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Accidental Participation in Control, in the Small of Society

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Introduction

This paper draws from a longitudinal ethnographic research project in telephone call centres (Winiecki "Technology-Mediated"; Winiecki *Discipline and Governmentality*) to detail and describe how planned constraints and abstract potentials in the workplace are taken up and translated into other areas of life by actors such that they actually participate in the production of pieces of what might be called "control society." In so doing, this paper attempts to approach an empirical bridge between the high level and abstract reports of "control" across and between social institutions and micro- and meso-sociological accounts of social action, where participation in "control" is as much an accidental doing by subjects "in the small" of society as it may be a characteristic, if abstract, feature of late modernity.

The concept of "control society" arises in the work of several, late 20th century philosophers whose investigations into particular institutions in society show how definable regimes of thought and rationality come into being and become "normal" and then become radicalised, abstracted and rendered as free floating and anonymous codes or regimes of rationality (Deleuze "Postscript" 177f). These widespread regimes are seen to gesture toward a collective orientation to actuarial forms of rationality across and throughout institutions in Western society. These codes of actuarial accounting for and evaluating the actions of individuals gives rise to institutionalised forms that serve to control access and privileges throughout modern societies.

Within the concept of control society, "control" is seen to begin with the activation or interconnection of heterogeneous constraints and potentials that facilitate a kind of "freedom", albeit only within a particular range of actions, choices and possibilities (Deleuze "Postscript"; Rose *Powers* 233-73; Rose *Governing*; Burchell). When faced with such constraints and potentials actors apply existing knowledge and understanding, and what that knowledge and understanding allows them to see, in activating only a limited range of what might actually be possible. For example, when faced with poor job prospects and personally held values for full-time parenting, a couple with children may accept low-wage jobs and shift schedules demanding that one individual work days and the other nights. While this may enable a double-income and one parent always present for the children, it also blocks off avenues that may lead to future prospects for more rewarding and more lucrative work, such as might be realised by attending night school classes or other options. It also presses the individuals who activate this option to begin to structure their – and their children's – lives around temporal and other regimentations of the workplace. They thus allow themselves to be regulated by institutional structures while also limiting other "unseen" possibilities, and are subsequently "accidentally" inserting themselves into an apparatus that "controls" certain aspects of their personal and family lives.

Commonly, research contributing to discussions of control societies has involved somewhat high level, macro and necessarily abstract characterisations of social systems and their components within large anonymising institutions or across such institutions – that is, “in the large” of society (Deleuze “Postscript”; Rose *Powers* 233-73; Ewald). Few studies of “control society” utilise ethnographic data collected in participant-observation type settings to detail specific conditions and actions that characterise processes by which individual actors “use” and translate institutionalised power such that actors establish inter-institutional links at the micro and meso levels of thought and action. These links between portions of an actor’s life document a “folding” of power (creative thought in terms of knowledge of forces somewhat distant from an individual) and thus a translation of power from a more or less distant site or source into a local or personal site, with broad-reaching affect across an actor’s life (Deleuze “Foldings”). Because institutional interests are more or less distant from an individual, when the individual involves those interests in one’s own life he or she is “folding” that distant power into his or her own life and in so doing, allowing it to have some degree of control over one’s self.

Translating power relations from one institution into other aspects of an actor’s life implicates the actor into the amalgamation of institutionalised, thus rationalised, power through his or her life. In doing this, actors participate in the production and translation of rationalised forms of power, and actively participate in the unintentional build-up of many such control systems into what might ultimately be called “control society”. In the brief example mentioned above, by choosing to align themselves with the temporal regulations of particular types of work, a couple has also accidentally participated in the production and maintenance of power – the production of one bit of evidence toward what it is to be a “good worker” and thus, one small element of what can accrue to control society. In the abstracted theory of “control society”, however, its potential is much more than this.

The “Control Society”

Following Foucault’s formulation of “disciplinary society” and governmentality – more generally “bio-politics” (Foucault *Discipline*; Foucault *Sexuality*; Foucault “Governmentality”; Foucault “Beginnings”; Rose *Powers*; Rose *Governing*) – modern Western society has been characterised as “control society” (Rose *Powers* 233-73; Deleuze “Postscript” 177f). Control society is a radicalisation and abstraction of discipline and governmental forms of power into widespread, abstract and anonymous codes or regimes of rationality. Under these codes, individuals are made subject to institutional regimes of hierarchical observation and normalising judgement – actuarial practices that further abstract their action and allow the institution to judge if individuals are “good” (consistent with the regimes) or not. With the intersection of many more or less local impositions of disciplinary and governmental power and high level actuarial assessment of individuals, a sort of meta-regime that combines these many actuarial assessments becomes possible, through which individuals’ ratings in each individual institution are combined to produce a large scale and highly abstracted evaluation of each individual, and individuals are subject to interconnected “control”.

