
Behind smiles and pleasantness: working in the interactive service sector in Portugal

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Abstract: This article draws comparisons between two types of interactive serviceworkers: call centre agents and supermarket checkout operators. It focuses on both the similarities and distinctions between the two groups, by exploring the mechanisms employed by managers to standardise and scrutinise work routines and service interactions. Managerial forms of regulation and surveillance are dominant features, being even more prevalent as far as call centres are concerned. This finding challenges the assumption that face-to-face encounters require greater regulation and control of emotional expression than vocal interactions. The workers' subjective perceptions of various dimensions of their jobs are also presented, as well as the repercussions in terms of emotional labour.

Keywords: interactive service work; emotional labour; call centre agents; supermarket checkout operators.

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1 Introduction

A significant body of research has shown how the interaction between the customer and employee is a key component of the quality service. As a result, workers are expected to regulate their genuine feelings, comply with management rules and expectations and express positive

emotions in their service encounters (Rafaeli, 1989; Leidner, 1993; Tolich, 1993; van den Broek, 2004). This paper draws comparisons between two types of routine service work in supermarkets and call centres. In both contexts, workers perform frequent, direct and routinised interactions with customers and emotional labour is inherent in their job performance (Hochschild, 1983). Moreover, service interactions are mediated by new technologies that affect the nature of the service exchange (Rafaeli, 1989; Tolich, 1993; Fernie and Metcalf, 1998; Bain and Taylor, 2000; Belt et al., 2002). Despite the plethora of studies, very little research has focused on the differences that might result in the quality of the service exchange and the satisfaction of front-line service providers in face-to-face interactions with customers as opposed to voice-to-voice interpersonal contact. This paper seeks to address this gap in our understanding by exploring the case of supermarket checkout operators and call centre operators in Portugal, where the studies on interactive service work and emotional labour have remained largely absent from the debate about changes in the nature of contemporary work and employment conditions.

The paper points to the need for a more nuanced understanding of emotional labour in front-line service work. It challenges the assumption that face-to-face service encounters require greater control of emotional expression than vocal interactions (Morris and Feldman, 1996). It contributes to our understanding of the mechanisms employed by managers to standardise and scrutinise work routines and to our understanding of how emotional labour in two distinct forms of interaction (voice-to-voice and face-to-face) is managed and regulated. Finally, it presents the workers' subjective perceptions of various dimensions of their jobs (evaluated in terms of job satisfaction) and discusses the repercussions of these in terms of emotional labour.

2 Front-line interactive service work and emotion labour

Drawing on the conceptualisation proposed by Leidner (1993, p.1), we have adopted the term interactive service work to refer to the work performed by supermarket checkout operators and call centre agents. The term is considered an important conceptual tool, as it embraces the combination of some prevalent features in the selected work settings: the standardisation of product/services and the detailed bureaucratic procedures governing work routines and service interactions with customers. The debate about the work and employment characteristics of the interactive service-based economy has been divided between optimistic and pessimistic accounts of social, economic and occupational changes (Macdonald and Sirianni, 1996; Kovács and Casaca, 2008).

The deterministic-optimistic accounts emphasise the new opportunities related with job creation and the centrality of knowledge work, in line with the development of semi-professional, empowered, enriched workers, working in post-Taylorist organisations (knowledge-intensive settings) who provide customised, quality services. According to the deterministic-optimistic view, work organisation is seen as essentially post-Taylorist in nature, with workers making use of intellectual skills, manipulating symbols, identifying and solving problems and being creative and autonomous when providing customised, quality services (Frenkel et al., 1998). The same line of reasoning is applied to the grocery industry sector or other interactive service sectors in general, where workers are considered to be free from arduous physical and manual work (typical features of industrial society) (Bell, 1973). In service occupations, workers have the opportunity to perform interactive jobs and work is regarded as a source of pleasure and self-accomplishment (Bryman, 2009).

On the other hand, deterministic-critical perspectives emphasise the increase in low-skilled, programmed tasks and the intensification of work and surveillance, with poorly-paid,

low-status workers engaging in intensive work in a 'big brother' environment. Workers consequently find themselves in neo-Taylorist settings, where they are completely controlled by the electronic panopticon (Ferne and Metcalf, 1998, p.21). In the case of the retail sector, including the grocery industry, the argument is similar; the workers in this sector swell the numbers of those who form part of the emotional proletariat (Macdonald and Sirianni, 1996, p.3), finding themselves in a completely subordinate position (Guelaud and Lanciano, 1991) and being involved in McJobs or fastfood jobs (Ritzer and Lair, 2009). In keeping with Hochschild's (1983) view, emotional labour is viewed as a source of alienation, emotional exhaustion, a loss of individuality and authenticity and an estrangement of self. As a result "workers have often to conceal, suppress or change the emotions that they feel in the process of doing their work" (Sloan, 2008, p.236).

