

**Citizens getting help:  
Interactions at the constituency office**

by

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## Abstract

This thesis examines a previously unstudied site of interaction: the constituency office. At the constituency office, Members of Parliament (MPs) hold ‘MP surgeries’, during which they help constituents to solve their personal difficulties. This thesis provides the first analysis of interactions at the constituency office. It is the only place where ordinary citizens can meet their MP; as such, it also provides the first analysis of face-to-face, unmediated interactions between politicians and their constituents. For this study, 12.5 hours of interactional data were recorded at the office of an MP in the United Kingdom, comprising over 80 encounters between office staff, the MP, and their constituents. The MP was of the majority (‘government’) party at the time of recording. The data were analyzed using conversation analysis (CA), in order to investigate how the social activities of the constituency office were accomplished through interaction.

The first analytic chapter reveals the overall structure of constituency office encounters, as well as examining what constituents say when they call or visit the office, and how they express that they are in need of assistance. This chapter finds that constituents avoid making direct requests of their MP, and instead use narrative descriptions. These descriptions manage interactional challenges including the ‘unknown’ nature of the institution (Stokoe, 2013b), contingency and entitlement (Drew & Curl, 2008), reasonableness and legitimacy (Edwards & Stokoe, 2007; Heritage & Robinson, 2006), and recruitment (Kendrick & Drew, 2016). The second analytic chapter examines the action of offering, and finds it to be the central mechanism for transacting service. The staff use different offer designs to index different nuances in the offering action, such as asking permission or confirming an activity. Both the first and second analytic chapters show that systematic deployment of offers help control the direction of the encounters and tacitly instruct constituents as to what services are available. Furthermore, both of these chapters show the flexibility participants employed in turn design and action ascription, which extends previous descriptions of how requests and offers are constructed (Couper-Kuhlen, 2014; Curl, 2006) and supports recent calls for a more nuanced approach to action *description* from conversation analysts (Kendrick & Drew, 2014; Sidnell & Enfield, 2014).

The third analytic chapter investigates the ostensibly ‘political’ context of the constituency office, and how the MP and constituents raise political topics in conversation. The chapter finds that the term ‘political’ is challenging to define in live interactions, and

relies on the concept of ‘politicizing’ (Hay, 2007) statements that upgrade (or downgrade) a topic into greater (or lesser) public and governmental concern. Both the MP and constituents were found to initiate political topics, but in different ways. The MP initiated political topics in explicit references to government, in order to provide evidence that the government was aligned with constituents’ interests. The constituents initiated political topics in vague and indirect references to recent policy changes, and avoided implicating the MP in any criticisms. The findings suggest that constituents privilege interactional norms (such as not criticizing a co-present interlocutor) over any potential interest in making political critiques. The chapter also discusses what impact these findings may have on concepts such as ‘power’ and ‘evasion’. The final analytic chapter assesses the concept of ‘rapport’, finding that it is difficult for both participants and analysts to determine long-term outcomes from local, interactional occurrences in interaction. ‘Rapport’ is important for MPs who may be attempting to build a ‘personal vote’ relationship with constituents, but this chapter also finds that constituents have a stake in building ‘rapport’ in order to receive the best (or any) service. The chapter finds that while traditional practices for building ‘rapport’, such as doing small talk or finding common ground, are problematic to employ and assess from an interactional perspective, other local outcomes such as progressivity (Fogarty, Augoustinos & Kettler, 2013) and affiliation (Clark, Drew & Pinch, 2003) may be more useful indicators of positive interactions. This chapter concludes that we need a more nuanced, and interactionally-based, framework to train practitioners (and clients) in effective communication practices.

This thesis challenges the conversation analytic literature by finding that the constituency office setting revolves around a more flexible ascription of requests than many studies have previously accepted, and that we can analyze actions as if on a spectrum, rather than in bounded categories. The thesis also contributes to the political discourse literature by finding that constituents’ activities at the constituency office are strongly influenced by interactional norms, rather than political attitudes. Finally, this thesis provides a basis from which to study the constituency office, as a site of service interaction.

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*To my teachers:*

*Mom, Dad, Agincourt, Churchill, Woburn, UofT, Loughborough*

## Introduction

“>I don’t know if it’s the best route to take.< People keep saying try:, you know, (.)  
Michael Johnson because obviously he’ll help you.”

- Constituent of Michael Johnson (MP)

Increasingly, the general consensus is that citizens are disconnected from politics and government. Yet, all across the United Kingdom and many other democracies, citizens meet regularly with their Members of Parliament, and have face-to-face interactions together. These interactions have never been studied before. This thesis is the first to examine the actual interactions that occur at ‘MP surgeries’ in the United Kingdom, where citizens and MPs have conversations and solve constituents’ problems.

In many democracies around the world, Members of Parliament (MPs) hold ‘surgeries’ on a regular basis, scheduling meetings with individual (or small groups of) constituents at their local constituency office. Constituents – the local subset of a nation’s citizens – can meet their elected representative face-to-face and receive personal assistance. This thesis presents the first analysis of the interactions that occur during the course of constituency casework between constituents, the MP, and constituency office staff. It examines these interactions at a constituency office in the United Kingdom (the MP was of the majority governing party at the time), a country where constituency casework has been ongoing (with variable intensity) since medieval times.

That this is the first study of its kind is and should be surprising. The constituency office is the only place where ordinary citizens and their MP can meet and have conversations. Despite this, few studies have investigated the constituency office as anything other than a means to better electoral results and none, to my knowledge, have examined how MPs (and their staff) and citizens talk to each other, or what they talk about. It is even more surprising given the widespread interest of news media and government itself in citizen engagement and interaction with politics. During the writing of this thesis, the United Kingdom (UK) held a national election (2015), a national referendum (2016), a Scottish referendum (2014), and several local elections (2012, 2014, 2016); news media regularly lamented citizen disengagement from politics (Booth; 2015; Coman, 2014; Chorley, 2013; Jowit, 2012), as well as how disconnected politicians are from everyday citizens (Groves, 2012; Mason, 2013; Nelson, 2012). Citizens are perceived as having limited communication

with their elected representatives (Coleman, 2005; Chorley, 2013; Hay 2007; Kurtz, 1997; Rutter, 2014), and yet many citizens are meeting said representatives regularly at MP surgeries; MPs report meeting between 200 and 500 constituents per month at the constituency office (Young Legal Aid Lawyers, 2012). Furthermore, citizens are contacting constituency offices at an increasing rate (Korris, 2011; Norton & Wood, 1993) and MPs report spending the single largest amount of their work week on contacting and assisting individual constituents (28%, Korris, 2011; compare to 21% in the House of Commons) – yet neither government nor researchers have investigated what actually happens during this contact. In short, there should be great interest in the institution of the constituency office and the interactions that occur there.

In this thesis, I will examine a corpus of recorded interactions at a constituency office in the UK, both telephone calls to the office, and MP surgery face-to-face meetings – a total of 12.5 hours of interactional data covering 80 encounters. I will analyze this data using conversation analysis (Sacks, 1992; Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson, 1974; Sidnell, 2010), the primary means of analyzing spontaneous and naturalistic talk-in-interaction. Conversation analysis (CA) focuses on how participants use talk in live, actual interactions (rather than, typically, interviews or constructed or experimentally produced encounters). CA will provide detailed insight how participants organize their talk and use it to accomplish social actions. *It is crucial to examine how these interactions actually proceed in order to understand what the social organization of the constituency office is.*

## **Chapter summaries**

First, in Chapter 1, I review what research exists investigating how politicians communicate with constituents. The majority of research into political communication has focused on mass media, political interviews, campaigning, and Parliamentary procedure. Some studies have examined the constituency office, but mostly as a means to increasing the success of an incumbent candidate at elections. I will discuss in detail the handful of studies that have systematically examined the casework that constituency offices achieve, but show that none of these studies have yet examined the interactions and actual conversations that occur at the office. I will also situate my research in interactional and institutional studies that have examined politicians interacting on news media (e.g., Ekström, Djerf-Pierre, Johansson & Håkansson, 2015), doctors and patients (e.g., Heritage & Maynard, 2006), and street-level bureaucracy services (e.g., Bruhn & Ekström, 2015). Prior research in institutional interaction has likewise not yet investigated the constituency office. This review motivates my thesis to

address the following issues: how the interactions at the constituency office are organized, and to take a first look at how politicians and constituents interact with each other.

Next, Chapter 2 explains the methodological approach taken in this thesis. I describe how the constituency office in this study is organized. I present a description of the roles and responsibilities of the major participants in the data, as well as a brief demographic overview of the constituent participants. I give details of how I collected and analyzed data, and a brief overview of conversation analysis. Finally, I discuss the ethical considerations raised by this study, and how I addressed those concerns.

In the first analytic chapter, Chapter 3, I provide an overview of the interactional structure of surgery meetings: how they open, how constituents present their concerns, where the MP and staff make offers, and how those offers and concerns are negotiated. In particular, I focus on how constituents describe their difficulties, and how they pursue the description of their difficulties throughout the meeting. Constituents increase the complaint-like nature of their difficulties over the course of the meeting. I find that constituents use descriptions of their difficulty, rather than requests, and that this practice manages several interactional challenges at once: contingency and entitlement, actionability, and the issue of the ‘unknown’ institution (Stokoe, 2013). The MP and constituency caseworkers first respond to these descriptions with offers, before switching to affiliative turns that sequentially obscure the relevance of further offers.

Following on the issue of offers, in Chapter 4 I analyze the design and sequential position of the offers that the MP and staff make to constituents. I show how the MP and caseworkers change the design of their offers over the course of encounters. Different designs index different components of offers more strongly. Offers that are designed in the format ‘Can I do X for you’ tend to highlight the relevance of initial permission to continue with the offered action, and treat the offer as a proposal. Offers that use the format ‘I will do X’ act like announcements, treating permission as already accomplished or irrelevant. Finally, offers that are designed with the format ‘let me do X’ act like requests, seeking compliance (rather than permission) from constituents in order to complete the offer. Chapter 4, therefore, demonstrates how actions such as offers cannot be strictly bounded into categories, since these offers overlap with other actions such as announcements and requests. Turn design can accomplish additional actions and nuances. These format changes are particularly useful for the MP and staff, who use the different forms in a systematic way to help control the direction of the encounter.

In Chapter 5, I analyze the ‘political’ topics that are raised at the constituency office. Overtly ‘political’ talk is rare at the office; rather, it arises in the corpus as a tangent to other concerns. I show how political topics may be made relevant by either the MP or constituents, and how collaboration is necessary to achieve the topic *as* political. I will demonstrate that the MP raises political topics to display the government as aligned with constituent interests. Constituents, on the other hand, mostly raise political topics as part of criticisms of government actions. Constituents must manage the interactional challenge of criticizing a person to their face, and as a result, constituents’ comments are indirect, with markers of delicacy. Constituents appear to privilege the interactional norms and relationship with the MP, over any potential desire to make ‘political’ points. I conclude by discussing how only an interactional analysis could reveal the difficulties in raising policy criticisms to an MP, and how interactional norms have a crucial impact on how, when, and to whom we express political talk.

The final analytic chapter, Chapter 6, investigates the question of ‘rapport’. Rapport, generally defined as a feeling of connection and trust, is widely used in communication literature and training. Rapport is a means to an end, a way to make service encounters more effective. MPs have a vested interest in building and maintaining ‘rapport’ with their constituents because they rely on that ‘rapport’ to improve their chances of being re-elected. In seeking this ‘personal vote’, MPs must maintain good relations with constituents, and seeking to build rapport is one way to achieve this. As such, rapport is of critical interest to MPs doing constituency casework. In this chapter, I will evaluate previous studies on rapport, and show that these studies have neglected an analysis of what rapport looks like in interaction. I will argue that rapport cannot be assessed *in situ*, in a live interaction, but is a post-hoc variable that is assessed either by participants (e.g., in interviews) or analysts (e.g., in experimental studies). I will also demonstrate that, at the constituency office, constituents have *as vested an interest* in building rapport as the MP. The stake of constituents, or clients, in rapport has never been analyzed before. I will show that while rapport is not accessible to participants during a live interaction, the local outcomes of interactional practices *are* accessible. The concept of rapport may not be necessary in order to achieve positive relations and positive local outcomes. This finding will impact not only MPs, but other service practitioners in other institutional settings.

In the final chapter, I discuss the findings in this thesis. Within the field of conversation analysis, this thesis has provided further evidence to support the concept of ‘recruitment’ (Kendrick & Drew, 2016). Not only do constituents work to achieve recruitment, the use of

recruitment instead of direct requests solves other interactional challenges simultaneously. This thesis has also provided evidence for a more nuanced appreciation of conversational action (Sidnell & Enfield, 2014), primarily that actions can overlap and achieve more than the central component of the action. The results of this thesis show the importance of investigating the interactional structures of a setting. Constituents face interactional challenges in raising political criticisms, which suggests we may need to reevaluate our concept of how citizens raise political concerns with their MP. Political communication studies have not appreciated nor analyzed how critical an analysis of interaction can be for understanding the norms that influence what is communicated at constituency offices. The concept of 'rapport' is also problematic when analyzed from an interactional perspective. Past studies of rapport have failed to address how rapport can be determined or constructed in live interaction, making it unhelpful for communication training purposes. However, the findings from this thesis, which stem from a detailed analysis of interaction, can be used to develop communication training. Using the Conversation Analytic Role-play Method, conversation analytic findings can be translated into applied communication training. By improving communication, this thesis can have a positive impact on how constituents and Members of Parliament interact.



# Chapter 1:

## The constituency office: Research and practice

### 1.0 Introduction

Each year, every constituency office in the United Kingdom deals with up to several thousand requests from constituents. Each of these requests involves a form of personal contact between the constituency office staff and constituent: a letter or email, a phone call, and/or a meeting with the Member of Parliament (MP). The most recent figures state that MPs report spending 28% of their workweek on this ‘casework’ (Korris, 2011), which is the highest category of work time they report (cf. Parliament time at 21%, and other constituency events at 21%). Most MPs also employ staff whose main purpose is to deal with casework and the United Kingdom (UK) spends over £106.2 million on MPs’ budgets for running constituency offices (Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority, 2015 – based on non-London area office rental and staffing costs), where constituents can raise their concerns. MPs have reported for many years that they consider constituency work and representing the constituency to be the most important aspect of their job, often above holding the government to account (Korris, 2011; Rosenblatt, 2006). In other words, work at the MP’s constituency office is a major activity for politicians. Casework is also important for the constituent, as constituency offices are the only place that ordinary citizens can see their MP in person (see Chapter 2 for a description of the constituency office studied in this thesis). Furthermore, constituency casework is conducted in many different countries, especially those with parliamentary democracies (see Abdel-Samad, 2009; Arter, 2010; Benstead, 2008; Clarke, Price & Krause, 1975; Costa, Lefébure, Rozenberg, Schnatterer & Kerrouche, 2012; Hazama, 2005; Heitshusen, Young & Wood, 2005).

Despite constituency offices being so commonplace in parliamentary democracies, and such a central feature of British MPs’ daily life, relatively little research has been conducted on them, compared studies of political discourse and communication more generally. Of the research that exists, most of it examines constituency service or casework as an activity that does, or does not, affect election results. There are almost no studies at all that systematically investigate what actually happens at a constituency office. This means that the scientific community has very little understanding of what MPs and caseworkers do at their offices, let alone what activities *citizens* do there. Most of all, we have very little idea *how* anything is done there.

In this chapter, I will evaluate the existing literature on how politicians communicate with citizens one-on-one, in several broad areas. First, in Section 1.1, I will situate the thesis within the broader literature of political communication and political discourse, showing that this literature mostly ignores the constituency office. Then, in Section 1.2, I will discuss the existing research concerning the constituency office, demonstrating that most research has focused on the electoral benefits of casework, rather than on the composition of casework. I will evaluate the exceptions to this problem in detail. In Section 1.3, I will position the thesis in the interactional subfield of service encounters and institutions. Although there is a large body of research on service encounters in other institutional settings, that literature has not yet examined the constituency office, yet it is the only place a citizen can receive services directly from their MP. We need to understand how MPs spend their time there, and how citizens and MPs interact when they are given the chance.

### **1.1 Political communication literature**

In this section I will discuss the overarching and broad spectrum of political discourse literature within which this thesis sits, before focusing on research that more directly addresses the constituency office. Most studies of communication in a political context focus on political discourse in the public sphere (excluding ethnomethodological and conversation analytic literature on news media and political communication, see Section 1.3). This includes communications made during campaigns, such as media debates, advertising, speeches, and communications in legislatures, such as House of Commons debates in Westminster-style democracies (Bayley, 2004), Private Members' Bills (Bowler, 2010) and others (Blidook & Kerby, 2011; Martin, 2011). It also includes textual data such as government reports, bills, party manifesto, and more (van Dijk, 1997). Major textbooks on political discourse analysis focus primarily if not solely on these forms of communication (see Chilton, 2004; van Dijk, 2008). Political discourse analysts typically study the distribution and reproduction of power (van Dijk, 1997, p.11), and how people with power (namely, politicians) deliberate and argue over decisions (Fairclough & Fairclough, 2012, p.1). For instance, in van Dijk's (1997, p.16-18) definition of the field of political discourse analysis he neglects any mention of situations in which politicians interact directly, one-on-one, with citizens:

That is, politicians talk politically also (or only) if they and their talk is contextualized in such communicative events such as cabinet meetings, parliamentary sessions,

election campaigns, rallies, interviews with the media, bureaucratic practices, protest demonstrations, and so on. (p.14)

Here (and elsewhere, 2008, p.176), van Dijk neglects the constituency office. He does not explicitly exclude it, but his map of the terrain demonstrates the way that much of political discourse studies ignores it. As Cain, Ferejohn and Fiorina (1987, p.51) write,

the scholarly literature has underemphasized service responsiveness [the authors' terms for caseworker] and allocation of responsiveness. For too long political scientists have viewed such aspects of representation as primitive or lower forms of political behaviour – belonging to a category ranging from baby kissing to bribery – best kept out of serious academic discussion.

Another challenge that remains unaddressed by studies in political communication is the question of unmediated talk *with* a politician. Political discourse studies often focus exclusively on the talk directed *towards* citizens, rather than talk that *includes* citizens. Citizens are represented as a set of people barely involved with politics (Wodak, 2009, p.27), and, at most, as recipients of communication (Hutchby, 2006; Lewis, Inthorn & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2005). Thus although political discourse studies acknowledge the centrality of language in political activities (Chilton, 2004, p.6-8), ordinary citizens and everyday political talk are neglected in favour of public media, parliaments, and manifestos. Many studies to date are based on text or broadcasts, through which politicians (and citizens) talk *at* each other, rather than with each other. These formats are highly mediated, edited (Eriksson, 2011) and structured (Clayman & Heritage, 2002a; Ekström & Kroon Lundell, 2011; see Section 1.3.1), begging the question of how citizens and politicians would (and do) interact in person, and without a broadcast host or setting.

There is, however, a subsection of political communication research that examines citizen political talk (see Schmitt-Beck & Lup, 2013 for overview). This literature focuses on 'horizontal' (Schmitt-Beck & Lup, 2013) political talk, which refers to the talk between people with similar amounts of influence or control over large scale political decisions and processes (usually, a lack of said control). While this literature does examine political talk, there are four differences between the data examined in the literature, and the data in this thesis. Firstly, the data in my own thesis does *not* look at 'horizontal' talk, given that it mostly involves citizen-to-MP, rather than citizen-to-citizen talk (although the question of

‘horizontalness’ is interesting in and of itself, see Chapters 5 and 6). Secondly, most of the research in citizen-to-citizen political talk uses interview and survey techniques (Conover & Searing, 2005), rather than recordings, which differs from the data in this thesis (but see Eliasoph, 1998; Walsh, 2004 for studies based on participant observation, although not recordings or analysis of talk). As a result, these studies lack insight into how talk is accomplished, and what practices and techniques people use to get social action done. Interview and survey techniques are limited to analyzing reports, remembrances, and accounts of people’s past actions (Potter, 2012a, 2012b; Potter & Hepburn, 2007). Some studies have also used experiments and simulated conversations (e.g., Jackson & Sniderman, 2006; Ryan, 2013), which is not compatible with a goal to understand how conversation works naturally (Potter & Hepburn, 2007). As Ekström (2016, p.17) points out, “Conversation analyses of recorded talk would be preferred” in order to understand how political topics are initiated and managed in conversation, which is, after all, one of the goals of this thesis (see Section 1.4). As I will later report, interactional rules and norms can have a big impact on what is discussed at the constituency office (see Chapter 5).

The third difference between studies of citizen-to-citizen political talk and this thesis is that the talk in this thesis is questionably and inconsistently political (see Chapter 5). The above studies concern explicitly *political* talk between citizens, whereas most of the talk at the constituency office is explicitly *not* political. The question of what counts as political, especially in interaction, should also be analyzed as an achievement of talk, rather than as a category of talk assigned by the analyst (Hepburn & Potter, 2011b). Fourthly, and finally, the interaction at the constituency office is not what conversation analysts would call ‘mundane’ talk, or what Schmitt-Beck and Lup (2013) call ‘spontaneous’ and ‘unstructured’ talk, as it is in an institutional setting (Drew & Heritage, 1992). Despite these differences, this subfield of political communication may still find the constituency office setting interesting, as this thesis provides another example of analyzing face-to-face conversations in an ostensibly political setting. Eveland, Morey and Hutchens (2011, p.1098) have especially called for

more observational studies of face-to-face and online political conversations...with an emphasis on understanding how and why individuals engage in political conversations, what they actually convey during these conversations, and what implications these conversations have for their social and political lives.

The relatively small amount of research concerning citizen talk in political communication literature is not without cause; some argue that voters are often uninterested in or unaware of many of these communications (Dalton, 2000; Hay, 2007), and others have argued that citizens are historically excluded from political communication (Kurtz, 1997; but see Section 1.3 for studies of journalists-as-public-representatives, radio call-ins, and mediated forms of access). However, although it may seem like common sense for news media and Parliamentary debates to be the most prominent part of an MP's working week and communication activities, MPs actually report spending the largest portion of their time on constituency affairs (Korris, 2011). As a result, it is crucial to go beyond the obvious and examine the constituency office itself.

Overall, the political communication literature is frequently unhelpful in examining the constituency office. Few studies appear to have considered MP surgeries to be worthy of study. Many studies also fail to investigate how conversations happen in political settings. There is a literature that examines how citizens talk to *each other*, but there is no research examining how *MPs* and citizens interact directly (see Section 1.3 for a discussion of the literature surrounding mediated access to the MP, via radio phone-ins, audience participation, etc.). We have seen that citizens are often only considered as an audience. In recent years, however, online communication has opened opportunities for MPs and citizens to engage. I will next discuss the literature on online MP-to-citizen communication, before turning to examining the literature on the constituency office itself in Section 1.2.

### *1.1.1 Politicians communicating online*

One place in which one would expect to find studies of politician-constituent interaction is the growing body of research looking at online communication and social media. More recently, researchers have been studying politicians' use of internet technologies to communicate. These studies examine politicians' adoption of websites, Facebook, Twitter, and other tools for advertising, announcements, and consultation (Allen et al., 2013; Stanyer, 2008; Williamson, 2009, 2010). Given that these studies focus on communication, one would expect to see a more detailed analysis of *how* MPs, their staff, and citizens communicate with each other. However, much of the 'MPs online' literature focuses on whether current methods of democratic representation can be changed, or if rates of citizen participation can be improved with the adoption of various online systems (Coleman, 2005; Lusoli, Ward & Gibson, 2006). The studies that consider how talk-in-interaction online work tend to focus on 'degrees of interactivity', or opportunities for citizens and politicians to mutually interact via

online media. Macmillan (2002) created a popular model for categorizing how interactive an online website or network can be, and whether it is being used in an interactive fashion. Politicians have largely used online media, both earlier platforms such as static websites and more recent platforms such as Twitter and Facebook, to promote political messages in the form of monologues. As Stromer-Galley (2000, p.116) found, “it is evident that political candidates are using their websites in ways similar to their television or radio advertisements – as one-way messages.” More recent studies have found “minor” and “incremental” changes (Lilleker & Malagón, 2010, p.39), in the form of increased dialogic interaction (see also Otterbacher et al., 2012), but most politicians continue to avoid two-way communication online (Lilleker & Jackson 2009; Lilleker & Malagón, 2010; Stromer-Galley, 2000). Jackson and Lilleker (2011) found that of those MPs who regularly tweet, most used Twitter for announcing news or doing self-promotion, and any ‘conversations’ were not between MPs and constituents, but between various groups of MPs: “For these MPs, Twitter has become a virtual ‘smoking room’ where they tease one another, gossip and occasionally score political points.” (p.100).

The chief finding of the online communication literature is that MPs treat the internet as another medium on which to send out information, but not as a place for communicating with constituents. One quote reported from an interview study with MPs sums up this problem neatly: “Email is a marvellous tool for communication, but a nightmare for MPs. Many constituents want to have a long email conversation with you. Sadly I have too busy a schedule.” (Williamson, 2009, p.9). It is interesting to note that despite the intense focus on interactivity and determining how best to analyze the (potentially) interactive online world, these studies never reference or mention conversation analysis. Yet there is a methodological framework being developed for analyzing *how* online communication takes place (see Giles, et al., 2015; Meredith & Potter, 2013; Meredith & Stokoe, 2014), which would precisely capture the interactive (or not) features of online communication with politicians. This further highlights the need for conversation analysts to tackle political settings.

In summary, there is a large body of literature covering political communication generally, which largely focuses on how media and politicians speak *at*, rather than with, citizen audiences. Where citizens are analyzed, most research investigates how they talk to each other, rather than to MPs. There is little research examining how communication is done *at* constituency offices. The above studies do not focus on constituency offices at all: how they function, who is present, what they accomplish, and so forth. Moving beyond political discourse and communication, however, there is a subsection of political science that

examines the activities that actually occur at constituency offices, albeit with little to no emphasis on communicative practices. I will outline this literature in the next section.