The resulting actuarially-manufactured “truth” about individuals may be selectively deployed in order to calculate risks related to whatever institutional concern – whether ad hoc or historical – might motivate the user of this truth, and subsequent or proactive development of networks of imbricated disciplinary and governmental tactics and programmes to subsequently control an individual’s access to resources in society (Ewald; Power; Townley). Thus an individual subject’s chances and options for the future are in many senses controlled by apparatuses of anonymous surveillance, abstracted inscription and examination that are increasingly orchestrated by no individual, and are rather cobbled together into relations that are made to exist, actuarially, through a calculus that draws selectively from otherwise unrelated databases containing abstracted bits of data about individuals’ actions [1].

These controls do not exist in any single form. Rather, they exist as continuously changing tactics, technologies and programmes reflected in social institutions through surveillance data and refracted by the creation of rules and methods for auditing and assembling data into forms that imputably “tells” something about an individual – the subject arises in the produced relation between data points. These data and manufactured subjectivity may be used to determine one’s ability to be granted access to things like: (a) purchasing credit, or low interest credit due upon purchases as regulated by private industry; (b) health insurance, variable premium payments for health insurance, or particular drugs as regulated by the medical and insurance industries’ continuously changing rules, goals and programs; (c) educational or training opportunities based on one’s prior educational records or vocational history. Thus, one’s subjectivity, as manufactured by particular processes invisible to the individual, and independent of what the individual *knows one’s self to be* at any one point in time, can be used to control that individual’s access to various resources in society (Deleuze “Postscript”), and /or to “manage risk” to society or one organisation in it (Ewald; Power).

Arguably, one’s status in a control society is more appropriately seen as a constantly changing measure of how closely *records* of one’s actions (both historically and contemporaneously) are seen to be consistent with continuously changing institutionalised definitions of “goodness” as operationalised in actuarial codes. The more closely records of one’s behaviour are consistent with such values at any given time; the better is one’s ascribed status within the gaze of a system known as control society (Rose *Powers* 233-73; Deleuze *Postscript* 177-82).

In most cases, an individual’s actions are not necessarily *designed* to be an artefact for later use in assessing and evaluating the subject’s alignment with external expectations, nor for informing the strategic actions of others. Thus, they are “accidentally” produced as inputs into a continuously changing system of control [2].

However, because the concept of control society as described here has been typically expressed only in very abstract terms, while the actions of individuals and organisations have typically been analysed and described in terms of more heavy-handed concepts of control common to Marxian-oriented sociology (Burawoy; Hochschild; Braverman), the theoretical concept of control society remains a *salto mortale* of theory rather than an empirically observable doing. Specifically, it remains common to consider control as the application of “power”, where “power” is a commodity or feature “owned” by, for example, management, that is wielded “over” labour. From this vantage point, control society is seen only as a relatively straightforward extension of control. As described above, control society is much more than this. However, identification of the concept still requires exercise of the sociological imagination (Mills). That said, an analysis and description of how an accidental production of control can begin, can be made in highly empirical terms. Initial components in this process will be described below, first in terms of organisational tactics and strategies and then in terms of individual worker choices. These empirical data will subsequently be used to begin to draw the micro and macro into a closer relation at the close of this paper.

Call Centres and their Actuarial Deconstruction and Reconstruction of Workers

Accidental participation in control society became evident during a multi-year ethnographic research project the author was conducting in four telephone call centres in an intermountain state in the U. S. Call centres are known for their deconstruction of individuals through the pervasive use of electronic and visual surveillance systems, abstracted inscription and tabulation of aspects of workers’ conduct. Recent research has shown that these are actively employed in the reconstruction of workers’ subjectivities through computational processes and charting or graphing of the result into an array that is said to “represent” the workers (Taylor and Bain; Taylor et al.; Winiecki “Shadowboxing”; Winiecki *Discipline and Governmentality*; Winiecki

“Subjects, Subjectivity & Subjectification”; Winiecki and Wigman).

Figure 1 displays one public product of this surveillance, inscription and tabulation in the form of “productivity statistics” for workers in one of the call centres participating in the above-mentioned research [3]. In Figure 1, each row represents an individual worker and each column represents a particular measurement of workplace activity. The actual statistical data is produced automatically by software built into the computer and telecommunications systems used by the workers. The four columns displaying colour are those this organisation pays most attention to. Colour coding is added so that each worker can be told how well he or she is doing against the company’s expectations as communicated in the key at the lower left corner of Figure 1.



