A method in search of a problem

The power of conversation analysis

Elizabeth Stokoe
“Isn’t conversation analysis just a method in search of a problem?”

(Reviewer 2)
1. A psychology problem
2. A ‘details’ problem
3. A communication myths problem
4. A ‘hard data’ problem
5. A conversational ‘products’ problem
1. A psychology problem
1. A psychology problem

“Laypersons often think of psychologists as professional people watchers. It is ironic, then, that naturalistic observation, as a methodology, has a remarkably thin history in our field...

...the psychological scientist’s tool kit needs a method to directly observe daily life where moment-to-moment behavior naturally happens” (Mehl, 2017)
1. A psychology problem
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“...a method to directly observe daily life where moment-to-moment behavior naturally happens” (Mehl, 2017)

“Social science theorizing must be answerable to the details of actual, natural occurrences” (Schegloff, 1987)
2. A ‘details’ problem
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**Humph**: Ah... Can you hear me Sopel?

**Sopel**: Humphrys, I can hear you.

**Humphrys**: Good, slight change of subject – first question will be how much of your salary you are prepared to hand over to Carrie Gracie to keep her, and then a few comments about your other colleagues, you know, like our Middle East editor and the other men who are earning too much...

"I mean, obviously if we are talking about the scope for the greatest redistribution I’ll have to come back and say, ‘well yes Mr Humphrys, but...’"

"And I could save you the trouble, because I could volunteer that I’ve handed over already more than you fucking earn, but I’m still left with more than anybody else and that seems to me to be entirely just – something like that would do it."

**Sopel**: "Don’t."
2. A ‘details’ problem

Humphrys: "Good, slight change of subject – first question will be how much of your salary you are prepared to hand over to Carrie Gracie to keep her, and then a few comments about your other colleagues, you know, like our Middle East editor and the other men who are earning too much..."
2. A ‘details’ problem
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We’re a mediation project in the Stockham area.

Caller: Yeh.

Mediator: [.hhh and what we try t’help neighbours that are in dispute, [.hhh what= [Uhuh.

Caller: [Yeh,

Mediator: =we do first um pt send a letter out to your neighbour straight away, hh t’say that: [Yeh,

Caller: [Yeh,

Mediator: =(0.4) .hhh get in touch with us so that we can discuss it with them? [.Hh [Yeh,
2. A ‘details’ problem

Overcoming Barriers to Mediation in Intake Calls to Services: Research-Based Strategies for Mediators

Elizabeth Stokoe

In this article, I investigate intake calls to community mediation services to assess disputing neighbors’ difficulties in helping them identify mediations. I explore the experience of potential clients and mediators. To maintain an organization’s funding, mediation must serve a sufficient number of these callers into clients of the service. Intake calls, however, are not treated as part of the mediation process. Participants are not informed to handle them. I conducted a qualitative and quantitative study of intake calls to mediation services based in the United Kingdom and analysed them using a grounded analytic. I identified several factors that lead to refusal of these intake calls that seemed to prevent disputants from ultimately engaging in the mediation process. I then describe these factors as barriers to mediation. These barriers include callers’ lack of knowledge about mediation as a service and mediators’ often inaccurate methods of explaining the process to potential callers. The paper includes mediation services whose mediators explained that mediation is an important service. Some of the mediators, however, misguided intake calls differently, describing it more effectively, expressing empathy or affiliation with callers, and thus were able to overcome many of the callers’ most common concerns about the process. In this

“My team adapted the promotional video and related leaflets/posters as a direct consequence of Stokoe’s input to a campaign that had the best return on investment.”
2. A ‘details’ problem

“If you can’t deal with the actual detail of actual events then you can’t have a science of social life” (Sacks, 1992)
3. A communication myths problem
3. A communication myths problem

“I am obviously uncomfortable about misquotes of my work. From the very beginning, I have tried to give people the correct limitations of my findings. Unfortunately, the field of self-styled ‘corporate image consultants’ or ‘leadership consultants’ has numerous practitioners with very little psychological expertise” (Mehrabian, 2002)
4. A ‘hard data’ problem
4. A ‘hard data’ problem

“Is there any data in there or is it just a list of anecdotes?”