Such a situation was originally noted by Hochschild (1983, p.7) two decades prior and refers to the management of private (true) feelings to ensure that the publicly observable bodily displays are the ones that are desired and prescribed by the organisation. In her view, emotions are commercialised, sold for a wage, thereby having exchange value; consequently, they are seen as part of the portfolio of resources used by management to acquire and maximise the margins of profit. However, as Bolton (2006) points out, relations with service recipients are not seen by service workers as being merely pecuniary-oriented. In a similar vein, Korczynski (2009, p.75) argues that the service transaction is not merely economic/instrumental driven, as service recipients are "socially embedded people, rather than as customers".

Some authors have also pointed out that as far as workers' perceptions and attitudes in relation to tight work routines are concerned, the reality is far from homogeneous. In the study of fast-food and sales insurance workers, Leidner (1993) found that some showed resentment in relation to the rigid scripts and managerial rules, while others appreciated the positive impact these had in simplifying their jobs and protecting them from abusive customers. A similar argument is also put forward by Rafaeli and Sutton (1987, p.31), who argue that the display of normative rules may not be harmful for workers, but act as a shield that protects them from emotional distress. Asforth and Humphrey (1993, p.97) also state that display rules allow workers only a state of emotional numbness, being more protected from emotional exhaustion.

The distinctive triangular relationship that characterises the interactive service sector has been emphasised by some authors. Leidner (1993) has argued that the triad managers–workers–customers reshapes the nature of contemporary work and introduces important tensions, ambivalences and contradictions in the labour process. Such characteristics may also be explained by the fact that in interactive service settings, work organisation is structured by a dual orientation that Korczynski (2009, p.79) defines as the customer-oriented bureaucracy. By employing this conceptual tool, Korczynski (2009) describes the combination of two contradictory logics: one is customer-oriented and is designed to provide high-quality service and maximise customer satisfaction; the other is the bureaucratic logic and seeks to rationalise and standardise work activities to reduce unpredictability, achieve predefined quantitative targets and promote efficiency. As a consequence, such ambiguous elements tend to be reflected in the way that workers simultaneously experience emotional labour as pleasurable and painful (Korczynski, 2009), or as a source of both satisfaction and psychological distress (Tolich, 1993). In contrast to the alienation thesis presented by the deterministic critical accounts, Leidner (1993) also observes that in some circumstances, the workers involved in her study were able to personalise the work routines and to use

individualised strategies in service encounters, such as humour and other demonstrations of self-expression and distance in relation to managerial rules. Similar strategies were also found by Tolich (1993, p.362) in his study of supermarkets, suggesting a paradoxical combination of alienating and liberating emotional displays at work. In a similar vein, contrary to the image of the silent servant put forward by deterministic-critical accounts, some authors have stressed the scope for workers' autonomy, self-expression and personalisation even in highly routinised work settings (Rafaeli, 1989; Asforth and Humphrey, 1993; Morris and Feldman, 1996; Bain and Taylor, 2000; Korczynski, 2003; van den Broek, 2004; Bolton, 2006; Sloan, 2008; Warhurst et al., 2009; Wharton, 2009).

In seeking to explore these issues, we adopted the framework by Morris and Feldman (1996, p.987). They define emotional labour as "the effort, planning and control needed to express organisationally desired emotions during interpersonal transactions". Further, they operationalise the concept using four dimensions: the frequency of appropriate emotional display, the attentiveness shown to the required display rules, the variety of displayed emotions and emotional dissonance. They also make reference to the antecedents of emotional labour. Supported by previous studies on the topic, they argue that work roles involved in face-to-face interaction require greater control of emotional expression since both vocal and facial displays must be regulated (Morris and Feldman, 1996, p.999). We sought to explore this in our comparative study of call centre workers and supermarket operators in Portugal.

3 The service sector in Portugal

Services have been absorbing an increasing number of employees in Portugal, though at a slower pace and considerably later than the most advanced European economies; in 2009, 62.2% of the total workforce had a job in services, approximately 71.9% of all employed women and 54.4% of men (E.C., 2010, p.187). It is worth noting that in the European Union (EU27), the equivalent average is much higher – 70.4% of the total workforce (E.C., 2010, p.165). Portugal has lagged behind these European countries (and especially so in relation to the previous EU15), where the development of the service sector took place much earlier, the gap being one of about two to three decades. Firstly, the democratisation process (after 1974) allowed for the rapid development of non-market services, along with the basic foundation of the welfare state (Machado and Costa, 1998). The privatisation process started in the late 1980s and gave way to the expansion of the market service sector. Accession to the European Union in 1986 also paved the way for the development of a new socioeconomic dynamics. With the country's greater integration into the European and global economies, the pressure to increase competitiveness has become even more intensive. From the late 1980s onwards, changes have also been introduced into the labour law aimed at providing greater flexibility in the Portuguese labour market and work organisation (Kovács and Casaca, 2008).