Figure 1. Quantified “Representation” of Workers in a Call Centre

The column titled “Avg Talk Time” lists the average minutes and seconds each worker spent on calls during the previous day. As the key in the lower left corner indicates, workers are expected to maintain an average talk time of less than or equal to two minutes. The column titled “OutBd Per-cent” lists a tally of the number of calls each worker made to customers (as opposed to received from customers). As the key indicates, a worker is expected to maintain a proportion of outbound to inbound calls of less than or equal to 15%. The column titled “% Avail” lists the percent of total time a worker was clocked in for the day, during which he or she was ready to receive a call from a customer. Each worker is expected to be available for greater than or equal to 95% of the time they are clocked in. The column titled “NCPH” (normalised calls per hour) is a computed value which makes it possible for the company to compare the number of customer calls worked by each worker, against that of each other worker. The key indicates that each worker is expected to maintain an NCPH of 25 or greater. Each of the four call centres participating in this study had similar ways of accounting for and rating the work of call centre agents.

A worker’s accomplishment of “stats” (statistics) that meet or exceed the company’s expectations is a large part of his or her employee rating. Consistent high performance may make a worker eligible for rewards and consistent underperformance may lead to sanctions or being sacked. The organisation thus produces and aims a network of disciplinary force at workers leading many to comply with performance rules. If one ends the analysis at this point, it is easy to appeal to heavy-handed theories of power and control as noted above. However, by extending one’s gaze, it is possible to glimpse the more abstract notion of “control” as it has been enunciated by Deleuze and Rose, among others (Deleuze “Postscript”; Rose Powers 233-73).

In addition to the actuarial production of records of workers’ compliance with performance regulations, in call centres, as in many workplaces, workers are scheduled into shifts, compliance

with which is documented by a common punch-clock or software on their computer workstations. In addition to the production of statistical records of compliance with performance regulations, workers' compliance with shift schedules is a remarkably large part of their employee ratings.

While these two aspects of the workplace are only a fraction of the many different kinds of surveillance, inscription and examinations accomplished in the call centre, they are particularly visible to workers because the controls that document them are always posted publicly, and workers are always reminded of their responsibility to maintain statistically "good" performance. In addition, the visible knowledge of each worker's value as displayed in the chart is intricately lashed together with other forms of actuarially manufactured knowledge. Together, these are woven into managerial "psy" practices in order to both discipline and govern the workers (Taylor and Bain; Winiecki "Shadowboxing"; Winiecki "Subjects, Subjectivity & Subjectification"; Winiecki and Wigman; Winiecki *Discipline and Governmentality*; Winiecki "Technology-Mediated"). In addition, as will be detailed below, they are also used by workers themselves in ways that make them a fundamental component in an arguably accidental production of what may be recognisable as an early component of control society.

"Doing Control" in the Small

As indicated above, control society is accomplished, in part, in the interconnection of abstracted data taken from various facets of social life. Consequently, one can look for the beginnings of control society in the small, local actions of everyday life, especially at the points where the data-mediated reconstruction of subjectivity in these call centres is found to be translated into other parts of the workers' lives.

In the course of ethnographic research in call centres, the first instance in which this became visible was when I was scheduling an interview with Lonnie, a senior worker in a call centre for *DeliveryWorldwide*, a freight delivery company. To arrange for a time during which he could meet for an interview, I interrupted him as he prepared to clock out for the day. "Lonnie?" I asked, "I want to schedule a series of interviews with you. Gotta minute?"

"Sure" he said, watching the figures on the time-clock as I fumbled to open my calendar. As I got my calendar open, I turned to allow him to see its pages, so he could get a view of the month and I indicated, "We can do it just about anytime after next week. What day and time do you think you could take about an hour to talk?"

"Maybe Monday would be a good day," he said as he pointed to the day in my calendar. "Let's do it right after my shift ends. My wife doesn't start work until later in the afternoon and she can keep her eye on the kids when they get home from school until I get home."

Okay, I nodded, and scribbled the note in my calendar. "I'll check with you when I get here that day, just to make sure it's still okay."

I'm sure it will be. My wife and I do this all the time. I run all the errands after work. We arranged our work schedules so there would always be somebody home when the kids are. I see the kids off in the morning when she's sleeping, and she gets up in time to greet the kids when they get home from school. She doesn't start her job at *her* call centre until about seven [PM] so we'll have plenty of time.

On the surface, Lonnie's situation is not altogether unusual. American families are commonly funded by two jobs, one held by each parent. In some cases, one individual considers the job to be a career, and the other wage earner more or less adds a second income. In other cases, such as with Lonnie and his wife, jobs are not so much selected for their career potential as they are for

other factors.