## **1.2 The constituency office**

Much political science literature sees constituency service as a ‘puzzle’ (Norris, 1997): behaviour that is motivated by potential electoral gain, despite uncertain evidence for that gain. As a result, the question of *why* MPs do constituency service is addressed on multiple fronts, while the question of *how* they provide service and *what* services they provide are rarely systematically investigated. I will first look at studies that examine *why* MPs do casework. I will then examine studies concerning *what* activities constituency casework comprises. These studies are mostly interview and survey studies, and show us what MPs and citizens report about constituency office work. Finally, I will discuss in detail the few observational studies that have investigated casework and constituency offices. These are the studies that report *how* citizens, office staff, and politicians behave and communicate at surgeries. None of these studies take an interactional approach, and most have significant out-of-date components in comparison with modern casework, such as a heavy focus on letter-writing (instead of email). This section especially shows the gap in our knowledge about how activities are carried out and organized at the constituency office, a gap that my thesis will begin to fill.

### *1.2.1 Why do constituency casework*

There has been a long-standing debate over whether constituency service helps to improve an MP’s chance of re-election. MPs that engage in constituency service engage in interpersonal interaction with constituents, rather than just appearing in advertisements or as a faceless name at the ballot box, so it is possible that constituents are influenced to vote for an MP that they know, and to whom they feel indebted for prior assistance. Doing casework in order to earn familiarity, trust, respect, and most of all gratitude, is called cultivating a ‘personal vote’ (Cain et al., 1987). Most studies have been of elected representatives in the United Kingdom or United States, with a few studies of other European countries or former British colonies (Australia, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand) (e.g., Docherty, 1997; Heitshusen et al., 2005; Norton & Wood, 1993). In some countries, such as Jordan and Lebanon, the personal vote is more of a contract, rather than gratitude, and MPs grant favours with the expectation (rather than the hope) of being repaid at voting time (Abdel-Samad, 2009). Cain, Ferejohn and Fiorina (1987) wrote a seminal book on the personal vote, interviewing politicians and their

staff in the United Kingdom and United States, as well as drawing on surveys for constituents' opinions. There was an early foray into systematically examining the effect of constituency service on the politicians and constituents, finding that

representatives and staff in both countries think that casework can be politically beneficial whatever the outcome so long as it is handled properly. This corresponds with the finding that most citizens who contact their representative for help or information tend to find the incumbent's response satisfactory and evaluate the incumbent positively. (p.69).

Cain et al. inspired researchers to measure where constituents' positive feelings had a significant effect on voting results. However, while some studies find the effect of the personal vote to be significant, or significant *enough* to be worth pursuing (e.g., Butler & Collins, 2001; Dogan, 2007; Heitshusen et al., 2005; Vivyan & Wagner, 2015), others find the effect to be too small (e.g., Gaines, 1998; Johannes & McAdams, 1981; Johnston & Pattie, 2009; Norris, 1997). One study even suggested that politicians may prefer (whether consciously or not) to have bureaucratic inefficiencies in the United States because it provided opportunity to cultivate a personal vote (Moon, Serra & Best, 1993). None of these studies analyze the constituency casework itself, though, making it more difficult to determine a link between specific constituency office practices and any positive incumbency effect for the MP. Furthermore, many other factors can influence the existence and size of the personal vote, including personal history in the constituency (Tavits, 2010) and party affiliation (Benstead, 2008; Johnston & Pattie, 2009), and these additional factors add to speculation that casework is not a 'profitable' avenue for studying successful electioneering. As Parker and Goodman (2009, p.496) point out, the relationship between constituency casework and vote results is not direct or simple, and thus it is unsurprising that past studies have led to conflicting results.

Political literature also has a lengthy history in discussing 'role theory' (Clarke, Price & Krause, 1975; Searing, 1994). Role-related studies classify MPs into categories based on the MPs' propensity to focus on certain aspects of their job, such as legislation, career advancement, or constituency work. 'Local', 'constituency', or 'welfare officer' MPs (Searing, 1994) are those who prioritize constituency service above other responsibilities, not necessarily in order to cultivate a 'personal vote', but for a wide variety of incentives, including a personal desire to simply help constituents (Franks, 2007; Searing, 1985; Studlar



& McAllister, 1996). Some studies also subdivide MPs into different types of ‘constituency MPs’, based on what casework activities they prioritize (Norton, 1994), or based on the degree to which their office gets involved in cases (Siefken, 2014). Heitshusen et al. (2005) have found that different electoral systems put different pressures on MPs to engage in constituency casework, and limit or provide time and resources for it in different ways. These ‘roles’ may also influence how MPs act in Parliament, and may put forward more constituency related questions in the House of Commons (Blidook & Kerby, 2011), or more constituency related Private Members’ Bills (Bowler 2010). But these studies represent another avenue in which researchers examine the *why-it-is-done* and not the *how-it-is-done* of constituency office casework. In the next subsection, I will discuss the research that has investigated *what* constituency casework comprises, and what MPs and citizens describe that they do, in interviews about constituency offices.

### *1.2.2 Constituency casework*

Beyond the papers addressing the electioneering impact of constituency casework, there is a small, growing set of literature that analyzes constituency casework itself. Most of these studies are achieved via interviewing politicians and caseworkers or staff (although see Hazama, 2005; Korris, 2011; and Leduc & Pammett, 2014, for surveys). A small subset of these studies actually observes constituency casework being accomplished. However, none of these studies captures the constituents’ perspectives on casework, focusing instead on the staff or politician ‘side’. Also, with one exception (Rawlings, 1990a, 1990b), none of these studies manages to present a systematic and rigorous analysis of what casework is actually accomplished during the study period. Finally, none of these studies analyzes the communication and interactional achievement of constituency casework.

Casework arises in interview studies both when the interviews concern casework itself, and when the interviews concern other aspects of parliamentary life (see Loat & MacMillan, 2014), possibly because it is such a ubiquitous part of a politician’s working week (Korris, 2011). Most interview studies have produced similar findings (see below); MPs are found to be spending large amounts of time at the constituency office doing casework, despite public perception that they spend more of their time in the legislature. Staff and MPs consistently report that constituents bring the same problems, across different nations and different constituents, which Le Lidec (2009) calls “the hit-parade of difficulties” (p.e122) (but see Abdel-Samad, 2009, p.426, who found in his study of Lebanon and Jordan that common

casework involved getting Hajj visas, covering health costs, or getting a constituent a job). Macleod (2014, p.38), summarizes the difficulties as follows:

Every imaginable grievance passed through their doors: nasty child custody fights; accusations of workplace discrimination; decades-long battles to reunite distant families; shocking miscarriages of justice; and stories of intractable tax collectors run amok. Any new staffer would immediately find himself or herself swamped by the endless stream of employment insurance claims, missing passports, and neglected veterans.

This kind of summary is common, and many studies investigating how politicians behave at the constituency office note something similar. For example, Loat and MacMillan (2014, p.139) write,

This can mean assisting constituents with the bureaucratic matters – immigration, employment insurance, passports or veterans’ support. It also includes helping people benefit from federal programs or legislation, and fulfilling the role of a representative by attending social occasions or other commemorative events.

Two of the most widely cited studies, Norton and Wood (1993) and Searing (1994), also summarize casework in this way. Searing focuses on a role-theory explanation for why MPs engage in casework and the casework itself never receives analytic attention. Norton and Wood argue that constituency office work is worthy of investigation. They produce historical evidence that casework is a significant obligation in the MP’s schedule, and that casework has been increasing exponentially over time (p.43); however, the investigation of casework itself never rises beyond description of the MP’s interest and procedure. These kind of summaries are reductive, as they efface the interactional work required to accomplish constituency casework. Summarizing casework in a list of typical activities glosses over important details such as how often any given item is requested, how the constituency office attempts to fix the problem, and most importantly, how the problems are communicated and discussed. In these glosses we see a microcosmic example of Cain et al.’s (1987, p.51) criticism above, which bears repeating: “political scientists have viewed such aspects of representation as primitive or lower forms of political behaviour – belonging to a category

ranging from baby kissing to bribery – *best kept out of serious academic discussion*” (emphasis added).

MPs and caseworkers also typically offer help even when it is outside their jurisdiction (Le Lidec, 2009, p.126; Siefken, 2014, p.10) or when there is little that can be done (see Rawlings, 1990a, 1990b, below). As Ortiz et al. (2004, p.57) put it, “Most problems that come into the district office for caseworker are of the ‘desperation’ nature, meaning this is the constituent’s last stop after a long, fruitless, and frustrating journey.” The constituents have serious problems that need addressing, and MPs are willing to go through the motions of helping if it will make constituents feel better. As Docherty (1997, p.179) notes, “Intervention by the member signifies the case is perhaps more serious, but also that the person has a legitimate concern.” MPs and staff report that the success of casework is not always important: even acting as a good listener or going through the motions of helping can be enough to satisfy constituents (Gay, 2005; Le Lidec, 2009; Ortiz, Wirz, Semion & Rodriguez, 2004). Finally, Eagles, Koop and Loat (2014, p.202) report that an MP acts as an “‘ombudsman of last resort’ for their constituents, called upon to intervene in problems that have defied successful resolution through more conventional channels”. In other words, casework was a last-ditch effort to get a problem solved (see also Young Legal Aid Lawyers, 2012, 2013). Casework often offers aid to desperate citizens who fall in bureaucratic ‘grey zones’. Most cases in this thesis’ data corpus fit this description.

A few interview-based studies of MPs and constituency work are worth mentioning in some detail because they go beyond descriptions of casework to investigate the day-to-day functioning of constituency offices. Le Lidec (2009) examined how MPs allocate and organize their staff. Le Lidec used interviews, analysis of websites, and questionnaires to determine what kinds of activities MPs and their staff undertook, how MPs’ staff were allocated to address the constituency’s needs, and the bias in French politics for a heavy focus on constituency service. His study is an excellent example of investigating the *what* portion of constituency offices, but he did not examine actual interactions or actual cases.

Koop (2012) interviewed thirty-two Canadian MPs to discuss how the party constituency association helped the MP and their office to communicate with constituents. Party constituency associations try to have members in many different ‘sectors’ of the constituency – in other words, in sub-constituency level communities that comprise different socio-economic, cultural, and language groups. The key difference to this thesis, besides the lack of interactional analysis, is that the communication in Koop’s study is mediated; the party association representatives act as go-betweens for the sectors and the MP. It is as much

a process of mutually informing either side of each other's activities as it is of communicating, and overall, the MP is not the communicator in question.

Macleod (2005, 2006, 2014) visited constituency offices in Canada and examined how the offices were organized and what kind of activities MPs undertook. However, this study, while noteworthy for being one of the few to investigate actual casework and constituency offices, was not systematic or scientific, and contains only anecdotal evidence. The study involved Macleod visiting "nearly 100" (2014, p.36) constituency offices across Canada. It is unclear in any of Macleod's three reports (2005, 2006, 2014) exactly how these offices were chosen, what the results were of the questionnaire distributed, what the questionnaire examined, whether and how interview data was collected, and if any attempts were made to collect data from constituents themselves, rather than solely constituency caseworkers and MPs.

The studies described above manage to have wider coverage, talking to many MPs within any given country (on the low end is Koop, 2012 with 46 MPs and local officials; on the high end is Brouard, Costa, Kerrouche & Schnatterer, 2013, with 230 MPs). Although the larger sample size is useful, the detail concerning *what* comprises constituency service is missing. As discussed above, the casework is often glossed as a list of frequent topics, rather than examined as a detailed set of practices. These interview-based studies rely on self-report, mostly of MPs, also suggesting that the results may be biased towards the perceptions of MPs. There is a small subset of studies that have investigated actual casework activities using observation, to which I now turn.

### *1.2.3 Observational studies of constituency offices*

Fenno's (1978) study, *Home Style*, is one of the most influential papers in the constituency office literature. Fenno accompanied 18 Congressmen [*sic*] in the United States to their constituencies and undertook participant observation. Similar to Koop's (2012) study, Fenno examined how the Congressmen reached out to subsections of the constituency population and how the Congressmen perceived their relationships with those communities. As both Koop and Fenno have demonstrated, the constituency is not a homogenous entity, and is a very complex population, making it challenging to represent the wishes of all constituents at any given time. Fenno was one of the first to examine how Congressmen divided their time and efforts between legislation and constituency activities (followed by Arter, 2010; Heitshusen et al. 2005, for example), and how they allocate resources (followed by Le Lidec, 2009; Parker & Goodman, 2009), and what effect Congressmen believed their constituency

efforts had on re-election. This study was ground-breaking and original at the time, but is now nearly four decades out-of-date, taking place prior to the substantial increase in casework observed by Norton and Wood (1993), and prior to email and other forms of contact. Furthermore, it does not provide detailed analysis of interactions between Congressmen and constituents, focusing more on the Congressmen's activities.

Siefken (2012) conducted an observational study of MPs at constituency events, observing 64 different German MPs for approximately three days each, and coding the MPs' behaviour. The study focused on coding events that the MP attended in the constituency, rather than constituency casework. Siefken's study is notable for being one of the few studies to observe constituency activities, and one of the few to document constituency events themselves. However, although Siefken's study coded communicative activities with constituents, the methodology was problematic for understanding *how* MPs communicate. The interactions with constituents were not recorded and are unavailable for analysis. The observations were coded into categories and scales (such as how often 'political' topics were discussed), obscuring the actual manner in which the communication took place. Coding not only prevents analysis of the original interaction, it can also demonstrate problematic assumptions; for instance, in Siefken's study, the coders decided whether politicians at events were 'listening to' or 'presenting' political positions. The analysis in this thesis demonstrates that there can be no meaningful distinction between 'listening' and 'presenting' as both are always present (see Chapters 3-6). Thus the more important distinctions are found in *how* citizens and MPs express their positions.

The only study to date, to the best of my knowledge, that directly and systematically studies constituency casework itself is Rawlings's (1990a, 1990b) investigation of the actual letters received and sent by the constituency office. The study examined the letters of seven MPs, representing all major parties at the time, and including all letters pertaining to cases that were opened at the beginning of the three-month study period, and closed by the end of it. Rawlings also interviewed the caseworkers and MPs about their casework. Rawlings found that each MP's office had a different style of management, and offered slightly different services, but that all offices agreed to help in some way with almost every case. Rawlings also found that, according to the MPs and caseworkers, many constituents simply needed an explanatory response from the agency with whom they had a disagreement, and that earning that response for the constituent was considered a success.

Rawlings's study should surprise scientists for a few reasons. Firstly, that casework is often not 'successful', in the sense of changing an agency's decision (such as a council's

housing committee's decision on a tenant renovation), but that it can be successful simply by fetching an explanation. Secondly, that constituents receive different access to services depending on who happens to be their MP, despite constituency casework being a nationwide endeavour. Thirdly, and most importantly, it is surprising that Rawlings (1990a, 1990b) is the *only* systematic study to have looked at actual casework and made first-hand observations of its accomplishment. Rawlings's study (along with Fenno, 1978; Norton & Wood, 1993; and Searing, 1994) is now significantly out-of-date. The most popular and observable form of contact was letter-writing, but now constituents and MPs mostly use email (Korris, 2011). The use of email, along with the increase in budget allocations for MP constituency expenditures (compare Ward, 2000, at £50 000, to Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority, 2016, at £164 000), allows for more frequent contact, as well as a larger quantity of contact (House of Modernisation Committee, 2007, ev. 74; Jackson, 2003; Korris, 2013, p.20). A final limitation of Rawlings's study is that it does not attempt to address live and in-person interaction, which is what this thesis will analyze (see Chapters 3-6).

In this section, I have outlined the literature that investigates the constituency office itself. Studies that examine constituency casework via interviews tend to have larger sample sizes, but focus solely on the opinions and experiences of MPs and their staff. The studies of actual constituency casework, above, have documented the activities that comprise casework in much greater detail than election-related studies, but this literature still fails to address the constituent experience. The lack of studies examining actual casework suggests that scientists have hitherto shown no interest in the details of casework activities, and/or that acquiring permission to record or observe politicians at work has been challenging (see Chapter 2).

My overview of the literature has shown that there are two major gaps in our knowledge: an understanding of the constituent experience of casework, and a detailed understanding of how casework is achieved in interaction. Although some studies have addressed constituent opinions, these have been from the perspective of understanding what would motivate constituents to vote for or generally approve of a candidate (Ågren, Dahlberg & Mörk, 2006; Vivyan & Wagner, 2015). A better understanding of the constituent experience could be determined from a detailed analysis of actual casework. As for understanding interaction, it is important to remember that all casework is achieved *via* interaction between staff, MPs, and constituents. Without interaction, casework cannot be accomplished. As Ekström and Patrona (2011, p.1) write, "Conversation is a vital medium of politics. ...politics is partly created and articulated, made public and disputable, in a variety of more or less institutionalized forms of talk and interaction." It is therefore important to

study the interactions there, in order to understand this institution. Given the importance of interaction, I now turn to interaction-based studies. These studies are yet to examine the constituency office, but they do provide a scaffold of other work that has examined institutions from an interactional perspective.

### **1.3 Interacting with politicians and service workers in institutional settings**

In order to appreciate how this thesis is situated in the ethnomethodological and conversation analytic literature, I now turn to studies of institutions. The constituency office is an institution, in that encounters there are “task-related and they involve at least one participant who represents a formal organization” (Drew & Heritage, 1992, p.3), in this case the MP and/or caseworker, and the layperson, or constituent. According to Drew and Heritage (1992, p.4), the participants’ “institutional or professional identities are somehow made relevant to the work activities in which they are engaged.” This is true of the MP and caseworker in potentially unexpected ways: although the *political* identity of the MP and caseworker may not be made relevant (see Chapter 5), their professional roles as experts in the local bureaucracies and governmental agencies are regularly made relevant.

The institutional literature has covered many settings in the past (Drew & Heritage, 1992; Heritage & Clayman, 2010). News interviews (e.g., Clayman & Heritage, 2002a), courtrooms (Atkinson & Drew, 1979; Drew, 1992), police investigations (Edwards, 2008; Kidwell, 2009), telephone call centres (Butler et al., 2010; Emmison & Danby, 2007), family mediation (Stokoe, 2013b), primary healthcare (Heritage & Maynard, 2006) and benefits claimants interviews (Drew, Toerien, Irvine & Sainsbury, 2014) have all been studied, and do not form an exhaustive list. These settings share their institutional nature with the constituency office. In this section, I will discuss three institutions that share some similarities with the constituency office: the news interview and many news media broadcasts in general share the presence of a political actor and the potential for representative work; the doctor’s office and general practitioner interactions have a similar structure for accomplishing service work; and the interactions with other social security agencies like work assessment interviews share similar topics and resources. Although the similarity between these institutions and the constituency office requires analytic comparison of data and cannot be fully addressed in a discussion of literature, it is useful to mention the institutions that share contextual details and interactional norms.

### *1.3.1 News interviews: Politicians in public*

News media is one way that citizens observe and interact with politicians. News media can include broadcast news shows on television and radio, interviews both live and pre-recorded, ‘phone-in’s or talk shows where citizens can direct comments and questions to hosts or show guests, and panels or debates. Citizens can also form part of a ‘live studio audience’, who are present for the recording (and sometimes broadcasting) of the show and may be able to interact with the politician interviewees or panelists via questions, comments, and applause. News media, however, has a specific set of features that are different from those at the constituency office. While studies of news media provide some insight into how politicians interact with and communicate to lay people, these studies cannot be a substitute for an actual study of one-on-one constituency office interactions.

To begin with, the context for news media is different than at the constituency office. By virtue of being broadcast, the media must be recorded in a certain way, which often involves substantial editing (Eriksson, 2011). There are editorial decisions that impact what version the public finally consumes, not to mention the editorial decisions involved in determining an interview schedule, choosing angles and images, and even constructing or choosing the setting (outdoors in the street, a studio with a news desk, a studio with leather chairs, etc.) in which the broadcast is recorded (Ekström & Kroon Lundell, 2011; Eriksson, 2011), and these latter concerns affect even live broadcasts. At MP surgeries, citizens have unedited and immediate access to their representatives, although during the rest of the time access to the MP is mediated by the caseworkers.

But editing is just one example of how the ultimate recipients of the broadcast – the public at large – influence the interaction. News media interactions are created to be ‘overheard’ or consumed by a large audience, often one that is not (entirely) physically present for the interaction itself (Clayman & Heritage, 2002a). As Hutchby (2006, p.164) writes, “...even when a show is produced in the presence of a studio audience, the audience of viewers and listeners [‘at home’] remains a principal recipient toward whom the talk is oriented.” Interviewers and interviewees use several interactional practices that are not generally found in mundane talk: interviewers refrain from assessing and affiliating utterances; interviewers refrain from giving news receipts such as ‘oh’; and interviewees address each other in the third person (see Clayman & Heritage, 2002a, pp. 120-126; Heritage, 1985). Furthermore, interviewers can use the audience’s presumed interest as an account for asking aggressive or probing questions (Heritage, 1985). At the constituency office, however, the MP and staff use practices that resemble the mundane version: they do



give news receipts and regularly assess utterances and affiliate with constituents (as in the ‘chat-like’ talk in Ekström, 2011), and constituents speak directly to the MP or caseworker, rather than to the camera. The presence of the camera in this study does raise the question of whether any participants presumed that they had an audience – namely me, the researcher. However, there is little evidence of participants orienting to the camera and, moreover, the participants would only be assuming a very small, restricted audience, instead of the large, public audience that ‘overhears’ news interviews.

In terms of other interactional norms, news media have different ‘rules’ than what we will see at the constituency office. Although journalists may purport to engage interviewees in conversation, even a cursory analysis demonstrates that there are substantial differences in how the interview interaction unfolds, as compared to mundane talk (Clayman & Heritage, 2002a, p.97). News interviews involve pre-allocated turns (Atkinson & Drew, 1979), in which the interviewer is largely constrained to asking questions, and the interviewee to answering questions, although there are some interviews that work to achieve a more relaxed interactional structure (see Ekström, 2011). Departures from this norm are accountable (see Clayman & Heritage, 2002a, 2002b), such as when politicians evade answering questions (Bull, 2008; Ekström & Fitzgerald, 2014). It is also important to note that the average citizens’ consumption of interactions with politicians is not via *directly interacting with* politicians, but via mediated reception of *other people’s interactions with* politicians, such as journalists and other politicians in debates. Although journalists may legitimize their work by representing the public (see Clayman, 2002a), we cannot reasonably substitute the empirical study of journalist-politician interactions for the study of citizen-politician interactions. The constituency office is one of the only places where the average citizen can directly converse with a politician, without the intervening mediation of news organizations, parliamentary reports, or other specialists.

There are also the participants’ roles to consider: do they resemble the roles of the MP and constituent? The journalist is at an interview on behalf of the public, purportedly to represent the public’s interest in information. This can be seen in their efforts to maintain a ‘neutralistic’ or impartial footing (Clayman, 1992). The journalist must remain neutral in order to best represent as much of ‘the public’, their audience, as possible. Major news organizations have explicit guidelines about how to remain impartial (e.g., BBC, 2016; Downey, Deacon, Golding, Oldfield & Wring, 2006 – although see Hutchby, 2011, on non-neutral interviews), which manifest in several practices that interviewers use. For example, interviewers change footing when introducing opinions or facts into an interview (Clayman,

1992). The impartiality of journalism is a major concern for research and for news organizations, and is regularly studied (for studies with an interactional perspective, see Ekström, Djerf-Pierre, Johansson & Håkansson, 2015; Heritage & Clayman, 2013, p. 498; Huls & Varwijk, 2011; for studies with a media and communication studies perspective, see Deacon, Downey, Stanyer & Wring, 2015; Downey et al., 2006; Stanyer, Deacon, Downey & Wring, 2014). The politicians, on the other hand, have no such need to be impartial; indeed, they often need to represent a particular perspective or bias. In news interviews, politicians have a stake in getting their message across to a large audience. As Clayman and Heritage (2002a, p.29) put it, "...journalists exchange [with politicians] access to publicity for the kind of news content that will keep readers reading and viewers watching." The exchange between journalists and politicians is often portrayed as a struggle (Ekström, 2009; Ekström & Fitzgerald, 2014, Ekström et al. 2015), during which journalists aim to get highly committed statements from politicians, and politicians resist committing to specific promises while getting their message out (Clayman & Romaniuk, 2011). This adversarial relationship is not present during constituency office meetings in this thesis' corpus. The MP and caseworkers are not constrained to be as impartial as journalists, and while they occasionally ask constituents to consider the other side (such as in neighbour disputes), they typically affiliate with constituents' concerns, and assess them as troubles to be solved. Nor do constituents regularly attempt to discuss policy or get commitments from the MP on parliamentary voting behaviour, and when constituents do discuss national politics it is a mitigated and delicate affair (see Chapter 5). Overall, the constituency office shares few institutional rules or norms with news interviews. MP surgeries provide an interesting contrast to the previous research done in news settings, especially as the participants are not constrained by the same concerns, such as the interview turn-taking format, or the need for impartiality. Furthermore, citizens themselves are frequently absent from news interviews, unlike at the constituency office. However, citizens *are* present in other public forums, such as town halls or mediated interactions on radio and television. I briefly discuss this literature in the next subsection.

### *1.3.2 Citizens' opportunities for talking to politicians*

Citizens have little direct access to politicians outside of the constituency office; however, they do have mediated access in several settings. First, I will discuss research that has examined audience participation and radio- (or television-) phone ins, where hosts mediate citizen questions to politicians. Second, I will turn to work on public meetings such as town halls, where citizens publically deliberate policy and question local politicians.

A commonly used format in debate or interview media with politicians is a citizen participation format. Citizens phone in, or form part of the live audience, and ask questions to politicians. Hutchby (2006, p.64) writes that, “Audience participation debate shows provide a public arena in which private citizens can express their opinions on issues in the public domain.” One difference with the constituency office is that, like other news media, these are *public* scenarios, often with large, national-scale audiences, whereas the constituency office interactions are relatively private, involving only the constituents, the MP and their staff. Citizens can, and do, participate indirectly via social media such as Twitter, both when responses are solicited by the media broadcaster (Thornborrow & Fitzgerald, 2013) or when not (Anstead & O’Loughlin, 2011), although this does not guarantee any response or interaction with the politicians on the show. Another difference is that citizen participation shows are mediated by a host or journalist. This has significant interactional implications since, as Ekström and Eriksson (2013, p.197-198) point out, “It is the host and not the questioner who decides whether the question has been answered or not.” Citizen access to the politician is mediated by the host, and this mediation has increased over time in some areas (Ekström & Moberg, 2015). Although citizens are encouraged to interact, their ability to pursue concerns is limited (Lorenzo-Dus, 2011; Thornborrow & Fitzgerald, 2013, p.19-20). As we will see, this is not the case at the constituency office, where citizens can pursue their concerns at length (see Chapter 3), with much longer time limits, and without mediation. Although Thornborrow and Fitzgerald (2013, p.25) hail citizen participation shows as “a significant part of the political process where politicians can...be called to account”, they are limited in their access to politicians. The constituency offers an interesting counterpoint as a setting in which access is less constrained and mediated (although where the large public audience is removed).