Furthermore, the spread of new technologies, especially since the 1990s, has changed the way that people work and new occupations have even emerged, such as those related to the call centre industry. Portugal is the country with the fifth highest growth rate of call centres among the countries of Europe, the Middle East and Africa (EMEA)¹. Nowadays, most banks, telecommunications and insurance companies, large stores and other service providers have call centres or contact centres. These use various flexible forms of employment (e.g., part-time work, fixed-term contracts and agency work) with a view to reducing costs through the adjustment of the number of workers or working hours in accordance with oscillations in production or the level of demand (quantitative or numerical flexibility) (Kovács and Casaca,

2008). The retail sector has been expanding since the 1990s, along with the expansion of large grocery stores (super and hypermarkets) and the growth in mass consumerism (Salgueiro et al., 2000). About 20% of the workforce were employed in the retail sector in Portugal in 2008 (APED, 2009). Just looking at the last 5 years, it can be seen that Portugal is the country with the third highest growth rate in Europe as far as employment in this sector is concerned (APED, 2009). These large grocery stores are run by a small number of powerful economic groups (Salgueiro et al., 2000). Temporary contracts and flexible time arrangements are more common than in other industrial sectors, as most of them are open 15 h a day and make extensive use of working time and employment contract flexibility (Cruz, 2003).

4 The research scope and methods

Information from six case-studies is explored in this paper: two call centres, two supermarkets and two temporary work agencies that provide services to both retail and call centre industries. The empirical data are drawn from a wider research project that aims to analyse the main changes in work conditions, employment relations and in the occupational structure of the Portuguese service sector. The research consisted of two phases: one from 2000 to 2004, which covered the urban districts of the metropolitan areas of Lisbon, Porto and Aveiro; and the current one, which has focused on the metropolitan area of Lisbon since early 2007.² These are the geographical areas in the country with the highest concentration of companies operating in the industries under study. The companies were selected at random, based on the relevance of their characteristics to the intended research and their willingness to collaborate. In the settings studied, call centres have been contracted by telecommunications companies to provide service support to their customers. Here, the work activities performed by call centre agents are fundamentally limited to handling inbound calls. With regard to the supermarkets, the selected commercial units belong to the largest grocery retail chains in the country, where food and a variety of other household products are sold and our analysis focuses on the checkout workers.

The study combined both qualitative and quantitative methods. Interviews were carried out with the respective managers (two in call centres, two in supermarkets and two in temporary work agencies) with a view to obtaining a more comprehensive understanding of the selected industries, the social representations of job requirements and the workforce attributes. Two trade union representatives were also interviewed and questioned about their views in relation to the same dimensions. A questionnaire was applied to the selected workers; a sub-sample of 101 respondents was used for the current analysis – as displayed in next section. The purpose was to obtain more extensive information about the job description and requirements, work and employment conditions, relationships at work, the emotional effort put into the interaction with customers and the individual strategies adopted to deal with it, the degree of identification with job and company and the satisfaction with various dimensions of their jobs. To complement the information provided, individual interviews were also carried out with workers (ten call centre agents and ten supermarket checkout operators). All the interviews lasted for about 90 min and took place outside the work premises and were recorded with the permission of the interviewee. Authorisation to either interview or administer questionnaires to the workforce was difficult to obtain from managers, access to informants largely relied on a snowball sampling, which was mainly generated by co-workers. In fact, some restrictions were imposed in terms of access to the work environment, especially in the call centres. Here, apart from a training session with

about 15 trainees, which took place immediately after a recruitment process at one of the call centres and guided visits to the workplaces, direct observation of work activities was not permitted. In the case of supermarkets, even though managers were not enthusiastic about our systematic direct observations, the open nature of such commercial settings compensated for the restrictions imposed on our visits. As a complement to the interviewing process and to obtain a more comprehensive grasp of recruitment criteria, training goals, work organisation, organisational structure and workforce characteristics, internal information was also observed at all the selected companies (consultation and analysis of the respective websites, internal newspapers, organograms, training contents, personnel balance sheets, scripts for work activities, in addition to our own notes taken during the visits to the work settings).

5 Empirical findings: working in call centres and supermarkets

5.1 Work and employment conditions

Strong similarities can be found between the selected occupational groups in relation to the question of the employment relationship, as shown in Table 1. The length of service is short, particularly among call centre agents (less than 1 year), a situation that is related to high levels of labour turnover (about 70%–75%, according to the managers interviewed).

