). This is because the relatively flat employment structure means that only a few people are promoted to supervisory jobs and the constant pressure to meet targets makes it a stressful occupation.

Yet, the relationship between class background, English language competence, and call center employment—while definitely evident at an aggregate level—requires further unpacking. In this regard, three points will be briefly made before the paper turns to questions of language and race. First, guardians' ability to send a child to a 'multiracial' English-medium school outside Umlazi does not automatically mean that they are particularly well-off; one noticeable case of social mobility exists when a domestic worker might live on the premises of an employer with her children who have a legal right to access the local elite school (with fee remissions). Second, while native-English-speaking teachers help students to develop English proficiency, English skills can be developed outside the classroom. Indeed, some young people who had attended what they described as poor-performing schools in Umlazi are, in fact, very proficient in English. In these cases, several individuals said that they had worked hard to learn English, including through soaking up English-based media like the TV, radio, and newspapers/magazines. Third, though competence in English is necessary for call center employment, it is an advantage to be multilingual. Some Umlazi residents with family ties outside the area can speak not only isiZulu and English but also SeSotho, isiXhosa, or other languages, and this gives them an advantage in the labor market. Call center managers and workers stated that multilingual employees were in high demand.

Language and race

Call centers represent a relatively new industry that can employ black South Africans with the requisite English-language competence, and thus provide a vehicle for class mobility. Nevertheless, we consider two examples of how language can be 'the last back door to discrimination,' in the words of Lippi-Green (1997).

The first example rests on the recognition that the specific organization of work affects the premium attached to English. It is important to note that at this point that although there has been a remarkable rush for English-language education, there has also been a tremendous embrace of isiZulu-medium media, especially in the KwaZulu-Natal province where Durban is situated: the newspaper *Isolezwe* was established in 2002 and now sells over 100,000 copies a day. Countrywide, isiZulu is the most popular home language today spoken by 22 per cent of South Africans (Posel and Casale 2010: 12). The popularity of isiZulu reflects how English has both positive and negative connotations. In townships like Umlazi, derisory comments can be directed toward 'coconuts'—African children educated at former white schools—for abandoning the moral register of Zulu customs, and therefore being 'white on the inside' (see also Rudwick 2008).

This point is relevant because, when a customer phones a call center, an electronic

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message asks for her language preference and the call is directed accordingly. As such, many people phone call centers and are able to speak African languages such as isiZulu. It follows that there is nothing technologically impossible about call centers employing monolingual isiZulu speakers, just as they are happy to employ monolingual English speakers. The reason why proficiency in English is required for call centers is, therefore, related to broader structures of power: here it is relevant that interviews, assessments tests, and in-house training are undertaken in English, the native language of most (overwhelmingly white and Indian) monolingual call center managers. Furthermore, the prestige of English and its hegemony worldwide are undeniable in giving it the value and legitimacy it enjoys in multilingual South Africa (Ives 2010).

Constructions of 'race' also affect the staff profile of call centers in other ways. Most call centers in Durban are easily identified within the industry as predominantly 'African', 'Indian', or to a lesser extent 'white'. Illustrating this point, in June 2010, Zodwa's two friends were sitting alongside the first author and his research assistant during our interview, and the conversation was permeated with lots of interjections and laughter; the conversation's rapid pace revealed the participants' high level of fluency in English. After a while the four began chatting about a prestigious call center, an expensive private health care provider. The company promotes itself as selling not only health insurance but also a healthy lifestyle, for instance, by providing cheap membership to gyms and cinemas. According to Zodwa and her friends, this is the only call center company in Durban which employs predominantly whites. They explained that the company's racial preference was coded in terms of their wish to employ people with a 'neutral' accent. As Zodwa put it: 'I think that it is just a particular way of saying that we don't want black people to work there.'