Access is also mediated, and strictly structured, at public meetings. At town halls (Llewellyn, 2005), planning meetings (Mondada, 2015), school board meetings (Potter & Hepburn, 2010a; Tracy & Durfy, 2007), and so on, citizens interact with each other, deliberate on issues and decisions, and address concerns to politicians. Conversation analytic work on public meetings has been concerned with how turns are allocated and contributions managed (e.g., Mondada, 2015), but these are also settings in which it is possible to see citizens interact with politicians. As with citizen participation shows, talk is often mediated by a host or chair. Citizens also demonstrate much more hostility or adversarial qualities than in the constituency office data (see Chapters 3, 5). Turns are also more structured, with citizens taking turns at microphones or by raising hands, which contrasts with the

spontaneous talk in the constituency office data. There is also more citizen-to-citizen interaction in these public meetings than at the constituency office (Llewellyn, 2005), likely due to the larger numbers of citizens present at any given time, or the citizen-discussion nature of the topic at hand.

Again, as with news interviews, we see that these settings share the presence of a politician with the constituency office, but otherwise differ significantly in the interactional norms of the setting. This suggests that the constituency office is a relatively unusual political setting, and further supports the need to investigate its interactional structures. Despite the lack of the presence of a politician, the constituency office shares more interactional features with doctors' surgeries than with the above settings. This brings us to considering the most studied service relationship in conversation analytic studies: medical interactions.

### *1.3.3 Medical interactions: The other 'surgery'*

Medical interactions and primary care interactions (see Heritage & Maynard, 2006) have the most structural similarities to constituency office meetings. Even the term in British English is the same: both doctors and MPs hold 'surgeries'. Other institutional settings are not as similar; for instance, interviews and courtrooms have much stricter templates for interaction (e.g., question-answer rights, Clayman, 2006, p.136-137), and participants in police investigations have a very different stake (Stokoe, 2013a) than constituents seeking aid. However, the empirical similarities and differences are an analytic point to be proven and discussed, which I will address in Chapter 3. The key point to establish at the moment is that there are contextual differences that suggest the constituency office deserves separate consideration, rather than being analyzed as a type of primary care interaction.

The first 'stage' in both primary care medical encounters and MP surgeries is typically an information gathering stage, in which patients/constituents present concerns, and/or doctors/MPs solicit those concerns (e.g., Robinson, 2006). Past studies have examined the structural contingencies for requesting medical care (Heritage & Robinson, 2006), how patients suggest candidate diagnoses (Stivers, 2002) or how patients demand certain treatments (Gill, 2005; Stivers, 2005). Similarly, constituents give accounts for requesting aid and for visiting the MP specifically among other potential services (see Chapter 3). However, constituents in data collected for this thesis do not suggest 'candidate diagnoses' or potential solutions (see Chapter 3), and regularly display uncertainty about whether their visit is appropriate. Constituents question whether the MP can help them at all, and treat the available services as unfamiliar. These practices resemble first calls to mediation, as reported

by Stokoe (2013b), in which callers regularly demonstrate their lack of knowledge about mediation services at the opening of calls. Additionally, while patients go to the doctor as a first-port-of-call, constituents (and mediation callers) frequently mention that they have tried other services first, but have not yet found satisfaction. This corroborates findings by the Young Legal Aid Lawyers (2012, 2013) that MPs are the last resort for constituents in need.

There are two further similarities between primary care visits and constituency offices. First, doctors must often express empathy for patients' troubles (Silverman & Peräkylä, 1990; Maynard & Freese, 2012; Heritage & Lindström, 2012), as must caseworkers and MPs. Second, doctors are considered knowledgeable experts in medicine (Pilnick & Dingwall, 2011). This is similar to MPs and caseworkers, although the staff at constituency offices must deal with a much wider variety of issues. Doctors focus on medical issues, whereas constituents visit their MP for a wide variety of topics, including benefits, housing, immigration, medical problems, neighbours, local events, business concerns, and more (see Chapters 3-6 for examples; Le Lidec, 2009; Norton, 1994).

Finally, there is a difference concerning the 'purpose' of the MP as compared to the doctor. A doctor's primary role is to see patients and give medical advice. An MP's set of "core tasks" (House of Commons Modernisation Committee [HCMC], 2007, p.56) is to sustain and hold government to account, and to debate and agree on legislation in the House of Commons (Barnes, 2011; House of Commons, 2010, 2013). It is uncertain how much this 'role' difference may affect constituency office interactions. All British MPs undertake casework. It takes up the largest proportion of their time, which is something some MPs resent (Gay, 2005; Korris, 2011; Loat & MacMillan, 2014; Wright, 2010). The debate over MP priorities has been documented in a House of Commons investigation (HCMC, 2007) regarding the role of the MP. It reports, "There must now be a real concern that MPs are so focussed on the parochial that they have no time for the national, let alone the international, picture" (HCMC, 2007). One testimonial to the investigation added, "What would do more than anything else to strengthen MPs at Westminster would be to relieve them of some of their (ever-growing) constituency duties...Even those MPs who agree that Westminster is their primary role often find themselves forced to spend an unreasonable amount of time on constituency casework..." (HCMC, 2007, Ev.18). This suggests that constituency casework is an undesirable and time-consuming component of an MP's job, which may or may not be considered central to the MP's activities. Constituents and MPs therefore may have a very different relationship, and consequently a different expectation of the kind of aid that will be requested or offered, when compared to patients and doctors, for whom aid is a primary and

expected part of the relationship (see Stivers, 2005, for an example of patient resistance when doctors prescribe ‘watch and wait’ instead of drugs or treatments). This will be further explored in relation to constituent requests in Chapter 3, but it is worth highlighting that there are many reasons to expect differences between data emerging from a doctor’s surgery, and data emerging from the surgery of an MP. I will now explore one final ‘type’ of institutional encounter that we can expect to have similarities with the constituency office: ‘street-level bureaucracy’.

#### *1.3.4 Street-level bureaucracy: Social support delivered to citizens*

Social services, such as tax assistance, loan agencies, and housing organizations, share topical content with the constituency office. Both the MP surgery and these bureaucratic agencies deal with citizens who are suffering from financial or social support difficulties. The same litany of problems comes through their doors: housing, debt, claiming and being assessed for benefits, housing, and so forth. People who work at social service delivery agencies, also sometimes called ‘street-level bureaucracy’ (Lipsky, 1980), interface between the agency and everyday citizens. Many of these agencies are run (sometimes indirectly) by the government (such as the Work Capability Assessment centres in the UK, which assess whether a citizen with a disability can receive public assistance funds, or must work), whereas others (such as the Citizens’ Advice Bureau in the UK) are charities. Given the topical similarities, it is worth discussing the literature that has examined these institutions.

Past studies have shown that the client, in social services settings, is in a difficult moral situation (Cedersund, 2013; Hydén, 1999). Generally speaking, the client is in (financial) difficulty, and in order to receive help he or she must argue that it is through circumstances beyond their control. As Hydén (1996, p.858-859) writes, “the right to be a recipient of help and support rests on the principle that such a right applies only to those individuals who have not consciously or intentionally put themselves into a situation in which they become dependent on the benevolence of others.” This results in clients either volunteering or being required to give accounts for their present difficulties, and accounts for seeking aid. For example, Ekström et al. (2013) report that student loan officials attempt to discover why debtors are having difficulty repaying their loan, and Rostila (1997) reports social workers using fishing devices to extract client narratives. Drew et al. (2010) also demonstrate that clients provide accounts for resisting advice in work-focused interviews. Constituents at the MP surgery likewise regularly give extended accounts of their difficulties, including accounts for seeking aid, and accounts of self-help prior to seeking the MP’s aid (see Edwards &

Stokoe, 2007), although it is rare for the MP or caseworker to elicit accounts, suggesting a different agenda than in medical care.

One substantial difference between many social services and the constituency office is that the MP office stands to benefit from assisting constituents in a different way. Social services are engaged in allocating scarce resources, and must do so fairly (Bruhn & Ekström, 2015), and be conscious of budget restrictions. Clients are thus placing a burden on the service, even while using it for its institutional purpose. As Lee (2011) points out, most services do not simply grant every request, but must screen requests for legitimacy. But for commercial businesses, requests are beneficial, in that they provide business. It is a similar situation for the MP. The MP is not bound to treating every case that arrives, but every time the MP provides aid to a constituent, there is an increased likelihood that the constituent will vote for the MP. This is the creation of the ‘personal vote’, discussed earlier in Section 1.2.1, and it allegedly is the primary reason most MPs engage in casework (Butler & Collins, 2001; Cain et al., 1987; Parker & Goodman, 2009). Despite the benefit that casework provides, constituents still supply accounts for their presence, creating a rather paradoxical set of data, in which constituents act as though they are burdening the MP, but the MP treats the constituents as providing benefit. This will be explored in Chapters 3 and 4. For now, the important point is that the constituency office has this potentially unique quality, compared to other social services.

In summary, I have shown that the constituency office is an institution with unique possibilities. It straddles the line between business and social service, depending on how participants orient to the potential benefits and burdens. It runs itself as a ‘surgery’, much like a doctor’s office, but deals with a much wider variety of issues. It is not the first place a constituent goes when in need, but the last. It is not a public place in which to interrogate politicians, but a place in which to use their connections and expertise. Most interestingly of all, the constituency office is not the primary purpose of the MP’s job. While the MP’s role as a politician may take centre stage in an interview, the MP takes on a new ‘role’ as a social service official when meeting with constituents. There is much to investigate about the constituency office that we have not yet seen in other institutions.

#### **1.4 Summary and research questions**

In this chapter, I have reviewed the literature that pertains to the current investigation of communication between citizens and their elected representatives at the constituency office. I have evaluated existing political communication studies and political discourse analysis, and

found their goals and results to date to be uninformative about the site in question. Prior research on constituency casework has neglected the interpersonal conversations that take place at the office, focusing mostly on election benefits and the ‘personal vote’. This all suggests that there is much to examine in the conversational practices at the constituency office.

Next, I reviewed the conversation analytic literature of institutions related to the constituency office. I found that politicians’ talk has been examined while in public spaces and news media, but not in one-to-one conversations with constituents. I have discussed other institutions like doctors’ offices and social services and noted that there are both similarities and differences, including the way the office is treated as a last-resort, and the way that it is treated as a secondary part of the MP’s job. These are empirical points to be discussed further in the analytic chapters, but it is worth noting, while discussing the relevant literature, that the current institutional literature can be used as a scaffold, but not a replica, when analyzing constituency office interactions.

To conclude this review, I will outline the research questions that have guided the current thesis overall. I address these questions in the chapters that follow.

- 1) How do constituents present their trouble to the MP and caseworkers? (See Chapter 3).
- 2) How do the MP and caseworkers respond to constituent troubles? (See Chapter 4).
- 3) What is the overall structure of these encounters, from opening to closing? (See Chapters 3 and 4).
- 4) How does the MP’s political affiliation or status as a politician come to be invoked in these interactions? (See Chapter 5).
- 5) How does the MP build a personal vote, if at all? (See Chapter 6).
- 6) How do constituents manage their relationship to the MP, as residents, voters, and aid-seekers? (See Chapters 3 and 6).

With these research questions in mind, I now turn to discussing the methods with which I approached these questions and this project.



## **Chapter 2:**

### **Methodology**

#### **2.0 Introduction**

In the previous chapter, I discussed the major gaps in the literature, particularly the lack of research into conversations and interaction at the constituency office. We know very little about how constituents interact with their Member of Parliament (MP), or how they seek help at the constituency office. I outlined the goals of this thesis, which centre on not only updating our knowledge of what constituency casework comprises, but moreover doing the first analysis of the social organization of the constituency office, and how social actions like requesting help are accomplished through interaction. In this thesis, I aim to develop a detailed picture of communication between MPs and constituents, which requires analyzing recordings of actual interactions between these parties. In this chapter, I will describe how I collected the data corpus of audio and video recordings presented in this thesis. I will also describe the participants, as well as how the constituency office is organized.

In Section 2.1, I will start by explaining what constituency offices are, and I will distinguish between the three types of actors that are found there: MPs, caseworkers, and constituents. Next, in Section 2.2, I will give a brief outline of the practicalities of data collection (such as recruitment and equipment) and the composition of the corpus. I also will describe the difficulty in acquiring participating offices. In Section 2.3, I will discuss the ethical considerations raised by this research and how they were managed. Finally, in Section 2.4, I will explain the conversation analytic approach to analyzing the recordings, including the transcription and analytic procedures of this method. Conversation analysis has guided this project in many ways, from the collection of live conversations, to the analysis of the data; an understanding of conversation analysis is essential to understanding the results of this research.

#### **2.1 Constituency offices**

MPs in the United Kingdom (UK) are responsible for creating and modifying policies and laws to govern the country. MPs debate which policies to adopt in the House of Commons. MPs also scrutinize the governments' decisions, and represent the citizens of their local districts in the House of Commons. MPs differ widely in how they accomplish this representation. Despite the differences (House of Commons, 2013; see Chapter 1, Section

1.2.1), all MPs in the UK claim to meet with the constituents they represent, and undertake constituency casework.

At constituency meetings, constituents may offer criticisms of government policy or opinions about law currently under debate (House of Commons, 2013), but most commonly they ask for assistance with problems they are having. In order to maintain a local place of work and a local point of contact in the constituency, MPs run constituency offices, and hire staff to assist them there. These offices, and the interactions between constituents, MPs, and staff that take place there, are the subjects of my research. In this section, I will outline the different participants who appear at the constituency office, and how the office and surgeries are structured.

### *2.1.1 Members of Parliament and constituency office surgeries*

There are three types of participants at constituency offices: Members of Parliament, caseworkers and constituency staff, and constituents. In this section I will describe each of these participants, and their presence at the office., starting with the MP.

MPs are the elected representatives of the geographical area that is the constituency. The boundaries are regularly redrawn to achieve a fair distribution of population, so that each MP represents approximately the same number of a country's citizens. In the UK, this is approximately 90 000 constituents per MP (House of Commons, 2013). This equalizes both the responsibilities of representation for the MP, as well as equalizing the 'value' of every citizen's represented vote in Parliament (although in practice the representation varies by several thousand citizens: Gussow, 2012; Office for National Statistics, 2013). As part of their role as representatives, MPs maintain contact with the citizens who elected them, and since medieval times have offered help to individual constituents in need (House of Commons Modernization Committee, 2007). The constituents are residents within the constituency borders. The MP in this study represented a constituency of England in the United Kingdom, and was a member of the political party that held the majority of Parliamentary seats (and thus was the 'government' party) at the time of study. The MP will otherwise remain anonymous.

MPs designate specific times to visit the constituency, since they spend most work weeks at Parliament, in London (even if they are working on constituency casework via email while in London: Korris, 2011). MPs are usually only available in the constituency on Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays. In the United Kingdom, it is expected that MPs run 'surgeries', weekly or biweekly meetings at their constituency offices, during which a

constituent can make an appointment to speak with their MP directly (constituents can also speak to the MP's staff during business hours all week, see 'Caseworkers' below). The MP in this study ran surgeries approximately biweekly, although occasionally during the study period there were additional surgery days offered on off weeks. Appointments for surgery meetings are taken over the telephone on a first come, first served basis. These surgery meetings run between ten to twenty minutes long, although they can be longer or shorter. At the constituency office in this study, constituents were instructed that the meeting would last approximately fifteen minutes, although this timeframe was treated as flexible during the surgeries themselves. Some MPs will take surgery appointments all day, and some for a few hours. The MP in this study allotted two to four hours per surgery day. The MP in this study typically took eight meetings per surgery day, although sometimes constituents did not show up for their appointments. Some MPs run surgeries during usual business hours, others on weekends, and some (as with the MP in this study) in the evenings. Although these surgeries are run so that constituents can see the MP in person, the caseworkers typically write the necessary letters, or phone the appropriate agencies, to achieve the constituent's desired outcome.

### *2.1.2 Caseworkers*

Caseworkers and constituency staff are non-elected people who work at constituency offices, typically as employees of the MP. Occasionally caseworkers are volunteers, but the two caseworkers in this study were full-time employees. Caseworkers provide support to constituents, and typically spend the most time directly interacting them. At the constituency office studied, the caseworkers were present during regular business hours (9-5, Monday to Friday), as well as staying late on surgery days and attending certain special events on evenings or weekends.

Experienced caseworkers are very knowledgeable about the services available to citizens, and regularly interact with, and send constituents to, these other services, including other government agencies, charities, and so forth. This included the UK's Citizen's Advice Bureau, solicitors, and local councils. Caseworkers are able to access an MP hotline (in fact it is predominantly the caseworkers who do this, *not* the MPs themselves, despite the title of the service), which provides them with information about policy, regulations, options, and specific case information. Caseworkers can also contact other governmental agencies internally such as benefits divisions or pension services that constituents cannot access. For example, caseworkers and MPs can call the UK Border Agency for information about

immigration cases, but there is no way for a member of the public to do the same. Some offices divide casework according to topic (with one caseworker taking all of the ‘housing issues’, another taking all of the ‘benefits issues’, etc.), and others, as with the surgery in this study, take cases in a more ad-hoc fashion. Once a constituent’s case has been initially seen by a caseworker, that caseworker typically manages all details of the case and is the main point of contact for that constituent until the case is closed.

### *2.1.3 Constituents*

‘Constituents’ are the residents of a ‘constituency’. A person may also be considered a constituent if their business is located in the constituency, although such a person can only contact the MP for business-related issues, and must contact their home residency MP for any personal issues. Non-voting citizens are still considered constituents (in the UK, the voting age is 18 years old), in that they are represented by and can appeal to the local MP. Non-citizens (resident immigrants, for example) are not officially represented by the MP, but they do still appeal to the constituency office for aid. The UK uses the electoral method of ‘first-past-the-post’, in which constituents vote for representatives, and whoever earns the largest total votes among the candidates is the winner. This means that a candidate does not need more than 50% of the vote to win, only the greatest total, which could be – and regularly is – only 30% or so of the votes. No matter how the constituent may have voted in an election, they are represented by the winner, and may expect to be fairly represented in Parliament by this winner. Constituents may also expect to be given aid by their MP, regardless of whether they originally voted for that candidate. Although some constituents mention their support for the MP’s party in my data corpus, the MP and caseworkers expressed that such statements of support do not influence the aid offered. The constituency office will even help citizens who have failed to vote at all; one caseworker mentioned that a constituent claimed to have voted for the MP in the last election, but his voting record showed he had not voted. Caseworkers can access the record of whether a citizen voted or not, but the vote choice remains a secret ballot.

The constituents in the current study formed a diverse group, although they were all from one constituency. My study did not record demographic information as such details were taken to be irrelevant until explicitly discussed by constituents themselves in the surgery meetings (see Section 2.4, Conversation analysis). Conversation analytic studies often take this stance towards demographic information, so this is in keeping with the conversation analytic tradition. However, a guide to the apparent demographics is in Table 2.1.

*Table 2.1: Demographics of data corpus*

<b>Demographic</b>	<b>No. of constituents</b>
Male voice	28
Female voice	40
British accented voice	62
non-British accented voice	6
Stated preference for MP's political party	2
No political preference stated	66
<b>Total number of constituents</b>	<b>68</b>

Constituents also brought a diverse number of issues to the constituency office, which matches data collected in other studies of constituency offices (Cain, Ferejohn & Fiorina, 1987; Gay, 2005; Le Lidec, 2009; Norton & Wood, 1994; Rawlings, 1990a, 1990b). A summary of the issues and topics that constituents brought to the surgery in the data corpus is in Table 2.2.

*Table 2.2: Concerns raised at constituency office*

<b>Topic/issue of concern</b>	<b>No. of telephone calls</b>	<b>No. of surgery meetings</b>
Making surgery appointment	2	n/a
Call with other agency (not a constituent)	21	n/a
Benefits	7	4
Housing	9	0
Immigration	2	3
Neighbour disputes	5	4
Problem with local council	3	6
Problem with other third party organization (incl. businesses, employers, and services)	5	6
Other	4	2

*Note: This table outlines the topics of concern for constituents calling or visiting the constituency office. Only one category was assigned per call or appointment. Where interactions covered multiple*

*topics, the leading topic discussed was used. The 'Other' category includes: Repatriating a sick relative, getting publicity for a petition, information on a school trip, taxes, and those unclear due to brevity of call.*

In this section, I have provided an overview of what a constituency office is and who its regular participants are. Next, I will discuss what data was collected, and the logistics of data collection and recruitment.

## **2.2 Data collection**

In this section, I will discuss how participants were recruited (Section 2.2.1) and the practicalities of collecting data (Section 2.2.2). I will describe how offices were recruited to take part in the study, and the difficulty in finding interested and consenting offices. I will also describe how individual constituents were recruited at the participating offices. Subsequently, I will describe the practicalities of setting up the audio and video recorders. In total, 12.5 hours of conversation were recorded. Five hours (58 interactions) were telephone conversations, and seven hours (25 interactions) were video recordings of surgery meetings.

### *2.2.1 Recruiting the participants*

Recruitment was divided into two stages: first, recruiting the MPs and office staff, and second, recruiting the individual constituents.

The first stage of recruitment was to recruit a constituency office. For the first few months of research, constituency offices were contacted by a mixture of letter, email, and telephone calls, detailing the research and requesting to meet someone at the office to discuss the possibility of making recordings there. Offices in the U.K. (national legislature of Westminster, 203), Scotland (devolved legislature of Holyrood, 54), and Canada<sup>1</sup> (national legislature and provincial legislatures, with politicians from both Ontario, 50 and Québec, 59) were contacted. 24 offices responded to initial contact, and two out of 366 offices agreed to participate. Non-responding offices were re-contacted by email up to two more times, unless a refusal occurred. Each office varied in its reasons for declining to participate, but the main concerns were time commitment, legality, and privacy issues. One of the two participating

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<sup>1</sup> Given that I (the author) am Canadian, I was interested in how the countries compared. Both Canada and the U.K. use a similar system of government, but engage in different styles of constituency service. It also seemed wise to cast a wide net during recruitment, to maximize the chances of recruiting other offices.

offices (in Québec, Canada) dropped out of the study, leaving only one office in the UK participating and contributing data to the final corpus.

Attempts to contact offices continued for eighteen months (2013-2014). At this point, recordings were already underway at one office, so preliminary analysis and results were available. In later attempts to recruit offices, these preliminary results were used as a 'hook' (see brochure in Appendix C): instead of asking to carry out research from the beginning, meetings were scheduled with MPs in order to present preliminary findings that the offices may have found useful. At these presentations, the possibility of participating in the research project was broached. Although this method was much slower, more offices were willing to have an initial meeting, making it possible to actually discuss participation with them. It was clear from many rejections that the project was not well understood, as many offices cited the inability to participate in 'interviews', which was not an accurate understanding of the project. Using the preliminary results 'hook' was useful in passing these initial rejections, but did not ultimately result in other recruitment.

Further attempts to recruit offices were made via constituents who volunteered to contact their local MP and vouch for the project, and by writing to the Speakers of the various legislatures (at the advice of the British Parliamentary officer Black Rod) to request a discussion and potential publicity or official endorsement. As some rejections from offices cited the 'unacceptable' practice of recording constituents, letters were also written to the Canadian Privacy Commissioner and the UK Parliamentary Standards Commissioner. None of these attempts at contact were successful, and none received a reply.

The second stage of recruitment involved requesting participation of constituents (see Appendix B, for information and consent forms). This was done on a call-by-call, meeting-by-meeting basis. When the constituents called the office or came to a surgery, they were presented with the possibility of participating (see Section 2.3.1, Informed consent). Four constituents declined to participate in video recordings (out of a possible 29), and three declined to participate over the telephone (out of a possible 61 calls where informed consent was requested). In other words, the vast majority of participants agreed to participate, and most did so without asking any questions about the research (see Speer & Stokoe, 2014, for a discussion of participants hurrying through the consent procedure). 11 calls were deleted due to a failure to achieve informed consent.

### *2.2.2 Practicalities of data collection*

Data for this research consisted of audio and audio-video recordings of Members of Parliament, constituency office staff, and constituents. Audio recordings were made of telephone calls. Audio-video recordings were made of surgery (i.e., face-to-face) meetings. Once the office agreed to participate (see 2.2.1 Recruitment), the staff were briefed on the use of the recorder (for a list of equipment, see Table 2.2). It was important that they could turn it on and off, so that they did not record conversations without consent. Office staff were given information sheets that they could keep by their desk to answer any questions that might arise when asking permission to record.