Table 1 Work and employment conditions

<i>Work and employment dimensions</i>	<i>Occupational groups</i>	
	<i>Supermarkets checkout clerks</i>	<i>Call centre agents</i>
Seniority	Men: low (less than 1 year) Women: 1–2 Years	Men and Women: low (less than 1 year)
Contractual situation	Fixed-term contracts (55–60%)	Temporary workers (TWA) (94–96%),
Working time	40% working part-time Shift work	Mainly less than 30 hours/week (approximately 60% of men and women) Shift work
Pace of work: individual perception	Very or extremely intensive (80%).	Very or extremely intensive (90%)
Work stress	80% (women); 50% (men)	80% (similar for men and women)
Job contents	Routine tasks	Mainly routine tasks (with nuances)
Earnings	Low (€320–€648/month, net) (same level for men and women)	Low (€320–€648/month, net) (same level for men and women)
Future promotion prospects	Unlikely or fairly unlikely (76% women) (Men: 82%)	Unlikely or fairly unlikely (68%) (Similar for men and women)

TWA – Temporary Work Agency

A similar percentage is found in supermarkets, as reported by a member of one of the trade unions. In call centres, almost all respondents have a temporary employment contract with another company (a temporary work agency) and not with the call centre to which they provide their services. Complementary interviews with call centre managers illustrate the importance of outsourcing in the industry, which is seen as an important strategy, enabling a flexible management of the workforce. In supermarkets, over half of the workers involved in the study also have temporary employment contracts (fixed-term contracts signed directly with the employment company). According to the information provided by the national business association in this sector, the overall percentage of employees working for the associate companies on a fixed-term contract is lower – 32.6% (APED, 2009, p.5). No alternative data exist for call centres; in this study, the incidence of temporary jobs is well above the national average in both cases, since, according to official data, 22% of the workforce in Portugal, in 2009, had fixed-term contracts (E.C., 2010, p.187). Flexible time arrangements are also very common, combining part-time work with shift work, including night shifts and variable working hours on a daily, weekly, monthly and/or annual basis. This working time arrangement involves 40% of supermarket checkout operators and 60% of call centre agents. These figures are significant, considering the national Portuguese context, where only 11.6% of employees had a part-time job in 2009 (E.C., 2010, p.185). Wages are low for both groups in the study; respondents from both segments positioned themselves in the same income bracket: 320–648 Euros per month. Furthermore, their prospects in terms of future promotion opportunities are poor, even though supermarket workers are less optimistic about the possibility of being promoted.

Both occupational groups share the following characteristics: they require either face-to-face or voice-to-voice contact with the public and call for the performance of emotional labour, “producing niceness many times a day” (Hochschild, 1983, p.150). The desired expressed emotions (including tone of voice, body and facial expressions) are induced through selection, recruitment, training, rewards and punishment mechanisms (Rafaeli and Sutton, 1987). With regard to the first of these dimensions, our findings confirm the preference for a young (most respondents were less than 25 years old) and educated workforce, having a secondary or preferably a tertiary degree – especially in the case of call centres (Table 2).

The recruitment of young and relatively highly educated workers is associated with the managerial emphasis on the “right attitude” (van den Broek, 2004, p.7) in both work settings. Furthermore, social skills (based mainly on interpersonal and communication attributes) are particularly required of call centre agents (see also Callaghan and Thompson, 2002). When managers in the call centre industry are asked about the most suitable worker profiles, the following characteristics were stressed: good written and especially oral, communication skills; good verbal fluency and diction; good listening skills; flexibility and adaptability; facility in developing and maintaining empathy in interpersonal relationships; capacity to work under pressure; ability to withstand the performance of routinised tasks; initiative and a sense of responsibility. Such job requirements are more likely to be found in this occupational group than among supermarket checkout operators. As far as this latter group is concerned, the most important job requirements are good coordination, manual dexterity and basic arithmetical skills. Even so, for both occupations, job advertisements often explicitly call for an ability to withstand the performance of monotonous and repetitive tasks.