The fact that white South Africans are employed at one of the most prestigious companies, and not at lower status companies, suggests that they have relatively good alternatives in the labor market—perhaps gained through tertiary education or informal contacts. Although white South Africans (like all South Africans) are by no means homogenous, their average educational levels and parents' assets are considerably higher than those of other racial groups. According to one (white) agency manager, whites typically saw the industry as being below them, and were inflexible in terms of getting to different workplaces since they generally refused to ride public transport such as shared mini-bus taxis (associated with African and Indian people). Other reasons why whites seem to be concentrated only at the highest-paid niches, according to the agency representative, is that they did not like to be a minority in a company that is seen as predominantly 'black' (in this context Indian, colored, and African). Since we know that nationally around 26 per cent of call center core employees are white, some of these dynamics might play out particularly strongly in Durban, which is known to host many of the countries least paying and lesser status call centers.[5]

According to Zodwa, whites' ability to secure what is generally seen as high status work in the aforementioned Durban call center resulted in part from direct discrimination, e.g. white people hiring white people. But this might be justified by management in terms of rich white customers' preference for 'white-sounding' call center workers. In other words, it might be argued that language hierarchies still exist which favor white South Africans of a particular class who speak the most 'legitimate' English as a home language. Zodwa certainly suggested that the company's preference for

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whites represented a certain 'classism,' in other words that whiteness signified upper-classness and distinctiveness for both white and black customers:

> Zodwa: I think [Company A] is trying to meet a certain standard within their customer base … it is an aristocratic type of medical aid … you'll find very seldom someone from KwaMashu [a large Durban township] on COMPANY A. I stay in town but I won't spend R 700 just for an option to go to the gym.
> INT: It is about prestige?
> Zodwa: Yaah it is aristocratic … it is classism really.

While 'race' might exclude certain African people from acquiring jobs in high niche sectors—this being justified in part because their accents might be identified as non-white—Zodwa also explains that speaking proficiently in English by phone can, at times, allow black customers to be treated with greater respect. Noteworthy here, is how call centers' ability to separate customers from workers, something would not happen for instance if black people visited a shop, and could face discrimination based on their appearance:

> Zodwa: Like, even, even, even, like for instance, I have a friend who stays in Durban north [a high income area] who is on COMPANY A. If she calls a call center she seldom speaks Zulu. And she has a twang and so she sounds like she is not black … she uses twang all over. She sounds like she is American … 'Like Hello' … And she'll tell you, they don't think I am black … most of the people who use COMPANY A, the way that they speak has no indication whatsoever of what race they are because of that twang and that way that they speak that sophistication that goes with it.
> INT: Give me the twang?
> Zodwa: It sounds like, 'hello, yeeah, like, I have problem with my medical aid [everyone laughs] … I like paid my bill and you guys like shut it down, so I was like wondering if there was a problem, because I like went to the bank and I deposit the money and you guys actually made a deduction [another person repeats 'like' and laughs] … that's exactly what she sounds like when she speaks to them.'

Here, the woman discussed by Zodwa appropriates and exaggerates a non-South African English dialect, as seen in the use of 'like' and the high rise at the end of declarative utterances as if one is asking a question (known as 'uptalk'). This evokes 'Valley Girl' speech, an American English speech style originally associated with white middle-class teenage girls from California. While this stereotypical speech style is stigmatized in the USA because of its associations with insecurity and lack of confidence (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2003), in this context Zodwa's appropriation seeks to index the authority and value that comes with speaking English with a non-African accent. This can be read in part as a reaction to the racism that can, as we have seen, still deny Africans work and other opportunities.

At the same time, Zodwa's comments also suggest that a particular style of prestigious English today is also a key index in differentiating better off from poorer black South Africans. This distinction provided by English is by no means unprecedented: in Cape Town's Langa township in the 1960s, anthropologists Wilson and Mafeje (1963: 26) recorded strong signs of social differentiation, including the rather insulting term 'ooscuse me' applied to well-to-do adults 'accused of being aloof and conceited'. What is different today, however, is the rising importance of service work that sometimes requires not only competence in English but also an accent free of influences from an indigenous African language. One reason for this is that today's

service work—unlike much service work in which Africans were concentrated under apartheid (for instance teaching and nursing)—involves interactions that *cross* racial and ethnic boundaries.