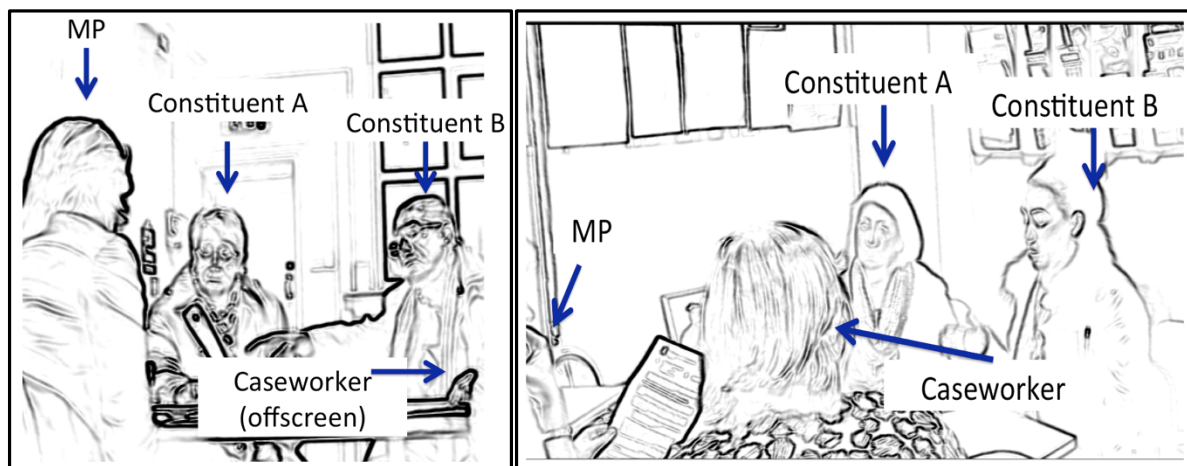
For telephone calls, a digital recorder was connected through the telephone jack in the constituency office. The audio recorder was connected to the telephone using a feed from the telephone jack. A jack extension with a microphone feed was plugged into the audio recorder. Audio recordings were made with a digital Olympus VN-8100PC recorder (see Appendix D). The recorder was left at the desk of the caseworker, by the telephone, so that it was easily accessible to turn on and off as required. The call taker, the caseworker, was instructed to turn it on in the morning, and off at the end of the day. This was deemed easier for the office staff than having to remember to turn on the call before answering the phone. It was important that the openings of phone calls be recorded, as these can be very informative (for example, see Schegloff, 1979), so it was necessary to have the recorder on all day to avoid problems due to forgetfulness. The caseworkers were instructed to turn off the recorder if a constituent declined to participate. The caseworkers were also able to exercise personal judgment and not ask certain constituents to participate. The caseworkers were concerned that some constituents were too distressed to participate, and so they sometimes chose not to ask constituents to participate at all. Some calls were recorded without achieving informed consent and these calls were deleted from the corpus before analysis.

When asking for constituents to participate over the telephone, operators were asked to say, “Before we start, we are recording our phone calls for research and training purposes, would you mind if this call is recorded, or would you like me to stop?” (For more on the procedures designed to handle ethics and consent, see the Section 2.4, Ethics, below). For in-person surgery meetings, I was present to ask constituents to participate, and offered participants information sheets and had them fill out consent forms (see Appendix B for copies of these documents).

During surgeries, constituents sat face-to-face with the MP and caseworker (see Figure 2.1). This made it difficult to capture faces from both sides of the conversation, and where a



choice had to be made between which side to record visually, constituents' faces were chosen. Not all surgeries occurred in the same geographic location. An MP regularly takes surgeries around the constituency, especially if it is large, or comprises a set of smaller towns instead of one city neighbourhood, and uses a local community venue. The researcher attended each geographic location to set up the camera. Video recordings were made using a Canon Legria FS306 recorder. The camera needed to be set up at least five feet away from the speakers, so as to include as much context in the visual recording as possible (see Figure 2.1). Typically, it was placed on a nearby table, or on top of other office items, such as photocopiers, stacks of books, or boxes. The video camera had a small, three-inch tripod that allowed it to be installed on any fairly flat surface, and allowed it to be adjusted for angle and orientation. Constituents' faces were prioritized over the face of the MP (as seen in Figure 2.1), as there were a much larger number of constituents that participated and this contributed to the variety in the corpus.



*Figure 2.1. Constituency office setting. Two anonymized stills of the video data. Each still (left and right) is of a surgery meeting. Each still is in a different location in the constituency. Left, the location is at a community venue at a small town within the constituency. Right, the location is at the constituency office itself. The constituents sit opposite the MP and caseworker at a table.*

In the course of recording data, it was necessary to manage the concerns of confidentiality and anonymity, which were assured during the recruitment process. As offices regularly dealt with confidential information, such as National Insurance numbers, addresses, and sensitive stories, confidentiality was a primary concern for offices considering participation. In the next subsection, I will discuss my approach to the ethical issues raised by my project.

## **2.3 Ethics, Consent, and Confidentiality**

The information discussed at constituency offices was frequently of a personal and sensitive nature. People often discussed debt, ongoing arguments with spouses, family deaths, neighbour disputes, and health problems. In this section, I will discuss how, following standard procedures for the collection of data in the conversation analytic field, I strove for an ethical collection of data. I will first discuss the informed consent procedures, and explain my inclusion of certain recordings in my corpus that did not have ‘textbook’ consent. I will then discuss the way that the data was anonymized and stored in order to maintain the confidentiality of those that did participate. Finally, I will briefly note the withdrawal procedure.

### *2.3.1 Informed consent*

As recommended by the British Psychological Society (2010), I obtained informed consent from every participant whose recording is included in my corpus. Each participant was informed that they were being recorded for research, and training, and had the opportunity to withdraw from the research immediately, during recording, or at any future point. For video recordings of surgeries, the constituents were given an information sheet with more detailed material about the research and their possible role, and a consent form, which gave them options as to how their recording could be used (for these forms, see Appendix B). For constituents that were not consenting, the video recorder was turned off. On the telephone, the caseworker at the constituency office asked for consent at the beginning of the calls (usually – see below), and turned off the recording device if the caller declined to participate.

The constituency office staff did not receive consent forms, as they had already been intensively informed about the project and given the opportunity to withdraw. The caseworkers and MP were told they could request any recording be deleted, or stopped at any point. All the participants were over 18 years of age. This procedure conforms to the standard ethical guidelines published by the British Psychological Society (2010), the American Anthropological Association (1998), and the Canadian Psychological Association (2000), as well as the Loughborough University Ethics Committee (2012).

### *2.3.2 Asking for consent midway through a call*

Call takers occasionally forgot to ask for consent at the beginning of calls. This resulted in calls where consent was requested towards the middle or end of the conversation. As pointed out in Speer and Stokoe (2014) however, this does not necessarily make the recording

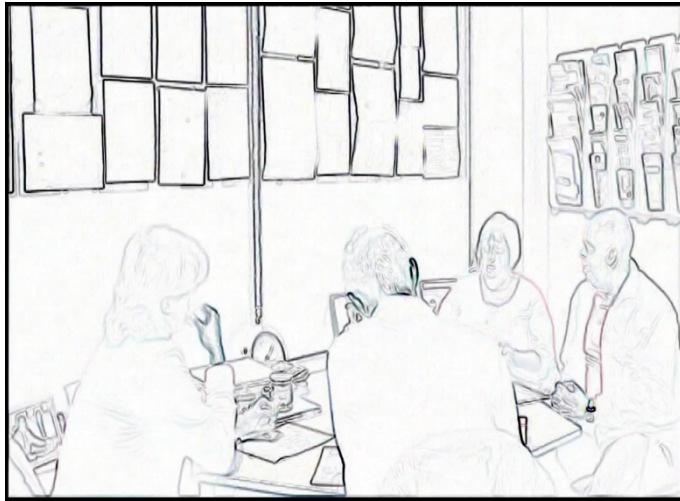
unethical; in fact, they showed that participants are better able to know to what information they are granting access, since the conversation has already taken place and all possible material for which consent might be necessary is already on the table. As long as the constituent gave informed consent at some point during the phone call, the recording was included in the corpus. When call takers forgot to ask for consent entirely (11 calls), the recording was deleted.

### *2.3.3 Storing and anonymizing collected data*

All collected recordings were kept on a password locked computer and/or encrypted hard drive. Data logs that tracked participants' information alongside recording code numbers held unanonymized information, and were locked with another password.

For each recording, a transcript was made. All recordings and transcripts that were made public, for example, in data sessions, conference presentations, or for publications, were anonymized. This entailed the following:

- 1) For transcripts,
  - a. Personal names were deleted, along with addresses, phone numbers, personal identity numbers such as National Insurance Numbers (UK), place names, and any other potentially identifying information.
  - b. These items were all replaced with pseudonyms.
- 2) For audio material,
  - a. Names, and all other information as above, were digitally silenced in the recording.
  - b. Voices had their pitch modified using Adobe Audition, to 3 semitones either above or below the unaltered voice, whichever was more difficult to recognize.
- 3) For video material,
  - a. Audio was modified as above.
  - b. The entire visual recording was given a permanent filter using Adobe Premier. This filter was an edge detector, which made all detail disappear from the video, leaving only outlines. For an example, see Figure 2.2.



*Figure 2.2. Anonymized still video image. An example of an anonymized still from the video recording.*

#### *2.3.4 Withdrawal from the project*

Participants were given the option to withdraw at any point. Constituents who had video recordings done were given information sheets to keep so that they could contact the researcher, me, at any point to withdraw and have all their material deleted. Constituency offices likewise had this information and option, and could supply it to any constituent who did not know how to get in contact with me. To date, no participants have withdrawn after recordings were made.

I will now turn to the question of analyzing my data, by giving an overview of my analytic framework: conversation analysis.

### **2.4 Conversation Analysis**

In this section I will describe conversation analysis and the orders of interaction that it attends to when analyzing recorded interactional data, as well as the conversation analytic approach to its transcription. I will conclude the section with a step-by-step description of how I conducted the data analysis.

#### *2.4.1 Conversation analysis: Method and analytic framework*

Conversation analysis (CA) arose as a way to understand human interaction and conversation; to demonstrate “that and how” (Garfinkel, 1967, p.29) human interaction and conversation were accountable and orderly to the participants of said conversations, and to show that social science could thus be conducted in an empirical and scientifically rigorous

way (Sacks, 1992, p.11; Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson, 1974). Harvey Sacks, one of the creators of this method, dismissed the then-popular belief that studying language had to entail studying formulated phrases. Instead, Sacks took inspiration from ethnomethodologists, such as Garfinkel (1967) and Goffman (1963), and focused on what Goffman called “the greasy parts of speech” (1964, p.133), or everyday, ordinary conversational talk. Sacks argued against social scientists of the day who “tended to view a society as a piece of machinery with relatively few orderly products, where, then, much of what else takes place is more or less random,” (Sacks, 1984a, p.21), demonstrating that there was ‘order at all points’ in social life. The resulting discipline, conversation analysis, has as its goal:

to see how finely the details of actual, naturally occurring conversation can be subjected to analysis that will yield the technology of conversation. The idea is to take singular sequences of conversation and tear them apart in such a way as to find rules, techniques, procedures, methods, maxims...that can be used to generate the orderly features we find in the conversations we examine. (Sacks, 1984b, p.413)

In other words, CA is a means by which to analyze talk for its orderly components, and through which to see how participants in conversations ‘do’ social things, and successfully interact on a regular basis. CA has allowed scientists across many disciplines to understand the orderly social life that pervades their study settings. For example, studies of telephone calls have shown how participants display and know whether or not they are recognized by their interlocutors (Schegloff, 1979); studies of courtrooms have shown how lawyers can make implications about witnesses, and how witnesses resist these implications (Drew, 1992); studies of doctor-patient interactions have found a way to encourage patients to relate all of their health concerns during a visit, instead of just one (Heritage & Robinson, 2011); and there are many others. For my work, CA will help me to uncover, for example, how constituents present themselves as ‘needing assistance’, how MPs offer help, how caseworkers demonstrate that they are busy working on a case and that progress is being made (or not), and how all parties orient (or not) to the fact that MPs are not simply ombudsmen – they are politicians, with a perceived role in government.

The fundamental observation of CA is that talk is organized into turns (Sacks et al., 1974), which are monitored by all participants to a conversation, so that the participants can

contribute at the appropriate time with the appropriate response for what they want to achieve in talking. Besides organizing opportunities to participate in conversation (Lerner, 2004, p.4), turns provide each speaker with an opportunity to accomplish actions, such as requesting, giving news, greeting, complaining, suggesting, and many, many more. As Sidnell (2005, p.207) writes, “Any phenomenon in ‘talk-in-interaction’ can be examined to see what job it is doing.” The various findings since the inception of conversation analytic studies have revealed how participants orient to these turns, such as where turns start and end, how participants design turns, what components can be relevant for the interpretation of turns, and how participants manage any difficulties that arise from using the turn-taking system. These findings, what Sidnell (2010) calls “keys”, or what Heritage (2005) calls “resources”, can be used as focal points for analyzing the data.

Turns provide a way to monitor the intersubjective understanding required for coherency and mutual sense-making (Pomerantz & Mandelbaum, 2005, p.151). People who engage in conversation continually coordinate their turns (Sacks, 1992, p.50), in order to maximize this mutual sense-making. This coordination is achieved by designing turns, not randomly or lackadaisically, to include specific features as required by the situation. Every turn is designed to deal with whatever was made relevant by previous turns, and also makes certain things relevant for the upcoming turn(s) by virtue of its design (Stivers, 2013, p.208).

Speakers monitor each other’s turn design for features that let them know at what point they can begin their own turn (Sacks et al., 1974), for example, but they also monitor for what a feature could be ‘doing’; speakers act as if they ask themselves “Why that now?” (Schegloff & Sacks, 1973, p.299), ‘that’ being some feature of the prior turn. Knowing or suspecting why a certain feature has been put into a turn gives people clues as to what action the other speaker is doing, and the overall intersubjective understanding or sense-making in the conversation is thereby continued.

In response to the prior turn, speakers produce what are often called ‘next actions’, or an utterance that has been made relevant by the prior turn. In other words, interlocutors use their turns to respond to prior turns, and address features or ideas that were brought up in the previous speaker’s turn. As Heritage (2005, p.105) writes,

By producing next actions, participants show an understanding of a prior action and do so at a multiplicity of levels – for example, by an acceptance, someone can show an understanding that the prior turn was complete, that it was addressed to them, that it was an action of a particular type (e.g., an invitation),

and so on. These understandings are (tacitly) confirmed or can become the objects of repair [see below] at any third turn in an ongoing sequence ...through this process they become mutual understandings created through a sequential architecture of intersubjectivity.

These actions and next actions, prior turns and next turns, come together to form sequences of action (Schegloff, 2007), such as an invitation sequence, in which there is an invitation and then an acceptance. The acceptance serves to confirm that many of the features of the prior turn were understood and, further, the acceptance demonstrates *to the conversation analyst* that specific features were understood and are being acted upon. These sequences can be analyzed for how the speakers progress through the sequence, how they deal with any trouble that arises in understanding or hearing, how they make the next item in the sequence relevant and how they design turns to respond to relevant features. By inspecting turns, speakers can understand themselves to be in the course of some sequence of action, such as 'requesting the salt'. Speakers can start sequences, and alter and end them. Sequences are "the vehicle for getting some activity accomplished" (Schegloff, 2007, p.2).

I have mentioned several times now the possibility for 'trouble' to arise in conversing. Trouble can be difficulties in hearing, or understanding a part of talk, or even a disagreement or challenge to what was just said (see Jefferson, 2015). Built into the system that CA is uncovering is a method for dealing with these problems and difficulties in maintaining intersubjectivity: it is called repair (Schegloff, Jefferson & Sacks, 1977; Schegloff, 2007, p.xiv). Repair is the practice of intervening in the current course of action to attend to a possible trouble in speaking, hearing, or understanding (Kitzinger, 2013, p.229). Speakers may repair any aspect of conversation that they believe has gone awry or created difficulty - that has become a 'trouble source'. Note that repair is different than correction; it is not limited to difficulties that arise due to errors, nor is it based simply on replacing or altering the trouble source to a 'correct' version (Schegloff et al., 1977, p.363). Repair provides speakers with the ability to 'fix' misunderstandings and breakdowns in intersubjectivity that would otherwise completely derail any mutual project of sense-making (which is what conversation, after all, is). Repair provides analysts with insight into what speakers orient to as trouble sources and what speakers consider to be crucial understandings for proceeding with courses of action.

Finally, a recent focus of conversation analysis is the study of how participants claim access to knowledge while interacting, and how these claims to access are supported or

disputed in talk, called epistemics (Heritage, 2013, p.370). One of the key components of designing turns for one's recipient is an orientation to what the recipient is supposed to know about the world, and CA has shown a pervasive concern among conversationalists for treating recipients of talk as sufficiently (or insufficiently) knowledgeable (see Enfield & Stivers, 2007; Heritage & Raymond, 2005). This has significant consequences for how turns can be designed, such as incorporating the appropriate degree of an 'epistemic claim', or a claim inherent in the talk to knowing some detail, and for the responses to talk that follow, such as making a stronger claim to knowing that detail, and implying that the previous speaker should be careful not to claim too much knowledge.

These are the core resources that have been discovered to date in CA, and each is important for analyzing a segment of talk. Next, I will discuss how I analyzed the data, using these core findings as tools to uncover the order present in the recordings.

#### *2.4.2 Transcription and analysis*

Once the data were recorded, they were transcribed using the Jefferson system of transcript (see Appendix A). This system uses normative spelling of a language with significant alterations to demonstrate lengthening, pauses, breathing, laughter, and much more. It is the standard method of transcription for CA, and focuses on precise details available in the recordings. Transcripts were updated as the researched continued, as there is never the possibility of including everything that potentially could be relevant for each stage of analysis (Hammersley, 2010, p.566).

In analyzing recordings, I used the conversation analytic concepts outlined above as perspectives from which to consider the talk in its context. Conversation analysis is generally regarded as an inductive method, which rejects applying theories or categories to data that were determined a priori, especially sociological attributes such as gender, 'power', or psychological concepts such as goals (Potter & Hepburn, 2007; Schegloff, 1996, p.172). From the early days of research, conversation analysts have promoted an 'unmotivated looking' at the data, at least initially, to see what patterns and features are apparent (Jefferson & Lee, 1992, p.521; Sacks, 1984a, p.27). Subsequently, all instances of the potential feature are 'collected' together for scrutiny. For example, to analyze offers, I collected every instance in which one participant offered something to another, and compared the instances for intrinsic similarities. I examined where offers appeared in sequences, and how the turn that built the action was designed. What was the turn in question making relevant for the next turn? What epistemic stance or status was the participant doing the offering claiming or



displaying? How did the recipient of the offer interpret it? Did they accept it, repair it, and what preferences and epistemic claims did they incorporate into their response?

Using the ‘next-turn proof procedure’ (see Heritage, 1984, p.245; Sidnell, 2013, p.79-80), in which analysts understand what a turn has accomplished via the displayed interpretation (by the interlocutor) embedded in the subsequent turn, I worked through each instance of a given feature. With each case that deviated from the pattern under scrutiny, I examined *how* it deviated, and possible explanations for the difference. Deviant cases, in CA, are not treated as necessarily disproving the existence or persistence of a practice. Instead, deviant cases are treated as potentially providing additional evidence for the circumstances under which a practice is used; these cases can actually be more revealing of the participants’ orientations to the practice (Sidnell, 2009, p.16).

As mentioned previously, my data are ‘naturally occurring’, which is precisely the kind of data for which CA was designed. CA was developed on conversations that happened naturally in the real world, ideally without researcher interference. CA is meant to uncover the natural, everyday way that people talk, in contexts they would inhabit whether or not the researcher even existed. Experiments and interviews interfere with the scientific discovery of how actual social life unfolds by putting participants into a research context, and pre-specifying what is important to ask and test. Natural data (or ‘naturalistic’, a term meant to indicate that participants are aware of being recorded, and thus may alter their behaviour in unspoken orientation to the fact of being recorded, see Potter, 2012b, p.438, p.445) has the benefit of permitting access to what people do in the setting of interest, rather than what they say they do or did (Potter & Hepburn, 2007; Potter, 2002; Sidnell, 2013), and rather than focusing on what the researcher thinks must have been important. It also permits the analyst to view interactions and aspects of life that would have occurred with or without the presence of the researcher; that is, it passes the “dead social scientist test” (Potter, 2002, p.541). This aids in understanding what happens for participants in that context, because we see it happen, and because it would have happened anyway. Thus the CA approach was preferable to interviews, as my research aimed to explore the world of the constituency office as it occurred for participants, and as it occurred everyday well before and after my study. Interviews would have reduced my data to a set of responses to questions that *I* created, with my own biases and concepts of social life, and this would not have captured the way that people interacted *in situ*, nor would it have captured anything beyond the recollections and opinions of participants. Following the CA approach, I wanted to research the social world as it happens, not as it was remembered, and not through a filter of my own creation.

## **2.5 Summary**

In this chapter I have described and explained how I collected the data to examine my research questions, their context and background. I have discussed the procedures I used for recruiting participants, the difficulties in getting constituency offices to participate and the relative ease of getting constituents to participate. I have shown that my ethical procedures for recruitment, anonymization, and storage, following standard and established norms. Most importantly, I have given an overview of the analytical process of conversation analysis.

I will now turn, across the next four chapters, to addressing my research questions and presenting the results of my analysis. I will present each finding in the order in which it typically appears in a surgery meeting or phone call. Therefore, I will begin, in Chapter 3, by examining the stories, troubles-tellings, and ‘requests’ that constituents present at the early stages of interaction. Following this, Chapter 4 will examine the offers that caseworkers and the MP made. Chapter 5 will examine the way that political topics were made relevant to the interaction. Chapter 6, finally, will address how the MP, caseworkers, and constituents build ‘rapport’, and how ‘rapport’ may be an unhelpful concept for approaching communication training. Using the conversation analytic methods described above, I will bring new insight into communication practices at the constituency office.

## **Chapter 3:**

### **Building a case for aid**

#### **3.0 Introduction**

In the previous chapters, I established the need to examine the interactions that happen at the constituency office of a Member of Parliament, and I described how I collected this data. I will now begin analysis of the data corpus. The purpose of this chapter is to demonstrate how constituents present their needs during constituency office encounters. Although the prototypical way for clients to communicate needs in a service encounter is through a request (Drew & Couper-Kuhlen, 2014), at the constituency office, I found that there are no direct requests for service. Instead, constituents present their problem with narrative descriptions of their problems, and these descriptions achieve recruitment (Kendrick & Drew, 2016).

Constituents' narrative descriptions simultaneously manage several interactional challenges as well as incrementally provide evidence for needing assistance; as such, the descriptions build the case that constituents need aid. The process of doing the narrative descriptions, and negotiating services, takes up the majority of each interaction at the constituency office. As a result, in addition to analyzing the process of 'building a case', this chapter will also give an overview of the overall structure of constituency office encounters. To achieve this, I will regularly return to a single case (first seen in Extract 3.2), so that the reader can see how these issues develop over a single encounter. I will also use extracts from across the corpus, to show that the analytic points are consistently patterned in the data.

First, in Section 3.1, I will outline how participants begin the business of institutional talk. The constituency office staff begin encounters with the phrase "How can I help", and constituents respond with a projection of an upcoming long turn. Next, in Section 3.2, I will show that constituents present their problem through a narrative description, rather than a request or a short 'gloss' of their difficulties. These are descriptions of the difficulties that the constituents have faced, leading up to their decision to contact the MP. Zimmerman (1992) has called these 'narrative descriptions', and finds that they are implicative of a request (see also Drew & Walker, 2010; Gill, 2005). The narratives are more extended than those reported in previous studies on emergency calls (e.g., Zimmerman, 1992) or doctors' offices (Stivers, 2002), typically lasting up to ten minutes. I will demonstrate how constituents design their narratives to display previously well-documented institutional features such as relevancy, legitimacy, and reasonableness. Both the constituents and the constituency office staff

manage the overarching relevance of what is *actionable* about the constituents' narrative (via possible means of assistance, such as offers or advice). Following this, in Section 3.3, I will examine what happens after a first offer of assistance has been made – namely, that constituents continue to build the case for receiving assistance, but make the complaint-aspect of their difficulty more and more overt. The constituency office staff also shift their talk after the first offer, focusing more on affiliating with constituents' complaints. Choosing affiliation as the relevant next turn removes the relevance of an offer, which is one way that constituency office staff can manage (and implicitly instruct) what is actionable. Finally, in Section 3.4, I will consider the omni-relevance of offers, and how all participants orient to the offers when they are absent.

### **3.1 Opening official business: How can I help?**

In this section, I will analyze how the constituency office encounters open. First, I will focus on the opening turns of the MP or caseworker (CW), which usually consist of the phrase 'How can I help'. I will show the way that the constituents respond to this standard opening – usually, with a turn that attempts to secure an opportunity to tell a narrative. I will contrast this with other styles of client openings at institutions, particularly the 'gloss' or 'request' format that directly conveys what the client wants or needs, as well as showing other examples of non-'direct'-style openings in institutions such as emergency calls or helplines. The purpose of this section is to show how participants 'end up' in the initial narratives that constituents tell: what work brings them there. I will also discuss the 'unknown' nature of the institution, in which constituents display evidence they are unfamiliar with the institution and its services. Stokoe (2013b) has found that there are certain institutions, such as family mediation, that are less well known by the general public. As a result, clients may face additional challenges when seeking services, given that the details of those services (what they are, who provides them, how they are accomplished, etc.) are uncertain or unknown. The consequences of the 'unknown' nature will be more crucial in the next section (Section 3.2), but some of the evidence for the unknown nature is present in the initial turns in office encounters.

Most, although not all (see Extract 3.7), encounters at the constituency office begin with the phrase 'How can I help' (or a variant), as can be seen in the following standard phone call opening (for transcription symbols, please see Appendix A):

### Extract 3.1: MP01.Phone-1KK\_01

1 CW: Michael ↑Johnson's office ↑Ann: speaki:ng how can I help you.

This phrase is also used in surgery openings, as in the following:

### Extract 3.2: MP01.Surgery-1KO\_01

1 MP: So. (0.2) How can we:: °how can we help.°

Note that ‘How can we help’ is used as well as ‘How can I help’. The ‘we’ is more frequently used in surgery meetings, because there is more than one person present (the MP *and* the caseworker are with the constituents), whereas on the phone there is only one person speaking for the institution. However, both the MP and caseworkers occasionally use the institutional ‘we’, wherein ‘we’ refers to a singular person as part of a larger institution. ‘How can I/we help’ is also used to convey the ‘official’ start to the encounter, by (re)starting the institutional business after a period of non-institutional talk, or after asking for consent to record the call. Such a ‘restart’ is seen in Extract 3.3, where the caseworker (CW) does a standard telephone opening, but then is interrupted by needing to ask for consent to record.

### Extract 3.3: MP01.Phone-1KS\_02

1 CW: Jacob ↑Moore's office, ↑Ann: speaking,=how can I help you.  
2 (0.8)  
3 C: Hello, Uhm Ann, this is- it's uh- Good morning.=Yes.=I  
4 am calling from::: Benin Socio-association?=  
5 CW: .hhh ↑Oh: hello there, .hh Uhm can I just let you know  
(3 lines omitted, asking consent to record)  
9 CW: [Oh, super. Okay, so you're from the Bee Ess Ay, Hello,  
10 (0.4)  
11 C: eYeah. (1.3) Hello- Yeah, (0.4) So you know the Bee-  
12 #uh- hh# Hello,  
13 CW: Hi. How can I help,

The constituent displays some confusion in how to restart the call, and possibly a concern that the phone call has been dropped (by reissuing the greeting, Line 12). The caseworker (CW) orients to this difficulty by first confirming her presence (reissuing the return greeting) and by re-starting the call, by repeating ‘How can I help’ (Line 13). This repetition shows how participants orient to ‘How can I help’ as a way to (re)start official matters.