Women are overrepresented in our sample (68.3% of respondents), especially among supermarket checkout operators, where they amount to about 90% of the workforce (Table 2). No official data are available for call centres, but as far as supermarket workers are

Table 2 Front-line service occupations (selected sample, $n = 101$)

	<i>Call centre agents</i>		<i>Supermarket checkout clerks</i>		<i>Total</i>	
	<i>n</i>		<i>n</i>		<i>Total</i>	
	<i>Men</i>	<i>Women</i>	<i>Men</i>	<i>Women</i>	<i>Men</i>	<i>Women</i>
	28	35	4	34	32	69
Feminisation rate	55.6		89.5		68.3	
Age (mean)	19	25	24	25		
Education levels	55% tertiary	74% tertiary	50% upper secondary*; 0% tertiary	42% upper secondary*; 10% tertiary		

*Upper secondary = 12 years of schooling

concerned, the Portuguese business association for this sector confirms the overrepresentation of women, even though their share is lower than it was in our survey and has been declining over the last few years (falling from 70.1% in 2003 to 67.7% in 2008) (APED, 2009: 05). This finding is consistent with those of other studies, such as the one undertaken by Rafaeli (1989), where the feminisation of the occupation (supermarket checkout operators) is also stressed. As has been said, in both cases, communication, emotional and interpersonal skills are regarded as imperative for either a checkout operator or a call centre agent. According to traditional gender ideologies, these attributes are deemed to be soft skills and are generally associated with natural female attributes, especially those related to communication and the ability to nurture and maintain empathy in social interactions (Hochschild, 1983; Belt et al., 2002; Casaca, 2006; Macdonald and Merrill, 2009; Wharton, 2009). Gendered assumptions are present in the discourses of the various factors involved in our study: both male and female workers, trade union representatives and managers. This can be seen in the comments by a female call centre operator:

“As far as answering calls is concerned, I can confirm that, though there are also some men working in these situations, as a rule women are calmer and manage to deal with a claims situation better (...). I admit I’ve already attended shrieking clients, they come on the line, you know, out to kill... They call us names, incredible things! These things happen. If you don’t keep cool and carry on calmly and if you also start shouting, then that’s enough for this same contact to go on far longer than necessary and then everybody’s screaming away. And, in this respect, women generally manage to remain calmer.” (Female call centre agent)

This statement coincides with the management’s view:

“We receive many more job applications from women (...). I presume they [women] don’t mind performing this sort of work so much. Maybe men think that the jobs here are similar to those performed by mere telephone agents and that they are therefore suitable as jobs for women rather than for themselves (...).” (Male call centre manager)

In addition to the recruitment criteria and selection procedures that attempt to select the most suitable persons to the jobs, managers try to foster and standardise “the specific personalities suited to interactive customer service roles” (van den Broek, 2004: 5). Scripted learning norms (feeling rules) are fundamental in terms of emotional labour – as stated by

Hochschild (1983) – enabling companies to “mass produce friendliness, deference, diligence and good cheer” (Leidner, 1993, p.46).

The workers involved in this study learnt which emotions were suitable to be displayed publicly and which are to be concealed or suppressed during the course of their work. The training material for new entrants are quite similar for both of the selected occupations: emotional norms are implemented to standardise the interaction encounters with customers either on the phone or over the checkout counter; in both service settings, characteristics such as ‘pleasantness’ and ‘niceness’ are particularly underlined by management. Nonetheless, the training that is given is more systematic among call centre agents than it is among supermarket workers. Call centre agents are responsible for answering incoming calls (according to the distribution made by the advanced automatic call distribution software) and are taught how to promptly identify the accurate information or solution to be provided, through an efficient and rapid research of the information in the computer system. They also learn how to perform other regular duties, such as how to perform data entry activities, update customers’ databases and report inquiries under ‘open’ status to the team and the supervisor. But an important component of their training is devoted to how to express themselves in an efficient, friendly and courteous manner throughout all the stages of the service interaction. Workers are taught about the importance of checking their voice tone before taking a call, and, in one of the call centres studied, workers had received instructions calling for the need to check their levels of warmth, enthusiasm and volume before taking inbound calls. This implies that the managerial norms about how to manage negative emotions, even when confronted with an irate customer, are also more rigorously defined for call centre agents. The interaction procedures are scripted and posted in each individual compartment, such as the following:

“Greet the customer with ‘good morning’, ‘good afternoon’ or ‘good evening’; give your name; offer to help; use the customer’s name preceded by the proper title (if known and registered on the database), Mrs, Mr. or Miss; focus on the problem, identify it (scripted problems) and solve it; if you need some time, ask permission to put the caller on hold and give the estimated time; then thank the caller for waiting and provide the solution or the information to the customer; if you need to transfer the call, make sure someone is available to receive the transfer; ask the customer for permission to transfer the call; ask if you can provide any further help; if not, close politely and thank the customer for the call.” (A call centre customer service protocol)

In supermarkets, there are instructions in terms of how to initiate and maintain good interactions with customers; thus, politeness and courtesy are described as elementary emotions to be displayed at work. However, the specific training provided is not so systematic and customer-centred as it is in call centres. In most situations, specific training is given to the workers during the first week after their recruitment and is part of their overall on-the-job training, which normally takes places with a more experienced co-worker (first watching them working and then doing the job under their close supervision). The focus is on task effectiveness, that is, on how to: correctly perform cash register operations; rapidly handle products through the electronic scanner of the cash register; type codes if the scan fails; place items in bags in an orderly fashion according to their type (separating fresh from preserved foods, health and beauty items from house-cleaning products, for instance); handle the payment modes and pay attention to eventual change, discount vouchers and coupons and how to correctly punch the cards that enable customers to benefit from free hours parking.