In subsequent interviews, Lonnie told me that he had always wanted to be a nurse – a job his mother held, and one that he thought was admirable and reflected his vision of what it was to be a socially-responsible individual. He also told me that even for a while after starting work at *DeliveryWorldwide*, he entertained visions of taking advantage of the tuition reimbursement policy of the company to attend the local university's night classes and earn a nursing degree and license. However, he admitted:

That kind of went away after a couple of years. We started a family and my daughter has a chronic medical condition that we've really gotta keep an eye on – and one of us has to be there pretty much whenever she's around. So I got this job and I always make sure I have an early shift. My wife found a job in another call centre where she can work overnight. We balance our schedules so one of us is always home.

Lonnie states that he and his wife have been able to take advantage of the temporal requirements of their jobs in order to fashion a schedule that, while having blocked off access to his original plans for career and self-actualisation, allows him and his wife to satisfactorily deal with their present obligations and values as parents – some of which, at least, were entirely unpredictable when Lonnie started work at *DeliveryWorldwide*. Lonnie's and his wife's goals and intentional tactics for taking advantage of features of the workplace, and which draw upon stable factors from the highly regulated ecology of the workplace, have been channelled into his and his wife's home lives. In so doing, there is a confluence between work and home that exceeds career interest, or a purely financial or consumption-oriented gain.

On the one hand, this demonstrates how an autonomous actor is able to make more or less free use of "resources" existing at work to enhance or reinforce more than just consumption practices, and to develop one's life to be consistent with personally held desires and values. On the other hand, the result is also a self-manufactured confluence of workplace rationality and a similar rationality at home in which he and his wife have come to link themselves to some of the regulative characteristics of the call centre. Even in satisfying conditions of one aspect of their out-of-work lives and demonstrating autonomy from theoretical universals, they have freely bound themselves to the workplace and its structure – they exhibit an instance of self-binding into an apparatus that begins the construction of a control society as described above (Mules; Rose *Powers* 233-73; Deleuze *Postscript* 177-82).

This is not to say that the workplace now controls Lonnie's and his wife's home lives – though their decisions are surely linked to it. Instead, this demonstrates the agonistic nature of power – a wrestling match in which an actor's moves are not *caused by* power in the workplace, but rather in which an actor's moves are imbricated with that power (Willmott; Cooper). Through this wrestling match, power can be divided, redirected or blended with other forces to translate its meaning into one's own life (Rose *Governing*).

As fieldwork continued, it became evident that this self-manufactured confluence between work and home is not unusual. Ro and other nurses working at the *MedAdvise* call centre – a telephone triage nursing service provided by a local hospital – who are younger and have young children at home, tell similar stories:

The part-time and mostly evening shifts we work here are actually good. I mean I don't always like leaving my kids at home with Dad, especially when they're sick, but this [job] lets me be at home when they're home and my husband is home when I'm at work. It's not a bad arrangement really. When I was a nurse for a local doctor both my husband and I had to be at work at the same time and day care costs and trying to rush home right after work were just terrible!

At *DeliveryWorldwide*, Sheila told of another part of the workplace's organisation and structure that she considers an advantage. Her orientation to maintaining consistently good statistics in productivity and quality have earned her several "Employee of the Month" awards from the call centre. This award comes with a plaque and a gift certificate redeemable at one of several local department stores – one of which she considered to be very high-end:

I can take my kids shopping at that store – a store we couldn't afford to shop in otherwise – and tell them that they're able to do this because I was a good worker, that when you're a good worker, you sometimes get special things that other workers don't.

So Sheila uses her award as part of an object lesson to her children to pay attention to what is expected of them in the modern workplace, then work to fulfil that expectation and sometimes to reap rewards for it. This life lesson for her children displays her orientation to the objectivising and subjectivising statistics of the workplace, but perhaps most poignantly, to the translation of power from the stats and means for producing them, into her – and her children's – personal lives.

By translating the adopted power immanent in the expectation to regularly produce "good stats" to her children – thus continuously to be the "good subject" at work – Sheila is teaching them to be good subjects in the future. While there is certainly no guarantee her children will carry on this externally imposed but self-adopted discipline to "the stats", the potential is plain. Similarly, when Lonnie admits abandoning his previous aspirations, and his and his wife's choice to "use" the strict shiftwork schedule of call centres to take opposing shifts so they could balance the child care load, he demonstrates his translation of institutional power and rationality consistent with the "good subject" into the personal lives of each member of his family. This was amplified about a year after the events noted above, when Lonnie quit work at *DeliveryWorldwide* and took a job at another call centre – this one closer to his home – where he also opted for the early shift so he and his wife could maintain their time dedication to family while also producing continuous records of compliance with the workplace regulations. Ro's statements indicate similarly.