It is common for ‘How can I help’ (as well as other, hearably ‘standard institutional’ openings, such as ‘Dr. Jones’ office’ or ‘Midcity emergency’, see Sikveland et al., 2016; Zimmerman, 1992) to elicit glosses or requests. For example, in emergency calls, one might respond “I need the paramedics please”, (Zimmerman, 1992, p.436) or in calls to a flight sales centre, “Yes I’d like to make a reservation for a flight ticket please?” (Lee, 2009, p.252). When making these initial responses, participants can design their turns to convey the degree of entitlement they have to make the request, and the degree of contingency required to fulfill it (Curl & Drew, 2008). Participants also display their familiarity with the services available (requestable) at the institution. However, there are many examples of institutional encounters where the client begins differently, with a bid for, or preface to, a narrative, and subsequently the narrative itself. For example:

Extract 3.4: MCE 20 15:207 (from Zimmerman 1992, p.438)

1 CT: Midcity police an’ fire  
 2 C: Hi um (.) I’m uh (.) I work at thuh University  
 3 Hospital and I was riding my bike home  
 4 tanight from (.) work-  
 5 CT: Mm  
 6 C: bout (.) ten minutes ago, .hh as I was riding  
 7 past Mercy Hospital (.) which is uh few blocks  
 8 from there .hh ( ) um ( ) I thinkuh couple vans  
 9 full uh kids pulled up (.) an started um (.)  
 10 they went down thuh trail an(h)d are beating up  
 11 people down there I’m not sure

In emergency calls, it is common for callers to open by requesting a service or help. In Extract 3.4, the caller directly begins a narrative, “I work at thuh University Hospital” (Lines 2-3). This is achieved by referencing their own positioning to the event, and leading those details into a description of a possible trouble and emergency-worthy event (Zimmerman, 1992, p.438-439). This style of opening has also been seen in helplines (“I’m concerned about...”, Potter & Hepburn, 2003, p.204), service centres (“I’ve installed office ninety seven and...” Baker, Emmison & Firth, 2001, p.51), and in calls to mediation centres (“I’ve been talking to somebody else, I don’t think there’s anything that you might be able t-” Stokoe, 2013b, p.292). It is difficult to assess how, or if, clients are designing entitlement and/or contingency into their turns when an overt request does not occur. Whereas earlier examples displayed a minimum entitlement to *make* the request at all (‘I need the paramedics please’), these examples circumvent putting a request on record, while still achieving recruitment and making a transaction of assistance relevant (Kendrick & Drew,

2016). The same lack of requests is seen in the data in this thesis. There are three potential reasons for constituents to avoid overt requests. First, Stokoe (2013b, p.293) has demonstrated that clients may choose this style of opening as part of conveying that an institution (and its remit) is unknown. Second, Heritage and Clayman (2010, p.76) have noted that the narrative design is “particularly useful for ambiguous troubles whose actionability may be subject to doubt.” Finally, many constituents in this data in this thesis have tried to get help from several different institutions and received different advice. At this point, it may be unclear what possible courses of action there are, let alone whether those courses of action are actionable, or whether the constituency office as an institution will attempt them. I will demonstrate these aspects (the unknown nature, the uncertainty of actionability, and the uncertainty that the constituency office itself will help) in the remainder of this section.

Let us return to Extract 3.2, which is a recording from a surgery meeting, and a face-to-face encounter with the MP and caseworker (CW). The constituent (C1) has come to the constituency office because he has been assessed as ‘fit for work’, meaning he is no longer eligible for disability state benefits. Although he is appealing this decision, the appeal has been repeatedly delayed, and as a result his benefits were cancelled anyway.

Extract 3.5: MP01.Surgery-1KO\_01 (continued from Extract 3.2)

1 MP: So. (0.2) How can we:: °how can we help.°  
 2 (0.9)  
 3 C1: Well, (0.9) I had ay: (0.4) assessment’hh. (0.9)  
 4 Eighteen months ago,  
 5 MP: Right,  
 6 (0.9)  
 7 C1: Which stated that I was (0.3) fit an’ capable, (0.6) For  
 8 work.=  
 9 MP: =Right,

In Line 3, C1 begins his turn with ‘Well’, displaying that he is orienting to the non-action confirming nature of his turn (Heritage, 2015): he is not giving a direct answer to the ‘How can we help’ opening. C1 then projects his narrative by mentioning that an event occurred eighteen months ago. This opening, by referencing a past event, necessarily raises the question of why such an event is relevant to the interaction now (Grice, 1975). It projects that C1 will explain or demonstrate the relevance of the past event, but requires the talking space to do so. The MP aligns with this projection; in saying ‘Right,’ (Line 5), he indicates his understanding that C1 has begun to do a telling, and that there is more to come. The

MP's turn also passes on taking a substantial turn himself, effectively granting talking space to C1. These opening sequences are common in the corpus, as in the following encounters.

Extract 3.6 involves a constituent (C) contacting the office to get help with a medical malpractice issue.

#### Extract 3.6: MP01.Phone-1KK\_03

1 CW: Michael Johnson's office ↑A:nn speaking how can I help you.  
2 C: °Hello there.° uh: I've been tryin' to send an email (.)  
3 uh:m but it keeps coming back as postmaster at mac dot com:  
4 uh delivery failed,=  
5 CW: =.hhH Ri:ght okay .hh uhm >just before we go on any<mo:re  
(4 lines, asking consent to record)  
10 CW: Oh great. Thank you. .hhH Right. So are you trying to email  
11 Michael or: me or  
12 C: Uh well y- uh-uh I don't really know >to be honest< I'm- I'm  
13 it's >a bit of< uh: (0.5) bit of a brick wall.  
14 CW: Okay? .hh How can I help then.  
15 C: °Well° basically what it is uhm: a-bou:t I-I suffer from uh-  
16 a disease called ankylosing spondylitis.  
17 CW: Yeah?

C's initial concern is that his email keeps bouncing, as he was attempting to email (rather than call) the office. After dealing with the consent question, and determining that C is uncertain who to contact, CW reinitiates the 'How can I help' statement (Line 14). C now follows the usual pattern: the well-prefaced turn (Line 15) indicates both a bid for a longer turn, and non-conformity to the 'How can I help' adjacency pair. C uses another set of practices common in the data corpus, prefacing his turn with 'basically' and 'what it is' (Line 15). These statements continue to show C's orientation to presenting a difficulty, but needing more turn space to explain it. Inevitably, these phrases will not preface a *gloss* in this data corpus (such as 'basically, I'm dealing with medical malpractice and I need help with X'), but instead serve to tie contextual details to the difficulty. Prefacing the contextual details with 'basically' conveys the sense that these details are necessary preliminaries for stating the difficulty itself. CW aligns with C's bid for a turn, saying 'Yeah?' (Line 17). This serves to show that CW is passing on taking a turn, and that she is expecting more to come. Similarly, in Extract 3.7, CW treats C's explanation as in-progress. Extract 3.7 is another telephone call to the office.

#### Extract 3.7: MP01.Phone-2AH\_02

1 CW: Good morning Jacob Moore's office,  
2 C: Oh good morning,=Yes. Uhm, I wrote to Jacob Moore recently  
3 about a problem that (.) my daughter was having. .hh Uhm,



4 (0.8)  
5 C: We- we- (0.3) <We're not sure how things work> with, >e-  
6 but- m-< .hh She At the moment she's Uhm, out of work.  
7 She's=  
8 CW: =[Okay, ]  
9 C: =[out of] work at the mom[ent.]  
10 CW: [Yea.] (.) Yea.

CW gives continuers (Lines 8 and 10) that align with C's turn *as* a narrative, and as part of talk that has not yet arrived at an actionable difficulty. C begins her turn with contextual details ('At the moment she's uhm, out of work.', Line 6). These details are necessary preliminaries for building a case for the constituent needing aid, and incrementally work towards achieving recruitment of assistance (see Section 3.2 on how these details achieve recruitment of assistance). In fact, although they could be called 'preliminaries', this implies that something different or some 'main' component is upcoming (like a request). As I will continue to show (see Section 3.2), these initial narratives are not preliminary at all (nor are they 'pre's – see Section 3.2.2). Launching into description both bids for space to tell a narrative, *and begins* the narrative itself. As long as the caseworkers show alignment with this action, the constituents continue their description of difficulties. There is no later request or 'main' component to which these descriptions are preliminary.

Extracts 3.6 and 3.7 also show evidence of what Stokoe (2013b, p.293) calls 'unknown institutions'. There are, at a minimum, uncertainties expressed, and at maximum, ignorance about what the constituency office does and or is willing to do. Both cases show the constituents saying they are uncertain: 'I don't really know >to be honest<' (Ext. 3.6, Line 11) and '<We're not sure how things work>' (Ext. 3.7, Line 5). These expressed uncertainties do more than portray the 'inner thoughts' of the constituent (if they do that at all: Potter, 2012b); they account for the constituents' calls, and help in the process of recruiting assistance (Kendrick & Drew, 2016, see Section 3.2) by making it relevant for the MP or caseworker to offer assistance. However, the constituents' turns also suggest a lack of familiarity with the office and its procedures, such as not knowing who to email (or possibly not knowing that there was more than one person to email) in Extract 3.6 (Lines 9-12), or, in Extract 3.7, expecting to be recognized merely by stating that one has written recently about a problem (Lines 2-3). There is further evidence, such as constituents frequently mentioning being referred from a third party agency or friend, seen in Extract 3.8 below.

#### Extract 3.8: MP01.Phone-2AH\_04

1 CW: .hhh Jacob Moore's office, ↑Gail: speaking, How can I help

2           you.  
3 C:       Aoh hello Gail:,=I was ↑told to ring you by a friend a' mine  
4           <Robert Clements.>

On Line 4, C mentions that he was referred to the office by someone who is already a 'client' of the office. As Stokoe (2013b) discusses, such comments indicate that constituents do not go to the constituency office as a first port-of-call, as the go-to agency for their difficulty (corroborated by Young Legal Aid Lawyers, 2012). Constituents are referred to the office by other agencies or by acquaintances. These utterances also account for calling, especially in a sequentially early position (Schegloff, 2007), as in Extract 3.8. In calls to mediation services, such mentions make it relevant for the call taker to explain the services offered (Stokoe, 2013b). At the constituency office, the staff never offer an explanation of services unless explicitly requested. As a result, constituents do not end up being officially informed of what services are actionable or requestable (this may be due to the very wide diversity of problems that the constituency office addresses). The consequences of constituents remaining relatively uncertain or uninformed about the services offered at the constituency office will be seen in how they design their ensuing turns.

In this section, I have shown that the constituency office staff begin the encounters with a standard institutional greeting, usually 'How can I help'. Constituents respond by opening a narrative sequence, through referring to contextual details and using other turn design elements such as 'Well...' or 'what it is...' that project longer turns. Constituents do not typically begin with requests or direct statements of needs. This mirrors certain openings of other institutions where the reason-for-calling has some element of dubious actionability (Heritage & Clayman, 2010). I have also shown that, in the initial turns, constituents betray evidence that they are uncertain of or uninformed about the services offered by the constituency office. This 'unknown' nature of the institution (Stokoe, 2013b) has consequences for how constituents design their ensuing narratives. In the next section, I will analyze how constituents design their ensuing narratives about their difficulties, which were projected by their initial turns.

### **3.2 Constituent narrative descriptions and building a case for assistance**

In this section, I will analyze what happens once constituents have secured the floor to talk (as described above in Section 3.1). Constituents launch a detailed description of the circumstances that have preceded their visit to the constituency office. These descriptions are quite extended, lasting up to ten minutes, and typically involve an explanation of the

history of the problem – as such, they are ‘narratives descriptions’ (Halkowski, 2006; Zimmerman, 1992). In this section I will show that narrative descriptions achieve recruitment (Kendrick & Drew, 2016) of an offer of assistance, but they are not direct requests. I will also show that, as found in previous studies, constituents do work in these narrative descriptions to show that their problem is legitimate, and that they are reasonable citizens in unreasonable circumstances. Constituents occasionally do work to show the relevance of their case for the constituency office, but more often they do work to show how all other possible institutions are *irrelevant*. While highlighting these aspects of their difficulty, constituents avoid the action of complaining, by avoiding putting their stance towards an issue on record (Drew, 1998). Finally, I will discuss the challenges that constituents manage by doing these practices, namely the issues surrounding the ‘unknown’ nature of the institution, and potential contingencies (Curl & Drew, 2008) involved in procuring assistance. Although this section draws on past conversation analytic studies of institutional environments, and shows many features that confirm previous findings, it is necessary to analyze this material in order to understand how these details are used at the constituency office specifically, as well as to explain the unique interactional challenges at MP surgeries that are managed by these practices.

The constituent narratives focus on portraying the constituent’s problem as legitimate and relevant. Previous studies have shown that these two issues are regularly the most salient for seeking help from an institution. To portray the problem as legitimate, clients at an institution need to show that they are reasonable people (Curl & Drew, 2008; Stokoe & Hepburn, 2005), often facing unreasonable and severe difficulties (Stokoe, 2003; Heritage & Robinson, 2006), and that they have already taken appropriate measures to help themselves (Edwards & Stokoe, 2007). To portray the problem as relevant, clients do work to demonstrate how their difficulty is relevant to the institution in question, such as showing that the problem is ‘doctorable’ (Heritage & Robinson, 2006), ‘mediate-able’ (Edwards & Stokoe, 2007; Stokoe, 2013b), or ‘policeable’ (Whalen & Zimmerman, 1990). These interactional achievements (legitimacy, relevance) are cross-cutting and overlapping, as a turn or utterance can do work to demonstrate both relevance and legitimacy; for instance, a turn demonstrating the severity (and thus legitimacy) of an issue can also demonstrate the relevance of seeking expert help, or the reasonableness of the client who has put up with the problem until now. Overall, as previous studies have described (Schegloff, 1991, p.59; Heritage & Clayman, 2010, p.76), this work builds a sense of actionability: of the potential to do something about the issue.

Simultaneously, the initial narratives work to make an offer of assistance relevant. In other words, the narratives do work that regularly achieves ‘recruitment’ (Kendrick & Drew, 2016) that makes an offer of assistance a relevant response. The demonstration of need has been shown in several studies to be sufficient to make giving assistance relevant (e.g., Gill, Halkowski & Roberts, 2001; Kendrick & Drew, 2016; Sidnell & Enfield, 2014; Sterie, 2015), and it is the same with constituency office encounters. Drew (1984, p.131) has also found that “by just reporting some activities/circumstances, speakers can get recipients to make proposals for arrangements arising from what is reported”; giving details (or narrative descriptions, here) promotes the relevance of handling the upshot of those details. The constituents rely almost exclusively on recruitment as a means to getting assistance; there are almost no overt requests in the corpus. The few direct requests that exist are for low contingency, local issues, such as ‘I want you to please just listen’ or ‘I’d like to use you as a sounding board [for an idea]’, which can be satisfied immediately and often involve no change in course of action (i.e., the MP was already listening, see Steensig & Heinemann, 2014 for an opposite situation). I will show how lengthy narrative descriptions build a case for aid, and achieve recruitment.

In Extract 3.9, I return to the case previously mentioned in Extracts 3.2 and 3.5. The constituent (C1) is visiting to get help with fixing a date for his appeal, which has been delayed, and to get his benefits reinstated.

Extract 3.9: MP01.Surgery-1KO\_01 (continuing Extracts 3.2 & 3.5)

1 MP: So. (0.2) How can we:: °how can we help.°  
2 (0.9)  
3 C1: Well, (0.9) I had ay: (0.4) assessment’hh. (0.9)  
4 Eighteen months ago,  
5 MP: Right,  
6 (0.9)  
7 C1: Which stated that I was (0.3) fit an’ capable, (0.6) For  
8 work.=  
9 MP: =Right,  
10 (1.5)  
11 C1: An:d\_ (0.4) my dactor: ↓when I phoned him up to tell ‘im he  
12 just (0.3) °laughed his head off.°  
13 MP: °Mm,°  
14 (1.1)  
15 C1: An’ there’s a dear lady for twenty minutes, (0.9) °She  
16 pronounced me fit for #work.° (0.5) °But he turned around  
17 an’ said, ‘I’ve been looking after you for twenty years.  
18 (0.5) I know ffull well you’re no(h)t f(h)it for  
19 wo(h)rk(h),’° (0.8) An’ it’s gone on from there.  
20 MP: °Mm:::°  
21 C1: I put an appeal in\_ (1.5) ↓an’ it’s just been (0.2)

22 <wait. (0.3) °°wait. wait.°> =I'm waiting now to go up for a  
 23 tribunal, (1.9) an' every time I phone up, (.) they're  
 24 saying, 'oh you're top of the list, (0.2) but (.) °we  
 25 don't know [when it's going to be.°'  
 26 MP: [°Right,°  
 ((23 lines omitted: MP asks clarifying questions, he gestures to  
 indicate letters of support from doctors and experts))  
 49 C1: But now they've changed that now. I'm now on progressive.=  
 50 MP: =Right.=  
 51 C1: =Cause I am just [(#slowly getting worse# )  
 52 [((truck goes by outside, 2.6))  
 53 MP: Well I am- I'm so- (0.3) Well- an' I think- (0.3) uhm, if  
 54 we: were to take, >your what, your reference numbers and  
 55 everything [else,< ((addressing CW2))  
 ((29 lines omitted, continuing to describe who they will call, what  
 they are offering))

The core of C1's difficulty appears in Lines 15-19. Here, C1 contrasts the 'dear lady' with his doctor. The turn categorizes this person as probably not expert or professional (as opposed to his doctor, who is both). She made her assessment of C1 in only 'twenty minutes' (Line 15), whereas C1's doctor has 'been looking after [C1] for twenty years' (Line 17). Note the symmetry between twenty minutes and twenty years, which highlights the contrast. This classifies C1's assessment (as being ineligible for benefits) as unreasonable. C1 further shows the unreasonableness of his difficulty through the long waiting time to get an appeal. The wait time is characterized with a three-part, repeating list ('<wait. (0.3) °°wait. wait.°>', Line 22, see Jefferson, 1991), and an extreme case formulation ('every time', Line 23, see Pomerantz, 1986) wherein the appeals tribunal consistently fails to provide him with a date (Lines 23-24). C1 also shows how he has helped himself, in that he has seen his doctor, put an appeal in, and is calling the appeals tribunal repeatedly. This demonstrates that returning to the appeal's tribunal by himself is not a relevant course of action (it makes further self-help action irrelevant). C1 does further work to explain the legitimacy of his problem, as he lists how his disease has been reclassified several times (in the omitted lines and ending on Lines 49-51), which shows that he is 'just #slowly getting worse#' (Lines 51).

Finally, note that C1 does not put his own reaction to the assessment on record. Instead, the reactions are given as reported speech and actions from the doctor: on Line 12, the doctor 'laughed his head off', and on Lines 17-19, the doctor said he knew "ffull well" C1 was not fit for work. These reactions both portray the assessment as ridiculous – as literally laughable. However, any personal attitude towards the issue remains off record. Using a third party expert underscores the reasonableness of C1's difficulty. C1 focuses on

the offer-relevant components of his difficulty, namely the difficulty as a troubles-telling (Drew, 1998; Jefferson, 1988). Complaint-like aspects (such as putting his own emotions or stance on-record) would make affiliation a more relevant next turn, and could also undermine C1's position of being reasonable. Avoiding stance markers promotes the sense of C1's turns being 'reports', rather than complaints (Drew, 1998). Being 'a complainer' is also socially problematic (Edwards, 2005), but moreover C1 does not yet have evidence as to how the MP would respond to such a position. As we will see in Section 3.3, below, after the MP (or caseworker) starts an offer of assistance, constituents begin to go on record with their personal stances, and make increasingly complaint-like turns.

The MP responds with continuers and begins a sympathetic remark, 'I'm so-' (Line 53, which would have been 'I'm sorry'). As such, the MP positions himself as a troubles recipient. This corroborates findings by Stivers (2008): the MP reserves any indication of his own stance, mirroring the lack of personal stance displayed by C1. The MP immediately self-repairs to an offer of assistance, treating the offer as more relevant than an expression of sympathy.

In summary, both C1 and the MP treat the narrative description as a troubles-telling, not a complaint – but one that is offer-relevant. The MP, by making an offer, does not treat C1's action as a request. The alternative would be for the MP to 'grant' the request, indicate compliance, or do acceptance (Craven & Potter, 2010). C1's action achieves recruitment, as the MP offers assistance. C1's turns do work to show legitimacy and reasonableness, at the same time as building the relevance for an offer. While C1 does not do work specifically to show that his case is relevant to the constituency office, he does show that further self-help would be irrelevant and ineffectual.

Constituents in this data corpus all draw on the same set of practices as C1; they do not use every practice in every meeting, but they use many of these practices together. In Extract 3.10, the constituent (C) is calling the constituency office about getting a council support house. Note that C appears to have slightly laboured breathing, which may partially explain the lengthy silences.

#### Extract 3.10: MP01.Phone-1KZ\_01

- 1 CW:     How can I help you.  
2             (0.4)  
3 C:       Well, (.) I live on a boa:t,  
4 CW:     Yea.  
5             (0.6)  
6 C:       And I've just been diagnosed with kidney failyure,=

7 CW: =Oh:↓ dear,  
8 (0.5)  
9 C: And I am having (0.3) dialysis regular three times a wee:k,  
10 CW: Ye:a.  
11 (0.7)  
12 C: Urm,  
13 (0.7)  
14 C: Then I had a <heart attac[k,>  
15 CW: [↑Oh::↓ dear,  
16 (0.3)  
17 C: E<sup>h</sup>eh (0.4) An' (0.2) on the eighteenth of December I've got  
18 to go in hospital an' ha:ve (.) a triple heart bypass,  
19 CW: .hh Ri:ght?  
20 (0.7)  
21 C: Uhm, (0.5) Living on a boat has been (.) quite difficult  
22 for me at the moment,  
23 CW: eYeshh.  
((9 lines omitted: husband gets small state benefit; trying to get a  
house on land))  
33 C: Now I've been on [their list for,  
34 CW: [°Khkhmmhhh ((clearing throat))  
35 C: It'll be two years after Christmas, (0.2) An' I- I just  
36 can't seem to ↑get ↓anywhere with them,  
((15 lines omitted, CW clarifies whether she has tried bidding for  
houses yet))  
42 C: but I <have bid for some an' I've not (.) got them>, an' I  
43 know there's other people in (0.5) probably same (0.8)  
44 situation, (0.2) an' I don't know.  
((33 lines omitted CW clarifies what priority C has, and where she is  
eligible to get a house))  
78 CW: Okay, so can I take your name please,

C tells a list of troubles (Lines 6, 9, 14, 17-18), the upshot of which is she wants to move out of her boat and into a house (Lines 21-22). CW positions herself as a troubles recipient, showing empathy (Lines 7, 15) and treats the actionable issue as forthcoming until the appropriate moment (Lines 4, 10, 19, 23). C shows her trouble is legitimate with a list of significant health problems. C also mentions that her health problems are receiving treatment ('diagnosed', Line 6, 'having (0.3) dialysis regular three times a wee:k' Line 9, 'go in hospital', Line 18), and are therefore officially recognized. She has waited for two years before seeking further help (Line 35), which CW later confirms is a surprisingly long time – this suggests her reasonableness. Saying 'I just can't seem to ↑get ↓anywhere with them' also suggests that she has attempted to rectify the problem herself. There is further evidence of her self-help on Lines 42-44, when she says she has tried to bid for houses, but was unsuccessful. Overall, C makes efforts to build her case as legitimate and reasonable. As with Extract 3.9, C does not specifically show how her case is relevant to the constituency office, but does work to show that further attempts at self-help are irrelevant. At Line 78, CW makes a pre-offer move, by beginning to take the details of the constituent and opening

the process of giving assistance. Taking a client's name suggests that the institution is now 'admitting' the client, or committing to initial stages of assistance. This shows that the narrative description successfully built a case for aid and achieved recruitment of an offer.

Extract 3.11 shows a further example of the presentation of troubles. In this extract, the constituent was supposed to sponsor an immigration application, but when the United Kingdom Border Agency (UKBA) called him, there was some confusion. C thought the call was some other agency calling about his business, rather than the UKBA, and gave the wrong information. As a result, the application was denied. He has been unable to contact the UKBA to correct the information.

### Extract 3.11: MP01.Surgery-1KO 05

1 MP: Right. How can I help.=  
2 C: =Yes. Uhm, (2.0) I:'d sent a- #uh:# a sponsorship letter,  
3 MP: Right,  
4 C: To:: °uhm::° (1.4) °a cousin. (.) <And his wife,>°° (0.6)  
5 in Bangladesh. °For a (0.9) a visit.°  
6 MP: Right,  
((58 lines omitted, explaining the UK Border Agency called him at  
work to ask about the sponsorship, but he got his wires crossed and  
thought they were calling about his company - the UKBA would not  
explain why they were calling))  
64 C: You know, ih- it- didn't say >but the in-< implication that  
65 I ought to know:, (0.2) [who I-  
66 MP: [An' did you explain that- you know  
67 if I've made [two separate ]=  
68 C: [Well- >l- I didn't]=  
69 MP: =[<com munic ations,> ]  
70 C: =[because< they- they were just s]o::, uh- (0.5) I said  
71 look, .hhh 'Give me a few m- minutes, °( )° Give me a  
72 number I can call you back,' '↓No we don't ↑do that,' .hhh  
73 They wouldn't actually say well wh:o they were asking about;  
74 MP: >Did they give you their na:me,<  
75 C: No,  
76 (1.0)  
77 C: See- they don't,  
((60 lines omitted describing his worry since he's never had this  
trouble before))  
138 C: The penny had dropped. (.) after they put the phone down,  
139 (0.4) a few hours later, (0.3) that (0.2) clear:ly they  
140 were asking for,  
141 (0.6)  
142 MP: °Yeah°  
143 C: For me::,  
144 MP: Yeah,  
145 C: An'- an'- (0.7) But there's no way I could contact them.  
146 (0.6) There's <no:: way I can ↑contact them,> (0.4) By  
147 phone: or whatever. .hhh So all I needed to do, if at'all  
148 possible, was to get a messa(h)ge(h) to them,  
149 CW: Mm[:.  
150 MP: [°Yeah okay.°  
151 C: ↑Please ring me\_  
152 MP: Yeah. [I understand.