“I appreciate this was poorly worded ... My point was more whether we should give that much weight to qualitative studies on long-covid in children before we have collected any hard data”
4. A ‘hard data’ problem

“About how fast were the cars going when they... bumped contacted collided crashed smashed ...

...into each other?”

One week later...

“...and was there any glass at the scene...?”

bumped contacted collided crashed smashed

Loftus & Palmer (1974)
4. A ‘hard data’ problem

“And was there any glass at the scene...?”

“And was there some glass at the scene...?”

“some” or “any”?
4. A ‘hard data’ problem

“talk” or “speak”?  

“some” or “any”?  

“interested” or “willing”?
4. A ‘hard data’ problem

“Very few studies have focused on the concrete, empirical details of what his participants actually said and did” (Hollander, 2015)

“Participants could draw the experimenter into a process of negotiation over the continuation of the experimental session” resulting in “radical departures from the standardized experimental procedure” (Gibson, 2011)
4. A ‘hard data’ problem

“I appreciate this was poorly worded ... My point was more whether we should give that much weight to qualitative studies on long-covid in children before we have collected any hard data.”

“How much weight should we give to quantitative studies that relate to complex real-world processes until we understand something of the ways in which the data were collected?” (Stokoe et al, 2021)
5. A conversational ‘products’ problem
Conversation analytic research yields “empirically grounded results at variance with our common-sense intuitions about how some action is accomplished” (Schegloff, 1996)
5. A conversational ‘products’ problem

((phone rings))

Marsha: Hello?

Donny: H’lo Marsha,

Mar: Ye:a[h. ]

Donny: [It’s D]onny.

Marsha: Hi Do:nnny.

Donny: Guess what. hh


Donny: .hh my ca:r is sta::led.

(0.2)

Donny: An’ I’m up here in the Gle::n,

(0.2)

Marsha: O::h.

(0.2)

Donny: A:nd. hh

(0.4)

Donny: I don’ know if it’s po:ssible but, .hhh see ↑I have t’open up the ba::nk. hh

(0.5)

Donny: A:t uh: (0.2) in Brentwood? hh=

Marsha: =Ye::ah:- an’ I_know you want- (0.2) an’ I wou:- (0.3) an’ I wo::uld, but-

except I’ve gotta le::ave in about five min(h)utes.[(hheh)

(0.5)

Donny: >Okay then< I gotta call somebody else right away. Oka:y?=

Marsha: =Okay *Don[.*

Donny: >Thanks a lot.=bye<

Marsha: Bye.
01 Caller: Hi.=I (got) a new d- uh: puppy the other day . hh s’wonderin’
        how much it’d cost t’get the jabs done. please.

02 Caller: Hello?=>I wonder if it’s possible to make an appointment<
        <for my cat> tomorrow=for a >follow up< uhm he’s had an operation?
5. The conversational ‘products’ problem

01 Patient: I was wondering if I could make an appointment please.
02 (0.3)
03 Reception: Is it something urgent or routine.

01 Alexa: Which of the following country flags does not include a cross?
5. A conversational ‘products’ problem

In Case of Emergency, Order Pizza
An Urgent Case of Action Formation and Recognition

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Article

Asking for help without asking for help: How victims request and police offer assistance in cases of domestic violence when perpetrators are potentially co-present

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Dispatch: >Nine one one. (.)
Caller: Nine (an') one.
Dispatch: >Where's the emergency.
Caller: One twenty seven.
Dispatch: >Okay: what's goin' on there.
Caller: I'd like t' order: a pizza for delivery.
Dispatch: >Mam you've reached nine one one, this is an emergency line.
Caller: Yeh. Righ'. Righ'.
Dispatch: >Um:: you know you've called nine one one, this is an emergency line.
Caller: Yeh.hhh
Dispatch: >Okay: is everything okay: over there.
Caller: Yes.hhh
Dispatch: >Are there any weapons in your house.
Caller: No.
Dispatch: >C'n you stay on the phone with me.
Caller: =#N:o. (0.2) Uh: see you soon. =thank you.hh
(ends call)
A method in search of a problem

“Psychology pays remarkably little attention to the important things that people do” (Baumeister et al, 2007)

When it comes to conversation, people often do what works, but they do not know – on reflection, post-hoc – what they actually did that worked.

Conversation analysts can identify, describe, and share how communication – expertise, experience, (in)effective practices – actually work.
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