Glimpsing Accidental Participation in Control

Each of these instances demonstrates how actions done by free agents in a modern society serve local institutional ends, personal ends with local impact, and also act to translate the regulations and production of data integral to control society into otherwise unaffected aspects of an individual's life. The power that produces a "dividual" (Deleuze "Postscript") rendered in "control" at work is now extended outward in the creation of another but rationally related dividual whose choices and behaviour are now open to surveillance, inscription, examination at other points and times.

In the cases described here, Lonnie, Ro and Sheila (and many others in the call centres involved in my original study who are not mentioned here) are organising their own and others' lives so as to be consistent across other institutional schedules – extending power from one institutional site to others – and make empirical one facet of the control society. This is all accomplished by the subject, firstly, actively folding power of the organisation over upon one's self such that one both reifies and is consistent with an extended control-oriented episteme and apparatus in society, and secondly, reducing risk to one's own ability to participate in each of the related systems (Deleuze "Foldings"; Power; Ewald; Beck). Others, whose individual choices are seen to be inconsistent with some logic for rationalising the linkage between bits of data taken from different parts of their lives, will be seen as deviant when actuarial data from many aspects of their lives are brought together to create an objectified subject. With the resulting rating of employee performance and any other data brought together into the actuarial gaze, a value of that

individual can then be assigned in a way that is totally *outside of their intentional production*.

While it remains the case that more conventional and Marxian-oriented theories of control *are* visible in the data presented above, when extended outward into other facets of modern life with the aid of the sociological imagination, one glimpses how the contextually dependent and context shaping actions of individuals may be seen to be *accidentally* related to the subjectivity made factual by actuarial practices in the more theoretical version of control society.

It is not that the actions of Lonnie, Sheila, Ro and others across institutions of modern society *are* constitutive of control society. Rather it is that these actions are performed with local intent that may be eventually apprehended in a larger actuarial apparatus that determines their access to other offerings or features of society. Thus, the actions of Lonnie, Sheila, Ro and others are, from their standpoint, *accidentally* implicated into the actuarial and reflexively modernist logic of control society.

The extra-institutional spaces in which Lonnie and his wife, Sheila and Ro are acting in the cases above are conventionally thought of as “spaces left free” where one might be considered to be somewhat beyond the reach of those institutions (Foucault, *Sexuality* 98-102). However, as illustrated above, even when provided with “free choice,” they are also continuously constrained by their position in modern society and choose to create links that continuously reattach their selves to the disciplinary and governmental values immanent in the institutions in which they work, and in so doing articulate the power of a disciplinary and governmental social apparatus into a form that, within a control society, keeps them open to surveillance in ways that serve the production of a subject consistent with or deviant from whatever values are encoded into the logic instantiating control society.

Conclusions

Thinking about and analysing control society calls for an orientation to abstracted links in and across large-scale and widespread systems of surveillance, inscription, examination and subjectification. As such, the production of control society is largely above and beyond the intentional programmes and tactics of any one individual or organisation. It becomes visible, however, with a combination of empirical data and the sociological imagination.

However, this is not to say that the production of control society is wholly “outside” individuals. This paper describes how individuals take power produced in institutionalised discipline and governmentality by surveillance, inscription, examination and subjectification processes and fold or translate at least some of the immanent “control” potential of biopower into other areas of their lives. In so doing, these individuals are involved in doings that, if extrapolated “up” into more abstracted interactions in and between institutions, individuals and society, produce what can be visible as a “good subject” or “bad subject” in a control society. Thus, actors’ actions in the inter-institutional spaces *accidentally* produce necessary, but fragmentary, bits of data which are open to use in the production of what we know as control society (Deleuze “Postscript”; Rose *Powers* 233-73; Ewald; Burchell, Gordon and Miller; Beck).

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Endnotes

[1] The officially cancelled "Total Information Awareness" (TIA) programme of the U. S. National Security Agency (NSA) is a model of this possibility. The TIA programme was envisioned as an unlimited interconnection of all local, state and federal databases related to law enforcement, personal credit, health records, etc. in which it was indicated the NSA could induce relationships it suggested would constitute probable cause for suspicion of illegal activity.

[2] However, see Winiecki ("Shadowboxing") for a discussion over the intentional production of this kind of data.

[3] While each workplace produced somewhat different statistical displays, all of them employed similar tactics for producing them. In fact, such displays are considered requisite in several principal texts on running telephone call centres (Durr; Cleveland and Mayben).

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