Tolich (1993) refers to the mechanisms of management intrusion that constrain the customer–operator interaction at the checkout counter and the way in which emotions are controlled through both direct and indirect supervision. In this study, surveillance emerges

as a prominent intrusion mechanism, through direct supervision, indirect supervision (when false customers in supermarkets or in call centres report their assessment to managers) and technical supervision, through the technological devices implemented in both work settings. Thus, while the previous processes (selection, recruitment and training) are designed to produce the desired and expected display of emotions, further mechanisms of control/surveillance, including performance assessment systems, rewards and punishments are activated to enforce worker's compliance with managerial rules. Our research suggests that surveillance is even more intensive in call centres, as the quality and accuracy of the information provided by the agent to the caller is always monitored and assessed, in addition to the positive emotions displayed over service interaction. As a call centre worker stated:

“It is common for recorded calls to be played back to the team. At such moments, performance is assessed as follows: 50% for quantity, which has to do with the number of calls made and the time spent on each one; and 50% for quality, assessing the level of pleasantness, amiability and helpfulness shown in attending the customer and the accuracy of the information that is provided.” (A call centre agent)

Calls with customers are, therefore, recorded and frequently played back to the whole team by the supervisor, whenever a deviation occurs in relation to the established rules. An open playing of recorded calls may serve as a form of social punishment, implying that such a display is not tolerated and will be collectively condemned by the organisation as a whole and by the co-workers as team members. The team structure and inherent peer pressure – as stated by van den Broek (2004) – also acts as a normative and cultural control mechanism, fostering workers' self-discipline and compliance with the rigid managerial rules (as each worker wishes to be recognised as a good contributor to the overall team performance). With regard to supermarket work, in addition to the feedback provided by direct supervisors and false customers, the productivity report produced by the electronic scanner cash register is a very important element in the assessment of a worker's performance. There are cameras in stores, apparently used more to prevent or identify possible thefts than to serve as a mechanism for controlling service interactions.

Therefore, our findings suggest that rather than face-to-face interactions being more regulated and more closely monitored than voice-to-voice interactions (Morris and Feldman, 1996), there is evidence of regulation, monitoring and surveillance in both types of work, with more of this occurring from call centre workers; in this case, the more rigorous surveillance was also accompanied by higher levels of discipline:

“These assessments can lead to a person being fired. It's already happened to some of my work colleagues.” (A call centre agent)

Such evidence is associated with the nuance found in terms of the nature of service encounters in the two work settings: despite the fact that call centre agents are required to keep all interactions short, a certain amount of talking is asked for to correctly identify the problem and provide an accurate response to customers. In the case of supermarket checkout operators, however, the situation is somewhat different, with workers being required to keep the interaction with customers as short and simple as possible. In the first case, managers assume that detailed norms and close supervision are basic conditions to ensure that only the appropriate performance is displayed over the phone. In the second case, as the focus is mainly on task-efficiency and less on the interaction itself, the level of managerial regulation tends to be less prevalent.

Social isolation is mentioned by both occupational groups. In line with Rafaeli's findings (1989), the layout (the positioning of checkout counters) in supermarkets is designed to restrict communication and interpersonal communication among co-workers (cashiers), so that communication is exclusively focused on customers. When it comes to call centres, it is important to note that workers are confined to small individual compartments where communication technologies mediate the customer interaction. In both cases, there are few opportunities for building up pleasant relationships with customers, as interactions are very short. As mentioned, in the case of checkout operators, not only is the duration of each interaction short, but it is very limited too: few words are exchanged with the customer at the checkout counter. Each contact is short, simple and swift, as highlighted by a supermarket worker during the interview:

“Our contact [with customers] is very short. I think that I keep saying four simple sentences and that's all: Good morning; Please sign here; Here is your change . . . Thank you!”. (A supermarket checkout operator)

The empirical findings provide some support for the view that emotional effort put into job performance tends to be lower in situations in which service interactions are short and frequent (Morris and Feldman, 1996). In our study, the short duration of interactions in particular seems to protect workers from having to make large amounts of emotional effort, as mentioned by this supermarket worker:

“The worst thing . . . is attending the public. A lot of people have no notion of the fact that we ourselves are people; they treat us badly and frequently without any reason for this . . . In fact, some of my work colleagues come away crying because they can't stand it anymore . . . (A supermarket checkout operator)

The pace of work is perceived as highly intensive by both groups of workers with 80% of checkout operators and 90% of call centre agents, reporting high levels of stress. The working conditions in general resemble some of the features of the Taylorist model of organisation. In the interviews, checkout operators stressed the physical strain provoked by the constant sequence of monotonous tasks that they had to perform with their hands (repetitive movements), with only predefined pauses; the psychological stress resulting from their mental workload, such as the need for full concentration (handling large amounts of money, giving change and dealing with different types of payment, remaining on the alert for possible thefts); the pressure for individual productivity (the number of products registered by each operator), time pressure and exposure to irritated customers. Health-related problems were also mentioned, ranging from musculoskeletal injuries, due to static muscular/posture work, to tension and anxiety caused by the constant registration of acoustic sounds or by periods of peak demand. Call centre agents reported similar constraints. In addition to the high number of inbound calls and the tight call-handling time, both of which induce great pressure among call centre agents, the stress levels are further exacerbated by frequent difficulties in providing a satisfying service to the customer.

5.2 *Job satisfaction*

Even though this research focuses on the work and employment conditions of two occupations performing emotional labour and not on their inherent psychological consequences, job satisfaction was nonetheless considered an important dimension to be studied. It was seen as an antecedent variable with regard to emotional labour: the lower the satisfaction levels, the higher the emotional effort put into the service interaction.

On average, respondents said that they were more or less satisfied with their work and employment conditions (using a five-point scale, the overall averages are 3.1 and 2.8, for supermarket workers and call centre agents, respectively, making the latter group the less satisfied of the two). Among call centre agents, low autonomy, a temporary employment contract, poor future career prospects and poor future job security are among the dimensions that cause low job satisfaction. Supermarket checkout operators are not satisfied with working time schedules that are irregular, may change every week and are communicated by management at short notice – a situation that exacerbates the difficulties in reconciling job responsibilities with family duties. Table 3 shows the overall means for both men and women, as the differences between men and women were small.

According to the interviews, the relatively low levels of job satisfaction are due, above all, to the high discrepancy between workers’ levels of education, but also to the poor content of the tasks performed, low discretion over tasks, work procedure and methods and pace of work, besides the precarious employment relationship and poor future job prospects. Co-worker relations is the only dimension with which workers are fairly satisfied, while some items cause particularly low levels of satisfaction, mainly among call centre agents. Such a finding calls for further research with focus on the informal social relationships formed and sustained at work.

Table 3 Job satisfaction by occupational groups

<i>Work and employment conditions</i>	<i>Supermarket checkout clerks</i>	
	<i>Checkout clerks</i>	<i>Call-centre agents</i>
Co-worker relations	3.8	3.9
	M = 4.5	M = 3.6
Earnings level	3.0	2.7
	M = 3.2	M = 2.7
Physical working conditions	3.3	3.3
	M = 3.5	M = 3.5
Employment contract	3.5	2.5
	M = 3.8	M = 2.4
Future job security	3.3	2.2
	M = 3.8	M = 2.0
Autonomy	2.9	2.3
	M = 3.0	M = 2.6
Job content	3.1	2.8
	M = 3.0	M = 2.9
Performance recognition	3.0	2.6
	M = 3.0	M = 2.6
Promotion opportunities	2.7	2.2
	M = 2.8	M = 2.3
Learning opportunities	3.0	3.0
	M = 3.0	M = 3.0
Working time schedules	2.4	3.7
	M = 4.0	M = 3.7

Note: All means in the table are based on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (not satisfied at all) to 5 (completely satisfied)

While task-related characteristics such as routine tasks, low discretion, work intensity, time pressures, etc., as well as interactions with angry, dissatisfied and abusive customers have already been identified as central variables in emotional labour. Our research found evidence of all these factors as well as the importance of the role of a perceived lack of organisational reciprocity. Such evidence seems to suggest some emotional dissonance between genuine feelings and displayed emotions during the labour process. This may occur in those situations in which smiling on the phone and at the checkout counter is perceived as incongruent with the low reciprocity provided by the organisation in terms of monetary rewards and job security. Emotional labour in both cases seems to be mainly pecuniary-based (Bolton, 2006), but the rewards are perceived as poor in relation to the effort put into the job performance. The lower levels of satisfaction among call centre agents might explain the high levels of labour turnover and their willingness to change jobs. Over half of call centre agents (and about two-thirds of women call centre agents) would like to find another job, if they could. The relative lack of job satisfaction again shows us that, in the case of call centre agents, for example, they are not passive victims, but were well aware that their work and employment conditions are not compatible with their career aspirations and they are willing to change the course of their current job situation.