153 C: [Again.  
154 MP: Have you got the name:s of: the vari[ous people,  
155 C: [Yes.

C highlights the unreasonableness of his situation, as well as his efforts to remedy the situation, by reporting how the UKBA would not reveal who they were or why they were calling. He tried to uncover what was going on while on the phone (Lines 70-73). He portrays them as unhelpfully adhering to procedure, through reported speech where the UKBA claimed ‘we don’t ↑do that’ (Line 72) and ‘they don’t’ (Line 77). The present continuous tense of ‘to do’ implies that it is a habitual refusal, or an institutional requirement, and thus that the UKBA officer was sticking strictly to policy, and making no allowances for C’s particular case. C also refrains from indicating a complaint. For instance, on Line 70, he begins to say ‘they were just so:’, but self-repairs and restarts with a report of what he said, rather than indicating how he felt about the UKBA’s actions. C summarizes his trouble in Lines 147-153, minimizing the potential contingency of his need by adding ‘if at’all possible’. He also formulates the activity as something *he* needs to do (‘all I needed to do’, Line 147), rather than the MP or CW, implying there is no effort required from them. As with Extract 3.10, The MP responds with a pre-offer (Line 154), asking for the names of the sponsored people, showing that C has successfully achieved recruitment.

The extracts in this section show common practices: the initial stories of constituents highlight the reasonableness and legitimacy of their difficulty, through providing evidence of the length of time waited, the severity of their condition, the unreasonableness of other agencies, and the ways they have tried to help themselves, all while minimizing their personal stance on the issue. The practices used to accomplish these portrayals are overlapping; for example, while showing one has undertaken self-help, constituents also demonstrate the irrelevance of further self-help (which implicitly makes the help of the constituency office relevant). Previous studies have reported practices accomplishing similar concerns (e.g., Curl & Drew, 2008; Edwards & Stokoe, 2007; Gill et al., 2001; Stokoe & Hepburn, 2005). Constituents’ narrative descriptions do not function as requests, but achieve recruitment by expressions of need. Constituents allow constituency office staff to find the upshot (Drew, 1984) of their narrative descriptions, and the MP and caseworkers treat constituents’ narrative descriptions as offer-relevant (also see Chapter 4).

By engaging in the practice of narrative descriptions, constituents build a case for aid, and achieve recruitment (Kendrick & Drew, 2016). This practice neatly manages several challenges that constituents face when detailing their difficulties. Firstly, constituents must

manage the questions of legitimacy, reasonableness, and relevance. The narrative descriptions give details as to why constituents' cases are legitimate, and why constituents are reasonable and/or in an unreasonable situation. The descriptions also show the irrelevance of further self-help or further contact (without the help of the MP) to the agency in question. This implicitly makes help from the constituency office relevant. Secondly, constituents manage the difficulties of the 'unknown' institution (Stokoe, 2013b). It is difficult, for example, for constituents to know *how* to show that their case is relevant for an institution if they are uncertain of the institution's remit. Building a case for assistance 'side-steps' that difficulty, by managing the issue without directly tackling the problem (i.e., without asking what the remit of the office is). As mentioned above, it is also difficult to analyze the way a request is designed to manage contingency and entitlement if it is not, in fact, a request (Curl & Drew, 2008). Does one suggest that the contingency is so high, and the entitlement so low, that a request is not possible? Further, if there are elements of uncertainty about the constituency office, how can the constituents know what potential contingencies are at play in any given request? Even if they are, in fact, aware of the potential contingencies, they display being uncertain. Building a case for aid manages the uncertainty issue by showing entitlement, without having to determine what the contingencies are. Thirdly, constituents must manage the difficulty in requesting aid when they do not know a) what aid is possible (by any institution, or even by themselves), b) what aid is actionable (what will be effective), and c) what aid the constituency office will actually commit to. Finally, the constituents avoid precluding courses of action that the office could take to assist them. If the constituents make a request, they limit the next turns for the MP or caseworker to variations of granting or refusing. By allowing the MP or caseworker to initiate an offer, the constituent has not imposed a limit on what the office can suggest. Overall, the narrative descriptions conveniently skirt the issue of knowing what the constituency office is able or willing to do, meanwhile achieving recruitment of assistance and demonstrating entitlement.

Regardless of *why* constituents choose to continually build the case for aid, they do engage in this 'case building' throughout the encounters. Moreover, the process of building a case in this way (via a narrative that incrementally indexes proof of legitimacy, relevance, and reasonableness) allows for the constituency office staff to supply whatever aid they choose. In other words, the narratives create a space in which recruitment is achieved while navigating the possibilities of what is actionable.

At this point, conversation analysts may be wondering if ‘building a case for aid’ could be considered a ‘pre’ – a turn that allows for, and checks the contingencies for, a subsequent action such as a request (see Levinson, 1983, 2013; Schegloff, 2007). I rule out this possibility based on Fox’s (2015) analysis of pre-requests, in which she suggests that a phrase that analysts may label as ‘pre’ may accomplish the work of a request in conversation, and should be considered as such. Fox argues that pre-requests that check availability or permission also accomplish a demonstration of common ground, as well as economy of language (p.59), and that being in a service environment encourages the interpretation of an utterance as a request (see also Lindström, 2005), making a ‘full’ or ‘overt’ request unnecessary (Fox, 2015, p.52). In other words, if a pre is treated as sufficient for the action in question, the label of ‘pre’ hinders rather than helps our analysis. Although the narrative descriptions discussed above are ‘preliminary’ in the sense of determining what is actionable about the problem, they are interpreted as sufficient for offers. There is no direct request required, and direct requests for services are consistently missing in this data corpus. If it is challenging for constituents to determine what is actionable, as I have suggested, it would also be inappropriate for constituents to make a request in the absence of further information. As such, direct requests are absent, but the recruiting properties of building a case for aid are sufficient to progress the conversation forward. It is not valid to interpret the narrative descriptions as pre-requests because the participants do not orient to them *as* preliminary.

In this section, I have also noted that constituents avoid going on record with complaint-like statements. Constituents do not indicate their personal stance towards an issue during the initial narratives, and sometimes self-repair away from potential opportunities to display a complaining stance. If a stance is required, it is reported from a third party. I suggest that this is not only to avoid the social implications of being ‘a complainer’ (Edwards, 2005), but because constituents have not yet received evidence as to whether the constituency office staff are aligned with the constituent’s narrative. After receiving an offer, this changes. In Section 3.3, I will examine how constituents come to give complaints and clear indications of their stance towards their difficulty.

### **3.3 The post-offer environment: Complaints and resistance**

In this section, I will discuss what occurs after the MP or caseworker makes an offer of assistance (for an analysis of the design of offers, see Chapter 4). Specifically, I will show that constituents continue to build their case for aid, despite having received an offer, and

that they start to make more overtly complaint-like utterances. The constituency office staff alter their turns as well; instead of treating constituent turns as *offer*-relevant, they begin to treat the utterances more and more as *affiliation*-relevant. The constituency office staff end up managing what is treated as actionable by virtue of orienting to most post-offer utterances as affiliation-relevant, rather than offer-relevant.

I return again to the case from Extracts 3.2, 3.5, and 3.9, and the constituent who has been assessed as ineligible for benefits.

Extract 3.12: MP01.Surgery-1KO\_01 (continuing Extracts 3.2, 3.5, & 3.9)

53 MP: Well I am- I'm so- (0.3) Well- an' I think- (0.3) uhm, if  
54 we: were to take, >your what, your reference numbers and  
55 everything [else,< ((addressing CW2))  
((29 lines describing who they will call, what they are offering))  
84 MP: [And whether: we can: >you know,< wher- >exactly what the  
85 estimated time sc[ale [is,=  
86 C1: [((nods))  
87 CW: [Yeah.  
88 MP: =An' whether there's a way of gehtting it, sorted ou:t.  
89 C1: 'S Over tw-  
90 (0.3)  
91 MP: [( )]  
92 C1: [No: it's not ove==it's] Well it's Over twelve m-  
93 (1.0)  
94 C1: It was at==it's eighteen months since it fir:st,  
95 started  
((18 lines omitted discussing backlog of cases))  
113 C1: But uh:: it's now sixty weeks,=an:d, (.) ffrom >the  
114 beginning of< Ju:ly: °I've not been getting any- a Penny.°  
115 (0.9)  
116 MP: °No:..°  
117 C1: At all:,  
118 (0.4)  
119 CW: °Really,°  
120 (0.4)  
121 C1: Y:ep,  
122 (0.3)  
123 CW: Should get on the lower RATE if you're on,  
124 (0.6)  
125 C1: We:ll, <this is what I've told them:,>=  
((5 lines omitted, trying to remember what he said))  
131 C1: =an' I said- (0.4) 'I've just listened to uh:: a thingy on  
132 the: tele[vision; sa]ying that  
133 MP: [↑Mm-↓mm:. ]  
134 C1: °the government° said, (0.6) that (.) people 'oo know: that  
135 they're on waiting lists [fer:,  
136 CW: [Yeah,  
137 C1: getting to tribunal, (0.3) that people will be Pai:d, (0.3)  
138 until the trib↑#unal comes [↓up.'  
139 CW: [Yeah.  
140 MP: An' what'd they [say:,  
141 C1: [Well I am Too ol:d.=An' ↓they just turned  
142 aroun' an' sai',= °↓↓Oo:. We don' know anything a↑bout

143 [that.°']  
144 MP: [Tch. ]hh  
((20 lines omitted, C explains benefits rules he has been told))  
165 C1: They actually turned 'roun' to me and said, when: (0.2)  
166 °they told me this >over the phone,<° (0.2) 'Well you  
167 could get (0.2) uh: (0.8) jobseekers allowance.' (0.5) An'  
168 I went, 'scuse m[e:,  
169 MP: [Mm:  
170 (0.3)  
171 C1: >If I'm go for a jobseekers allowance<=↑↑I'm saying it's-  
172 [↓I'm FIT FOR ↑↑WOR:]k, [.hh  
173 MP: [Yeah. Fit for wor:k.] [Yeah.  
174 C1: Ah (h)ehh .hh I'm NOT fit ↓for work.  
175 (0.5)  
176 C1: ↑You know, #so::,  
177 (4.0)  
178 MP: .hh Wull- [have >you got the] Letter=  
((52 lines MP and CW2 look at letter, confirm that he shouldn't have  
had his benefits cancelled))  
230 MP: >>Well it sounds like we need to do two things<< there next  
231 week, or Monday;=>which is to call the< tribunal service,=  
232 C1: =[Yes. ]  
233 MP: =[>They'll want] me to< call: the-=our contacts uhm at  
234 the:: uhm (0.3) Job Centre, (.) an' ask them about why they  
235 STopped. (0.2) It sounds more- the problem  
236 [ was that it was ( ) ]  
237 C1: [Actually it was at the Job Centre that] I <asked,>  
((27 lines omitted, C repeats comments about Job Centre 'not knowing  
anything about that'))  
255 MP: =°Yeah.°=They could offer to look into it for you, rather  
256 than just washing their hands [of it,

The MP has now made an offer of assistance, to call up the appeals tribunal (Lines 53-88). C1 gives a minimal indication of acceptance, a nod (Line 86); however, at his first opportunity to speak he begins to reassert the details of his difficulty, namely the timeline (Line 89-113). C1 adds further details that show his situation to be legitimate and unreasonable, saying he is no longer receiving benefits (Line 114). These turns disattend the MP's offer of assistance, which displays resistance to the offer. However, this example shows one way in which resistance can potentially be collaborative (see Potter & Hepburn, 2003, p.218fn). In giving additional details, C1 shows he requires more help than the original offer contained, and the MP gives a new, additional offer on Lines 230-235 to address this. The MP characterizes the additional offer as arising from C1's talk ('it sounds like', Line 230), suggesting he is also treating the additional details as collaboratively contributing to the project at hand – finding what help is actionable and appropriate.

C1 has also begun to include more strongly stated stances. C1 begins a complaint on Line 125, explaining he has tried to help himself and get the assessment centre team to change their minds. C1 invokes an advertisement he saw from the government on Lines 131-

138. This is a particularly useful third party expert to mention, as the government is *the* expert concerning the rules about the benefits it offers. Furthermore, the government is an organization to which the MP belongs, so the invocation of the government simultaneously invokes the MP's expertise and authority in the issue. That the assessment team responded that they 'don't know anything about that' (Lines 142-143) shows them to be incompetent or unreasonable – incompetent if they do not know about a policy created by their own overseeing organization, and/or unreasonable if they are unwilling to enact said policy. C1 frames the report with '↓they just turned aroun' an' sai'' (Lines 141-142). This portrays the speech as surprising or arriving without warning, and as a reversal from the expected scenario. C1 repeats this framing for the next transgression he reports, when the assessment team inappropriately suggests C1 could get a different benefit. C1 also gives his own reaction to this suggestion, with highly marked prosody (loud volume, very high pitched, Lines 167-172). At this point, C1 has begun to give his own stance on the issue, portraying himself as responding indignantly. For instance, in saying "'scuse me:.' (Line 168), C reports his own speech as surprised, and as giving a highly entitled refusal. The MP demonstrates his affiliation with this stance by collaboratively completing C1's turn on Lines 172-173. When C1 repeats his complaint about the assessment team (the Job Centre), the MP shows further affiliation (Lines 255-256). The MP suggests a course of action that the Centre could have taken, and contrasts it with a formulation that portrays the Centre as dismissive 'just washing their hands of it' (Line 256). This positions him as on-side with the constituent, and as likewise criticizing the assessment team.

It is unusual, however, for the continued detailing to result in the recruitment of additional offers. Most of the time, the additional details are treated as affiliation-relevant, rather than action- or offer-relevant. The continued tellings no longer achieve recruitment – they achieve affiliation. Although I will show other examples where the continued 'case building' moves into a complaint/affiliation sequence, it is important to note that the case in Extract 3.12 does eventually arrive there too. C1's wife (C2) arrives midway through the meeting, and after being informed about the MP's offers, begins her own assessment of the situation.

Extract 3.13: MP01.Surgery-1KO\_01 (continuing Extracts 3.2, 3.5, 3.9, & 3.12)

((107 lines omitted since 1c as wife enters, and is brought up to speed))  
 365 C2: °Y:eah this is it.=I mean- since- it's- What it's eighteen  
 366 months since he had his as[essmen]t=  
 367 CW: [Yeah:, ]

368 C2: =[then,]  
369 MP: [Mm:, ] Exact[ly].  
370 C2: [Which is, Ahhh.=It's just ridiculous.=  
371 MP: =Yeah.  
((79 lines omitted discussing wife's commitments at work))  
450 C2: [But ] it was the fact that they- they didn't give him any  
451 points, you know I mean [how can you not.]  
((35 lines omitted describing points and assessment process))  
487 MP: The troub- the trouble i:s,=  
488 C2: =[absolutely wha:cked. ]  
489 MP: =[the possibly- the answer to th]ese questions strictly  
490 speaking: is- I mean you probably you c- you're an  
491 intelligent man, you can learn how to do new tasks. (0.4)  
492 You know you are aware of dangers, You (.) usually (.)  
493 manage to begin an' finish,=You can go [li-] the- you-  
494 C1: [.tk]  
495 MP: So the answer to these questions (.) sTRICTly speaking,  
496 (0.6) is, is yes.  
497 C1: Yea. [But it- it- ]  
498 MP: [Uh Although,] BUt the point is >>it doesn't look at<<  
499 the WIDer  
500 C1: That [was [th- the-  
501 C2: [Yeah  
502 MP: [issues,  
503 C1: That was- it was mo:re <the <<one word answer>>.  
((230 lines omitted, raising further complaints, repeating some  
issues))  
734 C2: \$But it just seems to just, you know, We're ( )  
735 [together,  
736 MP: [Yeah. >Exactly.=Well you're in limbo uh limbo, (.) uhm  
737 completely.=So, .hh Look Jason will make these call[s, =  
738 CW2: [Yep=  
739 MP: =on Monday,  
((10 lines omitted, repeating offer))  
749 MP: (If) °that's okay?°  
750 C1: <Y[e s ı > [Y e a h :,]  
751 C2: [Yeah.=Oh y[eah=That's] fi:ne,  
((50 lines to end of meeting, saying goodbye and thank you))

C2 assesses the length of the wait as 'just ridiculous' (Line 370), which overtly indexes her stance towards the issue. C2 again makes her stance clear a few minutes later, raising a complaint about how the benefits assessment took place and calling it 'absolutely wha:cked' (Line 488). The MP at first appears to make a disaligned response, saying that the work assessment questions (to which the answers are 'strictly speaking:', 'yes', Lines 487-496) do capture the fact that C1 is an 'intelligent man' (Line 491) who 'can learn how to do new tasks' (Line 491). Although the MP prefaces this with 'The trouble i:s' (Line 487), which shows him to be on-side with the constituents, he still portrays the questions as reasonable. However, the MP transforms this into a more affiliative statement, acknowledging that the questions fail to look at 'the WIDer issues' (Lines 499-502). In this way, the MP treats C2's complaint about the assessment as affiliation-relevant. An alternative way to deal with this

complaint would be to suggest changing the assessment procedure or the benefits policy, which is within the MP's power to suggest. By choosing to respond with affiliations, and not a policy suggestion or some other offer, the MP determines what response is relevant, and what courses of action are *actionable* by the constituency office. This is related to, but not the same as, the 'transformative answers' in Stivers and Hayashi (2010) that retroactively specify aspects of a question and resist inferences. Instead, here, the MP chooses among possible subsequent relevant turns (Sidnell & Enfield, 2014), and chooses one that retroactively characterizes the prior action as being affiliation-relevant, rather than offer-relevant. It is more similar to the misalignment described in Drew (2006), as the MP treats further narrative descriptions as confirming the relevance of the offer that has *already been made*, rather than making a *new* offer relevant.

Ultimately, the MP reissues the offer. The discussion of C1's difficulties continues for several more minutes. The MP then formulates what the constituents are experiencing on Line 736, and reissues the offer – this time as an announcement (see Chapter 4). At this point, the constituents accept (Lines 750-751) and the meeting comes to a close.

To complement Extracts 3.12-3.13, consider what happens *after* the offers from Extracts 3.10 and 3.11. Extract 3.14 continues from where Extract 3.10 left off, and concerns the constituent who needed to move off of a boat, and on land, for health reasons.

#### Extract 3.14: MP01.Surgery-1KZ\_01 (continuing Extract 3.10)

((40 lines omitted since Extract 3.10 of taking address, CW has asked for a reference number that C does not know, so C is searching through her bag - as she searches, line starts))

109 C: They've had all:: letters, doctors letters, an' (0.2) <all:  
110 [°sorts of,>°

111 CW: [Oh:, that was gonna be my next question.

112 C: eYeah. Yeah. I- I've had, (0.7) Well it (.) cost me twenty  
113 pounds a ti:me off the <doctor.>

114 CW: Rea::lly,  
115 (0.4)

116 C: Ih- An' what annoys me is,=I know people who've got  
117 bungalows, (.) bugger all ↑wrong with 'em.

118 CW: Ri[:ght

119 C: [I feel, (0.4) You know:, an' ih- ih- it' just annoy::s  
120 yah. (0.6) An' I'm getting (.) <quite stress>f(h)ul a(h)t  
121 the moment,

122 CW: e- Yeah:.  
123 (0.5)

124 C: Worrying about when they have me heart- (.) my- my op.

125 C: E- [you know, an' (.) an' come ho:me.

126 CW: [Y:eah.



The clear indication of C's stance is on Line 116, 'An' what annoys me is'. While Lines 109-113 also show a complainable, and are indicative of a complaint, it is less clear what C's stance is. Interestingly, C chooses this moment in the interaction to make her stance clear, and to complain that the other applicants have gotten the service that she herself has not yet received. Previously, in Extract 3.10, C had started to mention that she had bid on houses without success (Ext. 3.10, Lines 42-44). At that moment, however, the complaint about others having 'bugger all ↑wrong with 'em' (Line 117) does not arise. Instead, C mentions that other people may be in the *same* situation as herself, in other words, not receiving service. This portrays her issue as part of a broader trouble in need of remedy. Lines 116-117 in this extract, however, portray her situation as unfair, and in need of *personal* attention to remedy the unfairness. It is only once C is in the environment of an offer-in-progress that she raises the socially riskier action of overtly complaining about others.

However, CW only gives minimal responses (Lines 114, 118, 122, 126) that do not affiliate with C's complaint. This may be for two reasons: first, the overall activity is the offer-in-progress and the search for a reference number required to complete the offer, which is different than being in a fully post-offer environment (as in Extracts 3.12-3.13). Second, this CW is often more cautious in siding with constituents in ways that could align her *against* other constituents in the district. C orients to this lack of affiliation in Lines 119-125. First, she reissues the annoyance, but now phrases it at a generalized feeling that most people feel, using the general 'you' ('yah', Line 120). Second, she returns to reporting personal suffering, such as her stress (Line 120) and health issues (Line 124), rather than reporting transgressions.

After the offer in Extract 3.11 (which concerned the constituent's inability to contact the UKBA), in Extract 3.15 the constituent also continues to build his case for assistance, following the same pattern as Extracts 3.12-3.14.

Extract 3.15: MP01.Surgery-1KO\_05 (continuing Extract 3.11)

((100 lines omitted since Extract 3.15, taking names and details of sponsored applicants))

256 C: [.hhh I tried to: uh: (0.4) before I called ↑you,  
 257 MP: °Mm, °  
 258 C: I went on the Yoo Kay:, ((UK)) (0.4) uh: home offi[ce,  
 259 MP: [Yeah,  
 260 CW: Yea.=  
 261 C: =°Yeah. .hhh° An' the (nearest/newest) office was <Thorny  
 262 Lake,>  
 263 CW: Yes.

264 C: But again there was no email an' no ↑telephone number.  
265 (0.3)  
266 CW: No. As it happens that's <where I call,> so,  
267 C: Oh I s[ee].  
268 CW: [Don't worry about [that.  
269 C: [ >Brilliant,< But- (0.3) °it's (a)  
270 frustrating.°  
271 MP: Mm.  
272 C: There's <got to be:,> at least, you know, All uh- All I  
273 woulda done was, (0.2) an' hour or two later, (0.2) °picked  
274 up the° pho:ne, (0.4) an' even if there was an <Answer  
275 phone.> (0.6) to say:, .hhh "This is such an' such, you  
276 rang me two hours ago, Please give me a ring:, with  
277 reference to."  
278 CW: Yes.  
279 MP: Ye[ah].  
280 C: [(B- (.) Uhm an' that's, (0.3) that's #eh-  
281 #=°yeahhh,=It's° something that's wor:th, (0.2) perhaps  
282 making a point but (that is/at least) there is some way,  
283 (0.6) [<of:> getting in=-  
284 MP: [For you to get in touch=  
285 C: =[<in ] ↑co[ntact.>]  
286 MP: =[with them,] [Yeah. ] W- Yeah.  
287 CW: Mm,  
288 C: >You know i- w- It's< an ↑E[mail.  
289 MP: [ >We can< explain it an' then  
290 when A[nn ca:lls,  
291 CW: [Yes,

In Lines 256-264, C demonstrates his efforts to help himself (Edwards & Stokoe, 2007) in trying to call a UKBA office. This turns out to preface a complaint, that there was no way to contact the UKBA office. CW initially receives Line 264 as a trouble, reassuring C that she will call that location anyway and C should not worry (Lines 266-268). However, C pursues the complaint aspect of his difficulty. Line 269 begins with 'But-', suggesting he is taking a divergent sequence. He indicates his stance towards the issue, 'it's (a) frustrating' (Lines 269-270), and goes on to suggest that the lack of contact information is a problem in and of itself. Line 272 begins 'There's <got to be:,>', suggesting C is about to *insist* (rather than propose) a change is required. C downgrades this with 'at least', before abandoning the insistence for an account that minimizes the contingencies inherent in his suggestion. 'All I woulda done' (Lines 272-273) portrays the cost of hosting an answering machine or call back line as nominal.

The MP and CW do not specifically take up C's proposal. To alter the ability of the general public to contact the UKBA would be a substantial change in policy, which may be why they do not offer any action or treat such a complaint as actionable. C pursues the issue on Lines 280-288, saying 'It's something that's wor:th, (0.2) perhaps making a point'. C leaves it ambiguous whether it is *he* that is making the point known now, as a criticism, or

whether he is suggesting that the constituency office take up the complaint and make a point about it in the future. This may make a new, politically-oriented offer relevant (see Chapter 6). The MP now does an affiliative turn, collaboratively completing C's turn on Lines 283-286, 'For you to get in touch with them'. This shows the MP fully understands C's perspective, and is affiliative, without committing the MP to any specific action. The MP goes on to repeat the offer made earlier (Lines 289-290). The offer '>We can< explain it' treats C's difficulty as continuing to be related to the miscommunication between C and the UKBA, rather than a complaint about the way the service is structured. This sequentially deletes the relevance of an offer concerning the UKBA's policies.

Extracts 3.12-3.15 shows how constituency office staff can use affiliation (or a lack of it) to manage what is made relevantly actionable by the constituents' turns. The staff's turns guide constituents through what issues are requestable, offer-relevant, and actionable. This section has also shown that constituents take offers of assistance as indications of being sympathetic to the constituent's concerns (Pomerantz, 1986), allowing for constituents to upgrade their concerns to complaints after the offer. As the final component in the analysis of the 'building a case for aid' sequences at the constituency office, I will examine how both constituents and constituency office staff pursue offers.