Conclusion

It is now widely accepted that race, class, gender, and sexuality cannot be studied in isolation but that they *intersect*. However, while social and cultural geographers have pointed to the spatiality of these intersections, this work has not been adequately taken up within labor geography, despite the emerging global division of labor. Here, we argue that South Africa offers a prescient case. Like much of the Global South, unemployment levels are very high, and many manufacturing jobs have been lost to the lower waged countries, especially China. Today, from India, to the Philippines, to Egypt, and to South Africa, call centers are being promoted as an alternative to manufacturing work. In South Africa, we found that what is important for young people's access to Anglophone service work is the acquisition of English language skills through schooling in desegregated English-medium institutions. This is one reason why access to high-quality English has become a key form of class differentiation for black South Africa.

Yet South Africa historically had a larger settler population than most colonial societies and we have shown how language can also be used to preserve white privilege, since white South Africans still have the greatest ability to utilize (and define) prestigious English. This raises questions about the ability of language policies to reduce social inequality. In an attempt by the South African government to redress the historical dominance of English and Afrikaans in relation to African languages, the post-apartheid constitution recognized eleven official languages. But as Alexander (1989: 12) stated: 'unless African languages are given market value ... no amount of policy change at school level can guarantee their use in high status functions and, thus, eventual escape from the hegemony of English.' The growth of the call center industry suggests that, rather than being reduced, the market value of English proficiency might be enhanced by the structural shift toward service work. This is not to say that English is necessarily hegemonic in all spheres of life—the rise of the isiZulu press suggests that it is not—but it is particularly important in arenas of high social power, such as desired sectors of employment.

We also argue that the high status given to English is by no means natural or uncontested. While there is a tendency to equate Bourdieu's notion of 'cultural capital' with 'high' culture (for instance a taste for art), a more productive and empirically open approach—one cognizant of the geographically varied industrial and political shifts noted here—is to emphasize constantly changing evaluative criteria, and the politics of how certain criteria are presented as the most legitimate (Lareau and Weininger 2003). To put this in terms used in this paper, the status given to English language is not fixed but constitutes and is constituted by the ways in which race and class intersect. Given that the call center industry is still overwhelmingly nationally based, and technology allows for calls to be directed to an employee who speaks a customers' first language, it would be very possible for at least some call center employees to be monolingual isiZulu speakers. There is therefore no *inherent* premium to speaking fluent English and one reason why this language remains dominant is that it is the first language of Indian, colored, and especially white people who remain in high status positions in society. As this paper has shown, language is a dynamic

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and highly fluid terrain: one that is a key bridge in post-apartheid society between geographies of industrial restructuring, national policy, and spatial patterns of social reproduction, especially schooling.

