

## **Framing participant and analyst roles in research**

### *Introduction*

This brief comment or observation turns on questions and issues surrounding the production of research material, the data derived from that material and the subsequent interpretation of the data – particularly in the social sciences. Here, I want to lay out a framework for considering some of the interdependencies involved which have arisen from certain puzzles I've encountered when analysing data from a longitudinal case-study I carried out with one of my children (see e.g., Forrester, 2008). Over time this has germinated into an outline sketch or framework for highlighting important implications for research practices when carrying out studies of everyday social interaction. In this instance, I'm particularly interested in research contexts that involve 'insider participation', i.e., where the researcher/analyst is also a participant in the context being studied. This raises some interesting questions regarding data collection, identification of material, transcription, and subsequent interpretation and analysis. I should say at the outset that the qualitative method of choice in my research is best described as ethnomethodologically-informed CA (CA&E).

Initially, when thinking through some of the methodological benefits and challenges of 'insider' participation in a longitudinal case study, the term or rather recommendation often found in psychology is to have an awareness of, or some point of reference towards, ecological validity. I first came across the term 'ecological validity' some years ago when learning about experimental approaches in the study of face-recognition. These seemed to involve the demonstration that if care was taken to conduct work in more life-like settings then the results obtained are very different from what you find in a carefully controlled environment (Logie, Baddeley & Woodhead, 1987). Although the notion of ecological validity began with the work of Ulrich Neisser (1976) in the area of visual perception and comparisons between lab-based experiments with real-world problem-based experiments, it has come to be associated with notions of correspondence or approximation to the 'real' particularly with regards to research method practices:

“For a research study to possess ecological validity, the methods, materials and setting of the study must approximate the real-life situation that is under investigation. (Brewer, 2000).”

Thinking through the implications of this methodological injunction, it struck me that on the face of it, one particularly 'real-life' situation one can be engaged in which would be more than a simple approximation – is your own. Reflecting on the methodological challenges and puzzles which arise from using conversation analysis as the primary analytic procedure the question of what exactly constitutes participant orientation came to the fore.

It is well documented that CA&E has a commitment to the recommendation that interpretations, suggestions or claims made about the data being analysed (for the most part transcripts of the conversations), should rest upon identifiable evidence from within the conversations themselves. Analysis should be *participant-oriented*. Researchers should guard against imposing an ‘extra/external’ analytic frame or category system on the material being studied (e.g., a coding scheme). Instead, CA&E emphasises that when you look at what people are doing in talk, what they do displays their own recognition that everybody, themselves included, is following certain conventions, regularities and habitual ways of producing conversation. These are *members’ methods*, methodic social practices which constitute the sense-making activities endemic to social interaction. When talking, people themselves understand that they can call upon the mutual recognition each person has, that such practices constitute the sense-making activities that we co-construct *in situ*. This is not something that people consciously think about – and often it is only when somebody doesn’t follow a conversational convention that you very quickly see that those around them seek to rectify, change or repair the ‘breaking of the rule’ that has just occurred.

Producing CA&E-informed interpretations of talk-in-interaction where the researcher is also a co-participant raises interesting issues regarding what the term orientation might mean here. There is also the further complication when studying adult-child interaction in that one of the primary participants is somebody who is herself learning how to produce appropriate members’ methods, in part, through watching, listening and participating. Where the analyst is him/herself a participant, as parent-researcher, we might ask how we are to understand the idea of ecological validity, and the approximation to the ‘real-life’? We need a framework that highlights what might be involved in such contexts.

The boundaries between what is to be considered ‘objective’ and ‘subjective’ with reference to the research and the findings described, appear somewhat ambiguous when there is a certain interdependence between the production of the research object and the interpretations one can derive from such objects. It would seem sensible to have a framework that might help inform our understanding of the production of social scientific accounts of the ‘everyday’, the ‘real-life’ and the ‘mundane’, that is, everything that we associate with the phrase *naturalistic social interaction*. In other words, when considering the analysis of naturally occurring events, where the researcher may or may not be a participant, there is a certain value in employing a framework which brings out the nuances of the research process involved. This should help guide our interpretations, or at least our evaluation of them.

*Intrinsic vs. Extrinsic research processes.*

Considering then the potential complexities involved when thinking through the analyst-participant relationships, there are at least four dimensions key to such a framework; **Noticing, Naming, Investigating** and **Concluding**. [see Figure 1]

1. First, NOTICING: We can ask, who recognises that there is a *puzzle*, problem or ‘trouble’? Is it the analyst or participant?

Initiating research or a research project first involves the recognition of ‘something’ that is curious, not clear, maybe puzzling, but most of all noticeable. Without such noticing there is no originating research issue.