6 Discussion and conclusion

The interactive service workers in our study were expected to follow detailed and standardised work routines, as well as to display a positive work attitude and manage emotions in their interactions with customers. Both call centres and supermarkets employ high percentages of young workers, which is considered to be associated with the managerial attempts to recruit and foster 'suitable personalities' for the job (van de Broek, 2004). Further, most of these workers were women and there was a gendered assumption that they would be better placed to perform emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983; Leidner, 1993; Macdonald and Merrill, 2009; Wharton, 2009). There are other strong similarities between the two groups. Both groups of workers have high levels of labour turnover; flexible working time schedules; common core attributes in their job requirements, similar working conditions and resemblances to some characteristics of the Taylorist model of organisation; similar training contents designed to standardise workers' behaviour and/or communication with customers and high levels of job strain stress and emotional pressure. In both work settings, the selection, recruitment and training processes act as normative and cultural forms of control (van den Broek, 2004), but further mechanisms of management intrusion (Tolich, 1993) are activated to prevent any deviation from the detailed managerial norms. These include direct and indirect supervision provided by feedback from direct supervisors and false customers, technical means of surveillance, as well as rewards and punishments. In keeping with the literature, these findings could suggest that, in both cases, workers are part of the emotional proletariat (Macdonald and Sirianni, 1996) and that emotional labour is much more closely associated with emotional exhaustion than with enjoyment and pleasure (Hochschild, 1983). However, the study does not support such a deterministic-critical view. Despite the strong similarities between the selected occupational groups, there are important differences which point to the need for a more nuanced understanding of emotional labour in interactive service work.

As mentioned, rigid bureaucratic and standardised work procedures are defined and tightly scrutinised by management in both settings, thereby limiting the latitude of workers' autonomy in service encounters. However, a different reality from the one depicted by Morris and Feldman (1996) was found: rather than confirming that face-to-face encounters are more regulated and closely monitored than voice-to-voice interactions, managerial norms and control mechanisms were seen to be more prevalent in call centres. This holds true in particular in terms of normative forms of regulation, such as the provision of systematic training to induce the "right attitude". In the case of call centre agents, service interactions are required to be short, while, at the same time, some conversation needs to be sustained so that the problem/issue can be correctly identified and a satisfactory response can be provided to customers. As a consequence, from a managerial point of view, detailed norms and close supervision emerge as basic conditions to ensure that only the appropriate performance is displayed over the phone. The demands are somewhat diverse when it comes to supermarket checkout operators: here, workers are expected to utter very simple, pre-defined, short (sometimes isolated) sentences, so that the interaction with the customer is minimal. As the focus is mainly on task-efficiency, the level of regulation upon the desired emotional display tends to be somewhat less prevalent.

Job satisfaction was seen to be an antecedent variable affecting emotional labour, assuming that the lower the satisfaction levels, the higher the emotional effort put into the service interaction. Being pleasant and putting on a smile when on the phone or at the checkout counter contrasts with the relative lack of job satisfaction shown by the respondents. This finding suggests that emotional dissonance may exist between the inner feelings and the positive emotions expressed during the work process. The subjective perception about the poor job content, low organisational rewards (in terms of the type of contracts available and the pay level), together with the workers' low identification with the job and the organisation, are key factors in the performance of emotional labour. These features demand more emotional effort to comply with management rules and expectations and proved to be even more important than the form of interaction. Therefore, call centre agents are required to put more emotional effort into their job performance. Behind smiles and pleasantness, workers perceive their working conditions as poor and their employment relationship as temporary and insecure; at the same time, they are expected to be loyal and committed to a company with which most of them have no formal bond (employment contract), as outsourcing prevails and the employer is a different company (a temporary work agency). This is seen as deeply contradictory. Nonetheless, the workers' higher levels of education may protect them (or some of them) from being trapped in their current low-status, precarious job, if their expectations of finding a better opportunity come to be fulfilled. Such expectations are lower in the case of supermarket workers.

There are, of course, these findings and discussion cannot be generalised to include all front-line service workers either in Portugal or in the most advanced service economies. However, by drawing on an in-depth study of the characteristics of the main work and employment conditions, as well as of workers' subjective perceptions about these and their effect on emotional labour, this paper seeks to contribute towards extending the theoretical debate on emotional labour and interactive service work.

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Notes

¹As no official data are available concerning employment in the call centre industry, these data are offered by the *International Faculty for Executives* (IFE) and were published in *Diário Económico* (a Portuguese newspaper on economic and financial affairs), 12 April, 2004.

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