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Notes

1. By the end of the apartheid era, state policy had left four widely used racialized categories: 'African,' 'white,' 'Indian,' and 'colored.' In everyday speech and some written texts, the word 'Black' can be used in preference to 'African.' However, since 'Black', especially after the Black Consciousness movement in the 1970s, also refers to all people of color, we use (with reservations) the four aforementioned categories. We use scare quotes conservatively to improve the article's readability and capitalize only 'African' and 'Indian' since they refer to places.
2. It is worth, however, flagging very briefly one issue that particularly strikes us as demanding separate research: why only slightly more women than men, 58 percent (Benner, Lewis and Omar 2007), are employed in the call center industry in South Africa. It has long been noted that service industries require 'feminine' traits of care and communication style and employ more women (e.g. McDowell 2009). However, compared to other settings, the feminization of the industry in South Africa exists to a lesser extent: for instance, in the UK approximately 70 percent of call center workers are women (Cameron 2005). In South Africa, this might be because men in this English-intensive industry are positioned as 'educated' and 'middle class,' and therefore not feminized in as negative way as they are elsewhere. These questions are all the more relevant because there are examples of how men can struggle to adapt to this service environment. Talking about her experience working in the industry, Motseke (2009: 52) relays how during the recruitment process some employees failed the oral exam because of their poor English. She says that 'One of them was a former soccer player, who was so upset by failing the oral that he went straight home after hearing the news, and left people who were in his lift club behind.' Everyone knew that the soccer player did not speak English very well and she quotes one of the coaches talking about this man: 'You people must understand the situation; he has a house, a wife and child. This was a chance for him to provide for them. Phela (just think) we are not all in the same situation. All the skills he needed before this was in his legs, he needed no English, pronunciation, spelling or whatever. It must be too much for him to think that he can't make even this work'.
3. http://www.bizworks.co.za/index.php?option = com_content&view = article&id = 57:location&catid = 36:why&Itemid = 72 (accessed 1 July 2010).
4. Agencies either employ workers themselves and place them at call centers; recruit workers for direct employment by a company; or undertake a combination of both strategies.
5. We do not have specific figures, however, demonstrating that white call center workers are employed at higher status (and higher paying) call centers. However, it appeared from briefly touring seven call centers (which generally represented lower than country-wide pay and status) that no whites were employed at these institutions, below management levels. In addition, no white people attended the training course which tended to be linked to low-to-medium status employers. We also know nationally that 'White women seem to be particularly over represented at team leader and management levels in the industry, with white women comprising nearly 40 percent of all managers' (Benner, Lewis and Omar 2007: 18).

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Abstract translations

Parler la classe, parler la race: La langue, la classe, et la race dans l'industrie du centre d'appels dans l'Afrique du Sud

Dans le contexte d'un secteur secondaire en déclin, cet article départ d'une étude de l'industrie du centre d'appels pour soutenir que la compétence en langue anglaise est d'une importance primaire dans l'industrie du service dans l'Afrique du Sud après l'apartheid. En tirant sur les recherches menées à Durban, l'article démontre que l'accès au travail dans un centre d'appels – surtout pour les couches les plus élevées – n'est accessible qu'à travers les compétences en anglais qui elles-mêmes ne peuvent être acquises que dans les meilleurs établissements scolaires. En faisant ainsi, l'article soutien l'argument que l'accès à l'éducation en langue anglaise peut contester l'inégalité raciale mais la langue anglaise risque en même temps de consolider le privilège blanc à cause d'une association continue d'un accent « prestigieux » avec la blancheur. L'étude révèle ainsi l'importance de la langue pour les études qui examine le croisement changeant de la race et de la classe et souligne ainsi la valeur des perspectives sociales et culturelles dans la géographie du travail.

Mots-clefs: Afrique du Sud, centres d'appels, classe, langue, géographie du travail, intersectionnalité.

Hablando de Clase, Hablando de Raza: Idioma, Clase, y Raza en la Industria de los Call Centers en Sudáfrica

En pleno de la decadencia del empleo de fabricas, este articulo utiliza un estudio de la industria de los call centers para discutir que la competencia en Ingles es fundamental para los trabajos de servicio nuevos en post-apartheid Sudáfrica. Llevando de investigaciones en Durban, el articulo muestra que acceso a trabajo en los call centers – particularmente los nichos mejor pagados – está mediado por habilidades en Inglés que generalmente están alcanzables solamente en los colegios más elites. Al hacer esto, el articulo se discute que acceso a educación mediano de Inglés puede desafiar la desventaja racial, pero al mismo tiempo Inglés puede consolidar el privilegio de la blancura por la asociación constante de un acento 'prestigioso' con la blancura. El estudio se revela la importancia de idioma en la interseccionalidad cambiante de raza y clase y, al hacer esto, subraya el valor de perspectivas sociales y culturales en geografía del trabajo.

Palabras claves: Sudáfrica, call centers, clase, idioma, geografía del trabajo, interseccionalidad.

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