2. Secondly, NAMING: Who formulates, specifies or articulates the *puzzle*, problem or ‘trouble’? From which orientation does naming originate (analyst or participant)?

This naming dimension may be the starting point (the research problem) or the endpoint (the research finding) of the research process, or some segment of it. If the former, then it will typically involve translating or recasting the puzzle, problem or ‘trouble’ into the form of a research(able) problem. Once something is named, such naming brings into place a theory, model, or set of presuppositions regarding the entity in question.

3. Third, INVESTIGATING: Who legitimates the criteria for legitimating the transformation of *information* into *data* and thence into *evidence*? Analyst or participant?

To investigate does not simply mean to employ a procedure, a method, technique, or set of practices, which is likely to be the case in many circumstances. A transformation takes place which itself encompasses and reflects prevailing criteria regarding appropriateness, defensibility, correctness. An element of this dimension focuses on the question of who adjudicates meaning in each case.

4. Finally, CONCLUDING: Here we can ask, who legitimates the criteria for legitimating the *substantive significance* of the consequence of relating the *evidence* to the *puzzle*, problem or ‘trouble’?

Related to this, for example, will be the question of: who adjudicates the meaningfulness of the evidence in relation to the puzzle? Within psychology and other areas of the social sciences, the process of peer-review evaluation in line with prevailing practices will often be carried out by journal editors and reviewing referees.

Examining this grid, we can position possible roles that analysts or participants might occupy, that is, with respect to extrinsic and intrinsic research processes (Figure 1). Beginning on the left here we might consider an analyst working within the CA&E tradition examining a recording as a non-participating researcher. She/he might notice a particular phenomenon e.g., a pattern in the way people seem to respond to a surprising event. They would then give this consistent response a name, e.g., ‘Oh’ prefacing in conversation analysis (Heritage, 1998), and might begin or initiate further investigation using contemporary procedures, such as collecting a large number of examples. Such investigating will be carried out with reference to what constitutes the appropriate criteria for this transformation of data examples into evidence of the phenomenon in question. Over time, and in light of subsequent journal submission, peer-review processes, associated work, further research, citation and correspondence regarding the phenomenon, certain analytic (analyst’s) conclusions become established. These various stages of the research processes can be located towards the ‘extrinsic’ side of the grid.

In contrast and moving two columns to the right (figure 1) and somebody in the role of ‘participant as analyst’, consider for example a psychotherapist working within the psychoanalytic tradition, where the ‘noticing’ might involve experiencing a peculiar sense or intuition when working with a client during analysis. This ‘noticing’ which could take the form of a counter-transferential recognition of discomfort on the analyst’s part, is often described by researchers in this field as having particular significance for identifying problems and initiating change (Hinshelwood, 1999). The move towards naming might rest upon the psychotherapist’s expertise and recognition of similar occurrences with other clients (e.g., ‘defensive reaction’). This in turn might initiate a form of further investigation by the psychotherapist through bringing into focus procedures appropriate for this research context, i.e., this might involve, in subsequent sessions with the client, offering interpretations and again monitoring the ongoing interaction for evidence supporting or refuting the original puzzle or problem. The final concluding phase of such research might involve consideration of the material (in the form of case-notes) with the psychotherapist’s supervisor, and/or possible further elaboration and discussion with colleagues through case-study publications in the appropriate manner. We would then locate the ‘participant-as-analyst’ in the second-right column where the research processes can best be described as more-or-less intrinsic.

At considerable risk of oversimplification, a case could certainly be made for locating Marcel Proust’s explorations of sleep in *Remembrance of Things Past* as a classic description of the author as a researcher participant describing the intrinsic processes involved with noticing, naming, investigating and offering conclusions for internal psychological phenomena (1921-22, pp. 376-377).

*Concluding comment:*

For now, and leaving aside the observation that this framework applies equally to qualitative and quantitative approaches, the scheme serves as a realisable clarification of the interdependence between data selection, transcription and subsequent interpretation. My current research work is focused on articulating the constraints and possible limitations of an all-encompassing CA&E perspective. More prosaically, the aim is to highlight the fact that in this area of social science there can never be a one-and-only-true account or perspective. By drawing out contrasting accounts from the same originating data corpus we might gain a clear idea of what it means to take up a position that celebrates methodological polysemy.

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Figure 1

	Analyst	Analyst-as-participant	Participant-as-analyst	Participant
NOTICING				
NAMING				
INVESTIGATING				
CONCLUDING				
	EXTRINSIC	MORE-OR-LESS EXTRINSIC	MORE-OR-LESS INTRINSIC	INTRINSIC