#### **3.4 The omni-relevance of actionability: Participant pursuit of offers**

In this section I will consider how both constituents and constituency office staff pursue the relevance of offers across the encounters. At the end of initial narratives, offers are relevant, and when they are absent, participants pursue them. Constituents continue to build a case for aid even when an offer is presented, but this appears to be part of determining what is actionable at the office and, as seen in Section 3.3, continued or upgraded narrative descriptions tend to get affiliation, rather than further offers. In this section, I consider the moments when continued case building occurs in the absence of an offer. As I will show, participants (both citizens and staff) orient to the relevance of an offer, suggesting it is 'omni-relevant'. When the offer is absent, it is accountable. This may further explain the way constituents continue to build a case for aid throughout the encounter, in that service provision is the way that participants can make sense of "who-we-are-and-what-we-are-doing" (Fitzgerald, Housley & Butler, 2009, p.50), and the absence of service (through offers) requires continued pursuit of potential actionable items.

In the first extract, Extract 3.16, the constituents run a local business. Their competitors, across the United Kingdom (UK), have started to copy them, even their

business name. The constituents are seeking a way to make themselves more unique, as well as more attractive to their growing market of overseas customers. They propose to add the words ‘UK’ to the end of their business name, but only for the purposes of promotion and their website – not officially (such as on tax records). They have contacted the MP to see if this is possible. The constituents (C1 and C2) have already explained their situation. The MP begins the extract by giving advice, rather than an offer, but the constituents pursue and eventually get an offer.

### Extract 3.16: MP01.Surgery-2BZ2\_02

1 MP: [I don't think you need anything for- for websites. >This  
2 is about company na:me[s,  
3 CW: [Mm  
4 MP: So if you aren't changing your company na:me I think you  
5 just go ahead and use it.  
6 (1.1)  
7 C2: [Right,  
8 CW: [Mm  
9 (0.3)  
10 MP: >I mean [>>We could- ( )-] We could go==  
11 C1: [(cause they- )  
12 MP: =>I mean the people you could che-< I- um >>you know you  
13 could<< check with just the tra- e- tra- trading standards,  
14 CW: [Yeah,  
15 C2: [Ye:s,  
16 MP: [Chris Mic[haels um  
17 C1: [Yes,  
18 (.)  
19 C2: >Because [I think- [if it said that you was making,  
20 MP: [Or- (.) [Jess-  
21 C2: You know like when people make things an' they've got 'made  
22 [in the UK,']  
23 MP: [Mm:, ]  
((50 lines omitted on trademarking and visiting a trade show and  
finding people copying them))  
72 C1: They do,=They copy everything don't th[ey=  
73 CW: [Yeah  
74 C1: =in the world now, but .hhh It's- it's maddening because  
75 they <don't pay> (0.7) business rates,  
((72 lines omitted about cost of owning a shop vs. online sales))  
148 C1: Cause we- (.) we're paying, (0.3) [Seve==  
149 CW: [Mm,  
150 C1: =Sixteen thousand pound a year, for the computer to sit on  
151 the des[k.  
152 MP: [↑Mm:,  
153 C2: But we couldn't do the brands that we do without a sh[op.  
154 C1: [With  
155 out a [shop.  
156 MP: [No.  
157 CW: No:  
158 MP: [.hhhhhhh ]>Well look-<=  
159 C2: [So it's kind of]  
160 MP: =why don't we:, um I think maybe ih- in: I- I'm pr- I'm  
161 >absolutely-< I'm almost Certain, (.) that  
162 [you can: use it-=

163 C1: [We can use it.  
 164 MP: =>If you wanted to use it in a company name, >that'd be  
 165 different, but if you can use it-< >>If you want to use it  
 166 in a website that's absolutely fine but why don't-< just  
 167 for completeness,=  
 168 CW: =[Yeah  
 169 MP: =[Do you mind giving Arthur (.) Taylor a [call:,  
 170 CW: [No. That's fine,

In Lines 1-5, the MP gives his advice, to simply use the word 'UK'. He suggests that the constituents contact the relevant agency to double check that this is acceptable ('you could<< check with', Line 13). C2's response to this does not address the advice directly, but diverges onto the topic of indicating whether products are '*made in the UK*' (Lines 21-22). C2's turn disattends the MP's advice, which also serves to resist it, and even sequentially delete it. Although C2 prefaces her turn with 'Because' (Line 19), which conveys a sense of continuing from prior talk, the rest of her turn does not deal with the advice. Instead the preface ties the turn to talk before the extract, when C2 was introducing the problem.

The constituents go on to build their case again, making an offer relevant. They tell a story of how they have been copied, which suggests they are dealing with an unreasonable situation. C1 says that 'They copy everything don't they in the world now but .hhh It's- it's maddening' (Lines 72-74). This portrays the constituents as reasonable, in that they accept that copycats are a modern evil that cannot be avoided. It also leads directly into both an indication of their stance towards the issue ('it's maddening') and an indication of the legitimacy of their problem, in that they are facing unfair competition. The copycats do not pay business rates (this is due to them operating solely online, whereas the constituents have a shop, and need a shop, Line 153), but the constituents do. The constituents thus present a case of facing high competition, while being reasonable people, making their case more legitimate. Note that this expression of stance comes after the advice from the MP. This deviant case suggests that expressions of stance appear after the MP or caseworker provides any assistance (such as advice) that also indicates alignment, not only offers.

The case building is successful, as the MP, on Lines 158-169, makes an offer to assist them. Although the MP stands by his advice (Lines 160-166), he asks CW to phone the relevant agencies on the constituents' behalf. The pursuit, via continuing to build a case and continuing to make an offer relevant, results in a transaction of assistance. Extract 3.16 also demonstrates that offers do not necessarily follow any given instance of narrative description. In Sacks's (1992, p.313-314) words, "there are some activities that are known to get done in [a] setting, that have no special slot in it, i.e., do not follow any given last

occurrence, but when they are appropriate, they have priority.” Offers are treated as omnirelevant by being pursued, and by their ability to arise at any given point while still being appropriate.

It is not only constituents who constantly orient to offers, however. The MP also orients to the relevance of an offer. When an offer is not possible, the MP apologizes for it, and even offers to still do *something* on the constituent’s behalf, such as checking in with them in the future. This is seen in Extract 3.17, below. The constituent (C) is in dispute over a local planning decision that is impacting his business. Members of Parliament, however, cannot interfere with local planning decisions at all. This is the only case in the corpus where there is no ‘substantial’ offer – an offer that directly attempts to deal with the issue.

Extract 3.17: MP01.Surgery-2BZ2 03

1 C: He’s got (.) the z- exact same size building, (.) °>↓funnily  
 2 enough it’s just< exactly the same size,° .hhh uh:m: (.) an’  
 3 he hasn’t got a limit on his,  
 4 (0.8)  
 5 MP: .hh >No but they< are allowed to put in different conditions,  
 6 I- >I mean I guess it was a-< it was a matte- wh- when the-  
 7 (0.3) Um look, #I: mean# >the first thing I should say is  
 8 Members of Parliament< have no °influence on the planning  
 9 pro[cess.°  
 10 C: [Mm:,  
 11 (0.4)  
 12 C: M[m,  
 13 MP: [So:: ahm (.) you know I can: >>obviously<< (.) you know,  
 14 (0.3) relay: concerns to the council, whether it’s expressed  
 15 by you as a (0.2) a[pplicant,=  
 16 C: [Mm:,

C has been telling his story for several minutes. At Line 1, C is explaining that another business owner in the area has the same size building, but without the planning restrictions that have been placed on C’s building. This demonstrates the unreasonableness of C’s situation, as well as providing evidence that there is precedent for his problem to be solved. The MP begins to explain how different restrictions can be applied to different buildings (Lines 5-6), but stops. He then gives an account for why he cannot offer assistance (which simultaneously *tells* that he cannot offer assistance, Lines 7-8) – that MPs are not allowed to interfere or ‘influence’ the process that is affecting C’s business. The account pre-empts the possibility that C will expect an offer and shows that the MP is oriented to the relevance of an offer. Special work is required to prevent or remove the relevance of an offer, suggesting that an offer was potentially relevant all along until negated.

C acknowledges the MP's account, but passes the opportunity to comment more substantially (Lines 10-12). The MP then offers to 'relay: concerns to the council' (Line 14), but formulates this offer as something he could '>>obviously<<' do (Line 13) and not substantial. This 'conciliatory' offer shows that even when the MP accounts for his inability to offer help, he still finds it necessary to do *some* offering. Even with the account and the conciliatory offer, C still continues to build a case for aid, as with the interactions previously show in this chapter. After ten minutes of further negotiation of C building a case for aid, and the MP denying the ability to help, the MP says:

Extract 3.18: MP01.Surgery-2BZ2\_03 (continued from Extract 3.17)

1 MP: >But look< I'm afraid there's- there's- Yeah. (0.8)  
 2 Apart from understanding where you're coming from, ('I need  
 3 more) people,' u:m don't- >Yeah let's just-< >1- we'll have  
 4 to see< where the process ends.  
 5 (0.3)  
 6 C: °Mkay.° I appreciate even:, I kno- I o-I uh- I understand  
 7 you can't just turn around an' go:, on the phone:  
 8 [an' it's not as ea]sy as that.  
 9 MP: [Unfortunately not.]

The MP here reissues the offer, highlighting how insufficient it is. The MP formulates his inability as unfortunate ('I'm afraid', Line 1; 'Unfortunately', Line 9) and as something that he is required to do ('we'll have to', Lines 3-4). The offer is presented *as* conciliatory and insufficient. It is the MP himself who formulates the offer in this way, demonstrating his own orientation to the relevance of an offer when a constituent presents a trouble. The meeting ends shortly after Extract 3.18.

In this section, I have shown how both the staff and the constituents orient to an offer when it is absent, which demonstrates how offers are treated as continually ('omni') relevant in each encounter. When an offer is absent, it can be pursued. Although constituents regularly continue to build their case for assistance even after an offer, this additional work will be treated as affiliation-relevant, rather than offer-relevant, if the constituents have already received an offer (see Section 3.3). When an offer is yet to be made, the additional building of a case is treated as offer-relevant. The MP also orients to a lack of offers as accountable; in the only encounter where no offer of assistance is given, the MP accounts for his inability to help, and also offers a 'conciliatory' offer that is formulated as insubstantial. Offers are the backbone of the constituency office encounters, and their relevance is crucial to the sequential organization of the interactions.

### 3.5 Discussion

This chapter has shown that constituents do not use direct requests to achieve recruitment. Their use of narrative descriptions solves several interactional challenges, including incrementally building a case for aid, managing the ‘unknown’ nature of the institution, concerns about contingency and entitlement, and other previously documented concerns such as reasonableness and legitimacy (see, e.g., Drew & Heritage, 1992; Edwards & Stokoe, 2007; Heritage & Clayman, 2010; Stokoe & Hepburn, 2005). In this chapter, I have shown how encounters at the constituency office are structured. Interactions typically begin with the phrase ‘How can I help?’, which starts the official business of the service encounter. Constituents use their initial turns to bid for and project longer upcoming turns, which office staff permit. Constituents then describe the difficulties that brought them to the constituency office. The action of offering, by the MP and/or caseworker, is the central way of achieving a transaction of assistance, as well as the main way that the office staff tacitly instruct constituents as to what is offer-able.

The first difference between other institutional studies and the encounters in this corpus is that constituents do not typically try to demonstrate the relevance of their case for the constituency office. Instead, they focus on demonstrating the *ir*relevance of pursuing further self-help. This may relate to the issue of the ‘unknown’ nature of the institution (Stokoe, 2013b). Demonstrating the irrelevance of other actions helps to promote the relevance of assistance from the constituency office, without specifically making any single course of action relevant. This is useful if constituents do not know what courses of action are possible, and helps to avoid rejection, as well as prematurely eliminating possible offers. The ‘unknown’ nature also relates to the second difference seen at the constituency office, which is the way that actionability is negotiated. Clients do work to demonstrate the actionability of their concern (Schegloff, 1991; doctorability, Robinson & Heritage, 2006; mediate-ability, Edwards & Stokoe, 2007; police-ability, Whalen & Zimmerman, 1990), as do constituents at the constituency office. However, while constituents’ narrative descriptions build actionability, they also allow ample interactional space for the MP and caseworker to co-construct what is actionable.

As with extended request sequences in service environments (see Fox, 2015; Lee, 2009), the narrative descriptions involve work from both the institutional practitioner and the client. They collaborate to build what ultimately becomes the service transaction, or as Lee (2009, p.1255) puts it, “What the request ends up to be is thus a joint construction between the parties.” Such collaboration is particularly useful in an environment where the



actionability of an issue is uncertain or unknown to the constituents. The narrative descriptions allow for the MP and caseworker to make offers, and these offers tacitly inform constituents as to what is actionable. The uncertainty about what is actionable also accounts for the third difference at the constituency office: a lack of overt requests for service. As the constituents may not be clear on what is requestable (what courses of action may be possible, what may solve their problem, and what the MP is willing to do), it is difficult to make a request. Building a case for aid allows for collaborative construction of the ‘request’ and as a result, requests themselves are unnecessary.

The fourth difference between the constituency office and other institutions is that the MP gives strong indications of affiliation and empathy in response to constituent concerns. Past studies have observed that it is unusual for institutional practitioners to affiliate with complaints (Ekström & Lundström, 2014; Orthaber & Marquez-Reiter, 2011; Stokoe & Edwards, 2007; Stokoe & Hepburn, 2005; Stokoe, 2013b; Zimmerman, 1992). Although there is not space to fully address this difference in the analysis, it is worth noting that the MP and caseworkers do a lot of work to align with the constituents. I am not suggesting that the MP is engaging in less institutional talk by affiliating – as Traverso (2009) has pointed out, affiliation can be difficult to achieve even in mundane conversations. The MP may be motivated by the ‘personal vote’ (see Chapters 1, 5, 6). Appearing as on-side with constituents may promote good relations with the constituents, who may then be more likely to vote for him in the future. As I have also shown in this chapter, the alignment can work to retroactively characterize constituent turns as complaints rather than requests, and reduce the relevance of offers.

After receiving an offer, constituents continue to build a case for aid. The descriptions are often upgraded, and constituents begin to put their personal stance about an issue on record – suggesting they take the offer to be an indication that the MP or caseworker is on side and affiliating with them. This supports findings in mundane interaction (Traverso, 2009, p.2393) that participants do work to enhance the complainability of their concern after receiving affiliation. However, especially in other institutional environments, continuing to make an offer relevant when an offer has already been given would be interpreted to challenge the appropriateness of the offer, or as pursuit of some further or different offer (Gill, 2005; Stivers, 2002, 2005; Stivers & Rossano, 2010). At the constituency office, this is not the case. The MP and caseworkers do not directly refute the relevance of potential further offers (e.g., by stating they are unable, or they can only do certain things, etc., but see Chapter 5 on policy-related implications). Instead, the staff treat further details as making

*affiliation* relevant, as if the descriptions were complaints-implicative, rather than request-implicative. We should not treat these activities as pursuit if they are not so treated by the participants (unlike pursuit that did achieve a subsequent offer, as in Extract 3.16).

It is possible that constituents continue building their case because they do not know whether to be satisfied with the offer they have received, or if further offers are forthcoming. They may also be resisting the relevance of closing the encounter; to accept the offer would be to complete the service transaction, and the interaction would soon end. Constituents may also be resisting the implication that their difficulty is easy to solve. After all, constituents face a dilemma when presenting their difficulty, in that they must present it as so-far-unsolvable by other organizations, but potentially solvable by the constituency office. A similar contradiction is seen in Ekström, Lindström and Karlsson (2013), wherein debtors must present themselves as currently unable to pay, but able to pay in the future. Constituents may resist ending the encounter after the first offer in order to pre-empt the implication that their problem is easily solvable, which is inconsistent with their narrative.

Overall, the context of ‘service encounter’ is extremely important for the constituency office. Participants orient to the continual relevance of offers and the service transaction, which promotes the interpretation of narrative descriptions as making offers relevant, rather than as pre-requests (Fox, 2015). There is also no need to see these turns as requests or ‘pseudo’ requests. Constituents’ build a case for assistance, and that achieves recruitment (Kendrick & Drew, 2016). By focusing on turns that work towards recruitment, constituents can neatly manage the challenges they face surrounding the ‘unknown’ institution, while simultaneously fulfilling the issues inherent in making requests (such as showing legitimacy, etc.).

The MP and caseworkers must manage the omni-relevance of offers as well. In this chapter, I have described how they use affiliation in the post-offer environment, and how that functions to reduce the relevance of further offers. But the offers themselves are also designed in a way that manages what actions are relevant. In the next chapter, I will analyze the way the constituency office staff design offers, and how those designs manage and control the relevant next options.

## **Chapter 4:**

### **Offers and the nuances of action: Offering turns and their design at the constituency office**

#### **4.0 Introduction**

As I have shown in the last chapter, offers are the central practice for getting constituency office work done. The Member of Parliament (MP) and caseworkers responded to the constituents' descriptions of difficulties with offers of assistance. Offering assistance is the primary business of constituency office encounters (rather than politics or holding the MP to account, see Chapter 5). I also showed that the constituency office staff used affiliation to manage the relevance of offers, which helped to control the direction of the encounter and to tacitly instruct constituents as to what assistance was actionable. The other way to manage what assistance is being made relevant is through the design of turns that accomplish offering. In this chapter, I will analyze how staff design the turns that accomplish offers, and how the design changes based on where the offer occurs in the encounter. In Section 4.1, I will evaluate the current conversation analytic research on offers and their design (see Hofstetter & Stokoe, 2015), pointing out that previous research has been too limited in terms of the range of formats examined and analyzed as accomplishing an offer. In Section 4.2, I will begin the analysis of the offers, starting with 'proposal-offers'. Proposal-offers are the first offers made to constituents concerning a problem, and seek permission and acceptance in order to act. Subsequently, as analyzed in Section 4.3, staff used 'announcement-offers', which confirm the plan to carry out an offer after the encounter. Finally, in Section 4.4, I analyze 'request-offers', which include an aspect of 'requesting' in the turn design. These offers make it relevant for the constituent to accept the offer, and tend to occur near the end of the encounter. I will discuss the findings in Section 4.5, noting the need to have more flexible action 'categories' in conversation analysis in general. I will also discuss the question of whether the offers in this corpus should be considered initiating or responsive actions, and whether that distinction aids analysis. Overall, this chapter will be of particular interest to conversation analysts interested in the achievement of action, and supports recent literature that has called for more nuanced approaches to action 'ascription' (Kendrick & Drew, 2014; Levinson, 2013; Sidnell & Enfield, 2014).

#### 4.1 The action of offering

Offers are, intuitively at least, the bedrock activity of service provision and other institutional settings, such as call centres or doctors' offices, as well as a regular activity in everyday social life. They can include concrete transactions, such as asking, 'Milk? Sugar?' when offering tea (Kärkkäinen & Keisanen, 2012), as well as more intangible commitments to future action such as asking, 'Do you want help with your homework?' (Curl, 2006; Davidson, 1984). They may be made to fulfil another's need or desire, but they also may occur in the absence of any expressed need (Curl, 2006). But while they are a ubiquitous conversational action, offers can be difficult to define empirically. Conversation analysis, being an inductive process, has an ambiguous relationship with definitions. The Oxford English Dictionary ('Offer', n.d.) provides the following definition of an offer: "An expression of readiness to do or give something if desired." The verb, 'to offer', is defined as "providing" or "presenting" something, "expressing readiness" to do something, and "to present or proffer something for someone to accept or reject as desired".

Unsurprisingly, however, the OED definition is not entirely aligned with what participants in conversation actually *treat as* an offer. Offers take a variety of formats in a variety of contexts, making them difficult to disaggregate from 'invitations', 'proposals', or 'suggestions'. Even 'requests', which Kendrick and Drew (2014) point out have been regarded as the 'opposite' of offers, can potentially be interpreted as doing precisely such an action (see Extracts 4.15 and 4.16 below). In her own work on offers, Curl (2006: 1258) does not define what an offer is, but provides a statement to specify the general action under investigation as one which satisfies "some want or need of the recipient's, or propos[es] to assist in the resolution of a difficulty or misfortune experienced by the recipient". Somewhat earlier, Maynard (1986: 268) argued that "parallel and consistent displays of alignment" constitute offers, in that they are done for the benefit of another person and made complete by recipient acceptance or rejection. Others have challenged the notion that offers are contingent on the recipient's acceptance or rejection, however; Toerien, Shaw, Duncan and Reuber (2011) show how doctors use offers to *circumvent* patients' ability to reject or resist treatment options, which is similar to what we will see in the analysis of the constituency office data (see Section 4.4). This suggests that offers remain more contingent on the beneficial nature of the transaction, rather than the recipient's response.

In a recent paper, Couper-Kuhlen (2014) examined initiating actions that bring about, or aim to bring about, potential future courses of action, including offers. As a typology, such initiating actions prefer an accepting or aligning response; index regularly and negotiate

issues of deontic and epistemic stance, and are geared towards making a future state exist (Couper-Kuhlen, 2014: 624). Offers are specifically defined as having the ‘Self’ as an agent (i.e., the offerer does the action required to bring about the future state), and the ‘Other’ as beneficiary (i.e., the recipient gets the object or assistance committed by the offerer), whereas requests work in the opposite direction (Couper-Kuhlen, 2014, p.628). However, the question of who benefits from an offer, and who suffers the costs, depends significantly on what the participants consider to be a benefit or a cost. Costs and benefits are not necessarily split such that one party benefits entirely and one party entirely is at cost. From a psychological perspective, when speakers make offers they place recipients in their debt (or at least earn their gratitude), which is a benefit to the speaker that could entirely outweigh any potential ‘cost’. Further, an anthropologist might note that offering (and gift-giving, see Mauss, 1990 [1950]) is fundamental to cementing relationships and even inter-group treaties, and thus any ‘cost’ of offering is obscured by the potential benefits.

This difficulty in attributing costs and benefits can be seen in the extract below from the Holt collection. Lesley is having a package delivered to Philip, but the delivery company failed to charge Lesley for carriage costs. As it is a gift, she requests that he tell the company to charge her.

Extract 4.1: Holt: X(Christmas)1:1:3 (from Curl, 2006)

1 Les: =The ↑other thin:g (.) was (.) uhm .t.h we've had 'n  
 2 invoice: fr'm Scott's .hh (.) Now if they deliver it  
 3 (0.5) to ↓you: UH (0.7) we- (.) we wanted t'pay the  
 4 Les: ↑carriage w'l they hav↑en't invoiced us f'r any  
 5 carriage.  
 6 Phi: .hw hh (.) We:l[l  
 7 Les: [So-  
 8 (0.2)  
 9 Phi: [they  
 10 Les: [if they come t'you an' invoice you f'carriage say  
 11 th[at it's we that're paying oka:y? ((smile voice))  
 12 Phi: [eYeah

While Lesley’s ‘request’ benefits Philip – he will not have to pay for delivery of the package, it also benefits Lesley – she can maintain her status as gift-giver and fulfil her goal (‘we wanted t’pay the ↑carriage’). The same dilemma is found in the politician-constituent data. In Extract 4.2, the MP’s caseworker (CW) is speaking to a constituent (C), and requests to use information that the constituent explained earlier in the call.

#### Extract 4.2: MP01.Phone-1KK\_03

1 CW: .hh right Okay well I'll look forward to your email then  
2 and then can I use that information .hh and send it on to  
3 the clinical commissioning group is that all ri:ght,=  
4 C: =°Okay° that no problem at'all.  
5 CW: Super. All [righ]t then,=  
6 C: ['Kay]  
7 CW: =Thanks ever so mu:ch.=

CW's request (Lines 2-3) benefits CW, in that she can now fulfil her offer of assistance, but ultimately benefits C, who will receive the assistance he requires. In addition, the MP (and CW, by virtue of being the MP's employee) benefits from helping the constituent, through possibly building 'rapport' and the 'personal vote' (see Section 1.2.1, Chapter 6). Who is the beneficiary in these instances? Are these requests or offers or something else? Couper-Kuhlen (2014) uses the term 'Proposals' to refer to these shared cost-benefit situations, but whether or not 'proposal' correctly characterizes the activities of Extracts 4.1 and 4.2 is moot. Furthermore, in neither extract are there clearly definable costs, only possible shared benefits. The cost/benefit possibilities are too variable for these categories.

Clayman and Heritage's (2014) concept of a 'benefactive' stance (and status) helps analysts navigate the question of what is beneficial. They introduce this idea with the same conundrum: "it may not always be the case that the offer recipient will treat the thing offered as a benefit" (p.4). In the same way that 'epistemic stance' describes how a turn configures distributions of knowledge, 'benefactive stance' refers to how talk distributes costs and benefits, as interlocutors see them. Benefactive status is "a complex of underlying conditions for the action, including such matters as whether a service will be rendered that is of actual benefit to its recipient, whether the performer of the service is able and willing to perform it..." (p.5). However, the concept relies on the possibility of objectively identifying "actual" costs and benefits, whereas in many cases, including the ones above, it is not explicit, and the benefits are overlapping. That said, benefactive stance provides a way of looking at the range of offers, requests, invitations, and other future projecting initiating actions. These actions have long been considered as part of a similar group (cf. Couper-Kuhlen, 2014), but also as discrete 'objects' (see Davidson, 1984). But it may be more helpful to conceptualize these actions as a spectrum of options for initiating actions and transactions. Sacks (1992, p.331) wrote:

We think of an ‘offer’ as something different than a ‘request’ or a ‘warning’ or a ‘threat’. But in some situations the offer is simply the first version of getting the person to do something. ... One wants then to reconsider these objects – offer, request, warning, threat – not as though they’re a series of different things, but to see them as sequential versions of a something...

As Couper-Kuhlen (2014) suggests, requests, offers, invitations, proposals, suggestions, warnings, etc., all share the goal of negotiating the creation of a future action, with two axes of variation (the degree of interlocutor agency, and the eventual distribution of benefits between them). While Couper-Kuhlen and Clayman and Heritage suggest an interpretation based on ‘actual’ costs and benefits, Sacks’s suggestion leads to a more flexible interpretation, based on what the participants wish to achieve *by doing* the action (e.g., appear agentive, intimidate, cajole, hint, welcome). These additional goals will continue to confound our interpretation of action ascription unless we allow for actions such as requests and offers to be conceptualized as zones on a spectrum of possible actions, with grey areas between possibilities. This is because, as Stokoe (2012) points out, it is not the job of analysts to be more specific about *designedly ambiguous* descriptions and actions, than members themselves are. The fact that we cannot be definitive about what an action ‘is’ is what gives language practices their *defeasibility* (see Edwards, 2005; Sidnell, 2012).

Based on the offers in my dataset, I have defined offers as actions that indicate a future action for the benefit of the recipient, even if other benefits arise, and which are at least mostly enacted by the speaker. Most offers in this data fall into Curl’s (2006) category of “offers that are responsive to overt problems” (p.1270-1275). Unsurprisingly, we found no examples of offers as a reason-for-calling; in almost all calls, constituents are calling to *receive*, not make, offers of assistance. There are also no examples of what Curl calls ‘educated-problem’ offers, in which an offer is made distally to the original discussion of the problem (typically in a closing section), and the offer is made based on some item the speaker has educated to be a problem. This is also unsurprising, as constituents contact constituency offices *because* they have a problem, and their problem is therefore discussed explicitly. As previous studies have found, institutional interactions often encourage the interpretation of utterances as service-relevant (Fox, 2015; Lindström, 2005), which differs from context in the mundane interactions that were studied by Curl. All of the MP or caseworker offers are made in response to overt problems, but do not all match the offer format or style as

described in Curl, even allowing for the variety of formats she identified. For example, her participants never used a ‘do you want’ format in these types of offers. This suggests that the institutional context of the constituency office has a significant impact on how offers are designed and what the designs may be used to do, but it also suggests that our overall understanding of offer formats cannot be limited to these designs. I will argue that offers should be considered along a spectrum of actions that include proposals, announcements, invitations, and suggestions. The grey areas between prototypical examples should be seen as zones in which some additional work is being done by the turn in question, rather than as an invalidation of the offering aspects of the turn.

The analysis below is divided into three sections. The first, Section 4.2, focuses on ‘proposal offers’ (“Can I do X?”; “do you want me to do X?”), which I found to be the format for *first* offers of a certain course of action following a problem presentation from a constituent. I will also differentiate between offering a potential course of action, and *explaining* a potential course of action. The second section, 4.3, focuses on ‘announcement offers’ (“I will do X”), and the final section, 4.4, on ‘request offers’ (“Let me do X”). In each section, I will consider the interactional and institutional affordances of these different offer designs.

#### **4.2 First offers: Proposals**

Many offers made at the constituency office are made in a similar form to a proposal. These offers are characterized by a low degree of ‘deontic force’, in that they are formulated to require the permission or acceptance of the constituent before being enacted. They regularly use phrases such as “can I do X” or “do you want me to X”. In using the word ‘proposal’, I am attempting to capture aspects of the utterances, such as their deontic and epistemic stance and am *not* using it in the specific way that Couper-Kuhlen (2014) has used it to refer to a potential future action from which both parties benefit and for which both parties contribute to actuation. My usage is closer to that of Stevanovic and Peräkylä (2012), to refer to a commitment to a potential future joint action that was contingent on the approval of the interlocutor. In this analysis, the term ‘proposal’ indicates an utterance that offers a potential future action of assistance, seeks the approval of the constituent before commencing action on the offer.

Proposal-offers are exclusively used as the first offer of a certain course of action to a constituent. ‘First’ does not necessarily refer to the temporally ‘first offer in an interaction’ but to the first offer of any assisting action that occurs following a *first* presentation of a



problem. For instance, in the following extract, the MP gives a first offer, following the constituent's (C) narrative description of his concern. This constituent is visiting because his benefits have been cancelled and he needs help getting them reinstated.

#### Extract 4.3: MP01.Surgery-1KO\_01

1 MP: Well then, I'm su- (0.3) Well- an' I think- (0.3) uhm, if  
2 we: were to take, >your what, your reference numbers and  
3 everything [else,<  
4 CW: [Yeah. They need national insurance number  
(10 lines omitted, joking about constantly needing a national  
insurance number))  
15 MP: =So >>we take your national insurance [number<< then]  
16 C: [Y e s ]  
17 MP: =what we- JAson can <do is give the> uhm:: >>Tribunal  
18 people a<< Ca:ll:: on Monday,  
(220 lines omitted, wife enters surgery meeting))  
239 MP: Uh:m (.) No, >>We were just saying that<< we'll- we'll uhm  
240 >contact the tribunal service

The MP begins by checking with the caseworker (CW) what the procedure would be for this case, phrasing his turn as a hypothetical 'if we: were...' (Lines 1-2). CW confirms that a national insurance number is indeed necessary in order to take on the constituent's case, which raises a joke from the constituent about how often he has to give that number to officials. The MP restarts the offer on Line 15, first by referencing the procedure of taking the number (Line 15), and then describing what Jason (CW) 'can <do' (Line 17). This turn design both proposes a course of action to C and describes what the office is willing to undertake for him. Subsequently, many minutes later in the meeting, the MP confirms this course of action, with the announcement 'we'll uhm >contact the tribunal service' (Lines 239-240). This later offer is a restatement of the action from Lines 15-18, and thus receives a different turn design (for more on announcement offers, see Section 4.3).

The proposal-first turn design shows up even when the MP or caseworker has mistaken the offer's temporal position. For example, in the following call, the caseworker has called the constituent's house to give an update on a roof leak that the housing association is supposed to fix, but has not. Thus the call does not start with a *first* presentation of a problem, because the caseworker and constituent have previously discussed the roof problem. The *first* offer in the phone call is an 'announcement offer' regarding the update ('I'll go back to (.) John [to] ... explain to him that the scaffolding's been up three weeks' – see Section 4.3, below). Immediately following the *temporally first* offer, however, the constituent (C) introduces a new problem and a new sequence about which he has not spoken before. As part

of this new sequence dealing with the new problem, the caseworker (CW) gives a ‘proposal’ offer, which is first with respect to the problem in question.

#### Extract 4.4: MP01.Phone-1KK\_08

1 C: Now there w- whil- whilst you’re on there, There wa- there  
2 was something that my wife has- has actually mentioned the  
3 other day, (0.6) She spoke to you before about (0.8)  
4 getting Roger another place perhaps,  
5 CW: .hhh Uh- well yes. But the- u:m, I mean:, (.) D- oo- I can  
6 approach the: council about that most definitely if  
7 you’d like me to, .hh[h the- the-]  
8 C: [Well be]fore you have  
9 actua(h)lly(h)eeh,  
10 (0.4)  
11 CW: I- I may have done in the passt,=f[orgi]ve me,

I found that the first offers for a course of action were routinely formatted as proposals, throughout the data. On Lines 5-6 CW makes a new first ‘proposal offer’ to “approach the council” using the “I can” format. Note that is CW’s belief that the offer has not already been made – which is corrected by C at Lines 8-9 – that accounts for this possibly second offer being produced as a first.

Let us look at other instances of proposal-style offers. In Extract 4.5, C has been describing a threatening letter from her ex-partner in the context of child custody issues. At Line 14, the caseworker (CW) makes an offer based on a complaint that happened earlier in the call – that the Child Support Agency has not been in contact.

#### Extract 4.5: MP01.Phone-1KK\_05

1 CW: So it was hand written,  
2 C: Oh yes. This one was typed,  
3 CW: ↑Yeah.  
4 C: From him.  
5 (0.6)  
6 CW: Right.  
7 C: But um (0.8) Now it’s (0.4) e(h)↑↑ih!  
8 (1.7)  
9 CW: Oh: dear,  
10 (0.3)  
11 C: °Anyway,°  
12 (0.6)  
13 CW: .hhh so Cee Ess Ay though, haven’t contacted ya since last  
14 Thursday, Can I chase them for you? S’t that all right?=  
15 C: =<I’d love you to cos with my phone not bei:ng> (0.4) you know,  
16 reLIable,  
17 CW: Yeah,  
18 (0.4)  
19 C: U:m (0.5) <That would be fabulous.>

CW's offer is formatted using what we observed to be the routine 'can I' format for first offers, with a tag question ('S'that all right?'). These design choices index a low deontic stance; that is, CW displays that she is not yet certain that this will be an acceptable course of action for C, and gives them the opportunity to raise concerns with this particular offer of assistance. However, C gives the preferred response, an acceptance, at Lines 15-19.

Note, however, that the offer takes place several minutes after the original problem was formulated. Curl (2006) referred to such offers as 'educed', appearing "... at some point which is temporally and sequentially distanced from the problem" (p.1265). I stated previously that there are no educed problems in my data; this is because the second half of Curl's definition: "Before the offer is made, the problem it educes is not treated by either participant as something in need of remedy" (p.1265). In Extract 4.4, the CSA issue *was* treated as a problem, but CW's offer was displaced by an inserted sequence about the threatening letter, which then took up the majority of the call. Once dealt with, CW returned to the original topic of the call, and made the offer accordingly. As a first offer, it was formatted as a proposal, in which CW seeks confirmation of the appropriateness of her proposed course of action ('Can I chase them for you? S'that all right?=').

Extract 4.6 provides another example of proposal-offers. In this extract, the MP and a caseworker are talking to two constituents about the repatriation of an ill family member to a nursing home in the United Kingdom (UK). Some contact has already occurred between the office staff (CW and MP) and the constituents (C and C2), especially over email. At this moment, C is inquiring about where her family member could stay while being assessed for long-term care.

#### Extract 4.6: MP01.Surgery-1KO\_06

1 C: So you know #you- >you say about those couple a days an' <  
2 if we could sort something out to go into a private  
3 residential home, .hh How would we go about that, Because  
4 is that different to what we've found out from ringing,  
5 (1.6) Ho:mes y-  
6 CW: I ca[n-  
7 C: [you k[now:,  
8 CW: [I can get a list from,=  
9 MP: =>°dYeah°<=  
10 CW: =from u:m, Countyshire county council an' people who  
11 would do it,  
12 (0.3)  
13 C: Ri:ght,=  
14 CW: =If you'd like me [to,  
15 MP: [Ih- It may be, >I [s'pose that<=  
16 CW: [Yea,  
17 MP: =the BAsis on which they're admitting her °is different,°

18           so it MAY not be in the SAme PLAcE.  
19 C2:       Sure.  
20 MP:       But I suspect they'll probably, (.) charge ↑more,

CW issues the offer on Lines 5-10, the first to propose finding a list of short-term nursing home placements. The offer is phrased as a proposed, not definite, course of action, indicated by the verb 'can' (instead of 'I will'). This is further indicated by the increment added on Line 14, 'If you'd like me to', which emphasizes that this course of action would only be pursued 'if' the constituent approved. Such 'I can do X' utterances could be treated as grammatical statements of information, informing recipients that speakers are *able* to do that action. In the context of a service setting, though, where offers of assistance are a core activity, 'I can...' utterances convey courses of action that are *possible*. In particular, at constituency offices, where constituents need careful direction as to what aid is available, this design helps indicate what the constituency office staff are able and willing to do. The design presents the course of action as a potential future, to be assessed for viability and acceptability on the part of the constituent.

There is more evidence in Extract 4.6 that shows that and how 'I can do X' utterances are offers (as opposed to 'merely' proposals, or commitments, etc.), making assessments or acceptances/rejections relevant. After making the offer in Lines 8-11 ('I can get a list from...'), C's response is slightly delayed (Line 12) and neither accepts nor rejects the offer, but treats it as information ('Ri:ght, Line 13). At this point, then, C is not yet unambiguously oriented to CW's turn as an offer (although it is possibly on the way to being an offer). As a result, CW adds the increment 'If you'd like me to,' (Line 14). This increment emphasizes that this action *is* an offer, and is for the benefit of the constituents, and that it will only be enacted if they desire. As Stevanovic and Peräkylä (2012) point out, this indexes greater rights on the part of the constituent to have a say in how their case is managed and what courses of action are pursued.

By indicating that the offer is contingent on the constituent's approval, the staff a) make clear what courses of action the constituency office staff can pursue on behalf of the constituent, and b) treat constituents as having greater epistemic and deontic rights over their own cases: they know all the details whereas staff only know what has been divulged so far. If constituents have already tried certain solutions, it is not useful to try them again. In Extract 4.6, the constituent (C) has been trying to get into state supported housing, and one way this process works in the United Kingdom is by bidding on houses, but she was unable to bid within the correct time period. Prior to the extract, C asked if there was new

information on the house – information that the caseworker (CW) was supposed to track down. However, CW had not found any new information, and so has to report her problematic failure to do so. Given that CW needs to help maintain good relationships with constituents, any perceived failure is a problem to be remedied, and as in the case below, CW usually follows any lack of success in accomplishing aid with a new offer of assistance.

Extract 4.7: MP01.Phone-2AH\_03

1 CW: No::.. Did you Bid on anything else,  
 2 C: No there wasn't a legit flat an' stuff, There wasn't anything  
 3 else I could BId on,  
 4 (0.8)  
 5 CW: Ri::ght. .hH d'ya'wa- °n°- do you want me to ask if anybody did  
 6 ge:t sixty fi:ve,  
 7 (1.4)  
 8 C: Um::; (0.5) Wull:, you see I don't see the point.=Because like I  
 9 (sent/said) to Laura Bo:nd,  
 10 CW: Yeah,  
 11 (0.4)  
 12 C: An' she says well you're just <swappin',> (0.3) basically if >I  
 13 move (out a') the village,< j'st my house is a little ways out,  
 14 CW: .hH Oh is it the [same] side Bathroom,  
 15 C: [( )]  
 16 (0.3)  
 17 C: You're still gonna have the <steep stair> situation.=  
 18 CW: =Oh::, I see::. Ri:ght. Okay. Fair enough.

At Lines 5-6, CW offers to find out what happened to the house (number 'sixty fi:ve') that C wanted to bid on. The offer is based on whether the constituent 'wants' the caseworker to look into the house, and it is also formulated as a question, requiring the constituent to answer, and thereby accept or reject the offer. C has, therefore, a maximum amount of control over what course of action CW will pursue. The 'do you want' formulation indexes an even stronger deontic position for the constituents than the 'can' formulation, although both make acceptance (or rejection) relevant. It would be inappropriate here to use an 'announcement' offer (see below), because the desires of C are as yet undetermined. Given that bidding was over, an inquiry into who got the house will not help C get the house, or get some other house in the future. Examples in my data, such as Extract 4.7, are different from those discussed in Curl (2006), whereby 'do you want...' formats were used exclusively with educated problems ("offers responsive to overt problems are never produced in this way", p.1274). Not only is C's problem in Extract 4.7 not educated – as C's housing problem was already known by both parties, as was the issue of C's interest in that specific house – the offer is produced immediately after the original mention of the problem. The different sequential contexts of the offers (in a series, see Schegloff, 2007, and Section 4.4 below) result in a different offer

format. Curl concludes that the reason why the ‘do you want’ format is avoided with overt problems may be to avoid implicitly accusing the problem-holder as hinting or ‘fishing’ for aid. She gives an example of ‘do you want’-avoidance after an overt problem, out of the Newport Beach data, seen below.

Extract 4.8: NBII.4.R: 181-195 (from Curl, 2006)

1 Emm: [I : 'd ] LIKE TIH GET S ' M  
 2 LID'L[E slipper]s but uh:  
 3 Nan: [Y e : ah.]  
 4 (0.7)  
 5 Emm: .t.hhh I jis do:n't think I better walk it's jis bleeding  
 6 a tiny bid'n a:nd u-I think I'm gon'stay o:ff of it it  
 7 thro:bs: a liddle bit. Yihknow thet's no fun tuh have a  
 8 nai:l tak[en off.]  
 9 Nan: [°Y ea h] right.° hh[hh  
 10 Emm: [°Oh: Go:d,°  
 11 (.)  
 12 Nan: We:ll dih you wanna me tuh be tih js pick you Ken u you (.)  
 13 get induh Robins'n? so you c'buy a li'l pair a'slippers?h  
 14 (.)  
 15 Nan: I mean er: c'n I getchu somethin:g? er: sump'm:?=  
 16

Curl argues that Nancy’s repair from ‘dih you wanna me tuh’ to ‘c’n I getchu somethin:g’ (Lines 12-15), displays a return to the norm; the norm being to use ‘do you want’ only with educed problems. However, this could be explained more simply: Nancy makes the repair because she already knows that Emma *does* want something (Emma has just said ‘I’d like to get some little slippers’) but is unable to acquire it. Asking “do you want” would amount to asking Emma what Nancy has just been told in Lines 1-2. Nancy should know that Emma cannot make use of a mere ride – Emma needs someone to physically get the slippers, because she cannot walk (‘I just don’t think I better walk it’s just bleeding’). Whether the ‘dih you wanna’ (Line 12) was prefacing an offer of a ride or slippers, or any other type of assistance is uncertain, given that Nancy repairs away from that format (the subsequent ‘me tuh’ cannot grammatically follow ‘wanna’, implying that self-repair is underway). But any offer here that does not address what Nancy ought to know will be insufficient. In contrast, in Extract 4.7, CW does *not* know what C wants, vis-à-vis the house bidding. This suggests that educed problem offers may be more about being uncertain of what is offered than about a linguistic norm. For both parties, for CW and for Nancy, there is a social obligation to help the party in need (C and Emma). Nancy is Emma’s sister, and thus may be expected to help her when she is ill, and CW works for an institution where it is in their best interests to help clients in every way possible. Neither is required (by law, ethics, or otherwise) to offer help,

and neither turn format could be interpreted as aught but an offer, even outside of the institutional context in Extract 4.7. This comparison has been drawn to show that knowledge may play a greater role in determining these turn designs, something that is clearer to see in the institutional context, where the knowledge of CW is more available to the analyst.

With first time offers, the constituency office as an institution has a more pressing need than a friend or family member might – to be certain that they are acting on the constituents' wishes. Not only do they have a vested interest in acting on the constituents' behalf, in order to best build the 'personal vote' (see Section 1.2.1, Chapters 5 and 6), it is necessary for the staff to get permission from the constituents to act on their behalf when dealing with other organizations. First time offers are the first place this permission is sought. This institutional formality hangs in the balance when first time offers are accepted or rejected. As a result, I see this downgraded deontic stance in proposal-offers as the staff attempt to ensure they are acting on the constituents' wishes.

Note that in both Extracts 4.7 and 4.8 above, speakers ask 'do you want *me to X*', not just 'do you want X'. This is a crucial difference. 'Do you want me to X' gives greater deontic powers to the recipient; the offer is contingent on their acceptance or desire. Additionally, 'do you want me to X' includes a very clear indicator of who must carry out the action on behalf of the recipient. This puts the recipient in a difficult position in terms of a preferred next turn. While offers prefer acceptances (Davidson, 1984), it has been suggested that one should also not burden others with having to do an action (Couper-Kuhlen, 2014; Clayman & Heritage, 2014; Kendrick & Drew, 2014), which creates a cross-cutting preference between accepting the offer and not burdening the offerer. In other words, by indicating who must perform the action within the offer turn, the speakers are actually creating a situation in which the preferred next turn may not be acceptance, but rejection. This could be another reason why Nancy repaired away from 'do you want me to', as she may have realized that suggested too high a burden for Emma to accept the offer. These extracts demonstrate one way that constituency offices are more similar to mundane talk than other institutions like doctors' offices; constituency offices are offering services to help constituents, not because it is their job, but because they are doing being 'good' community members and representatives, just as friends and family enact being 'good' friends and family when they undertake offers and actions on behalf of others. One could argue that constituency offices are doing this *in order to enact* the 'good' representative, whereas family members do it for other reasons (such as, they actually *like* the person they are helping and want to help them). But this would go beyond conversation analysis' capabilities. One cannot

say whether the constituency office staff like or do not like constituents, nor whether MPs want or do not want to help citizens. By offering constituency services, and with *each offer* of service, MPs and constituency office staff enact and re-establish their position as ‘good’ representatives, partly because of the fact that they offer these services outside of their mandated job roles.

We have seen that at, in the constituency office, first offers of assistance are done using a particular proposal-style design, and made with downgraded deontic stance, indexing that the offer may not be appropriate or acceptable to the constituent. The constituent is expected to respond to these proposal-offers, and response is usually pursued when absent. Proposal-offers can be made with more than one format, including ‘Do you want (me to) X’, ‘Can I X’, and ‘I can X’ (see Extract 4.6). The latter format can be confused with explanations of what the constituency office is able to accomplish. I will now differentiate between offers and explanations of what is offer-able.

#### 4.2.1 ‘Can’ as an offer vs. ‘Can’ as an explanation

Proposal-offers can appear, grammatically, like explanations of what the office is capable of doing, rather than what it is offering. Both explanations and proposal-offers regularly use the modal verb ‘can’ (and its conditional form, ‘could’), and both reference potential future states or courses of action. In real time interaction, however, staff are rarely asked to explain *what* the office is able to do. Extract 4.9 below, however, demonstrates the use of ‘can’, both as an offer, and subsequently as an explanation of the options for courses of action. In the first part of the extract, the constituent has been explaining that he is a small business owner in a residential area, and one resident has been complaining about parking at the business to the local council. The MP for the area is Michael Johnson. A series of offers is made by the caseworker (CW) in Lines 14-17.

#### Extract 4.9: MP01.Phone-2AH 01

1 C: <Which they have now put all enforcement #↓onto us#> ↑an:d  
2 I’ll be honest with you, (0.7) <I feel> very weak at this  
3 stage because I feel like they-==they’ve overpowered me an’  
4 there’s nothing I can do about it.  
5 CW: Ri:ght, Okay.  
6 C: I mean >#to be ho- I-# I don’t know if it’s the best route  
7 to take.< People keep saying try:, you know, (.) Michael  
8 Davies because obvio’sly [(he’ll help you. )]  
9 CW: [>Yeah=yeah=yeah.< ]  
10 (0.5)  
11 C: really suppor:ts [ev ]’rythin’ like th[is.  
12 CW: [Mm.] [↑Mm.]



13 (0.2)  
14 CW: .hhhhhHH ↑WELL we ca- We can certainly look into it for  
15 you.=That's not a problem an:' if we need to: u:m: uh: get  
16 in touch with the council, we'll Happily do #so,#=tha-  
17 that's not a pro#blem:#, Yeah. Absolutely .hhh[hH  
18 C: [Will y- e- e-  
19 (0.2)  
20 C: #I- I-# e- >you know I don't know what's best to do<  
21 #>would'you-e-<# Do you- Do you: do like appointments  
22 w[here you ca-]  
23 CW: [Yeah::, ]I- I think um proba'ly the best <thing to  
24 do: i:s if <<you are able to come in>>to the office, #I  
25 mean: uhm# presum'bly you canh you get here if you're based  
26 in Bramley, .hhhH uh We can go through it. U::m an::d u:m  
27 .tsch=an' then: we'll see where we go from ther:e, .hhh um  
28 is [that o]kay¿=  
29 C: [Ri:ght.]  
30 CW: =D'you think that'd be a- (.) e- (.) the-the best  
31 [thing to do¿  
32 C: [Yeah: no that's- that's fine,

The conclusion of C's problem formulation is that 'people keep saying' (Line 7) he should try contacting the constituency office for help, because he knows that the MP is someone who 'really suppor:ts ev'rythin' like this.' (Line 11), which acts as a fishing device (Pomerantz, 1980). The utterance 'people keep saying' constructs a state of knowledge that is widespread, to the general, unnamed people, making it relevant for CW to now explain whether this general knowledge is accurate, what help is available, and whether the constituency office will help C too. C also says that he does not know if this is 'the best route to take', something that CW confirms as he begins to describe what the office can do. Note that CW expresses it as something he is 'happy' (Line 16) to commit to doing, something that is 'not a problem' (Line 15 and 17). As in Extract 4.6 above, in which CW proposed that she 'can get a list', the caseworker here also uses 'can' to formulate the first offer ("We can certainly look into it for you"). In contrast, the second offer uses different format: "if we need to, we'll happily do so" (Lines 15-16). Both of these proposal-offers offer a potential future course of action, contingent on the response of the constituent. These offers explain the abilities of the constituency office, especially given the context built in the preceding turn in which C makes relevant information about what is *possible* and *whether* help will be offered. However, the relevant acceptance/rejection from C is missing in the following turn (Lines 18-20). Instead, C pursues his own lack of knowledge, saying he does not know 'what's best to do<' (Line 20), and asks if the office does appointments (Line 21). This turn does not treat the preceding turn from the caseworker as an offer, but as an insufficient explanation of what the constituency office does. By continuing to reference his own lack of knowledge and

pursuing the question of what the office could do next, C treats his previous fishing device as incomplete or unsatisfied. CW, however, recycles his offer in Lines 23-28, and does not address C's earlier question about what the constituency office does as a service.

As the call unfolds, we can see more evidence that C *does* want an explanation of what the office is capable of doing in general. Extract 4.10 comes after C and CW have scheduled the appointment referenced in Extract 4.9 and CW has given directions to the constituency office.

#### Extract 4.10: MP01.Phone-2AH\_01

1 C: Okay. Awesome.=UH:M so #uh-e-ih-er# JUST so I know: what  
2 roughly what you guys do, [I mean I've (0.2) You know=  
3 CW: [Mm,  
4 C: =I 'preciate, A lot [a pe]ople keep=  
5 CW: [Yea.]  
6 C: =saying, con[tact] you,# wha- wha- What=  
7 CW: [Yea.]  
8 C: =exact(.)ly CAN you do,=or what are the options or  
9 [what's,  
10 CW: [Erahhh# WELL- my- my role is a CAseworker, (.) uhm So  
11 there's two caseworkers here. So we deal with all sorts  
12 of°ff° problems issues that (.) Jacob gets his way, .hhh=  
13 uh::m [So:] a-  
14 C: [Mm,]  
15 CW: =but we- we quite Often: coun- uhm contact the council, (.)  
16 about various (.) things like this,=So, so we can, (0.2) we  
17 can write letter:s (.) Do that sort of thing:, so, .hh It  
18 just depends what the issue is really,  
19 (0.9)  
20 C: Right,  
21 CW: But we can[:  
22 C: [Because I, I mean obviously I'm going to cause  
23 my business but=  
24 CW: =Yea.

What is the difference between *offering* a potential course of action, and *explaining* a potential course of action? In Extract 4.9, CW explained potential future courses of action, but did so with explicit costs and benefits indexed (an explicit example of how 'benefactive stance' could be enacted, Clayman & Heritage, 2014). CW said that the office would 'look *into for you*' (Ext. 8, Lines 14-15), making it clear that the potential action was for C's benefit. CW also referenced the ease of doing the actions, and the willingness of the office to do the actions, thus indexing a low cost for the office to accomplish this assistance. The sequential and institutional context (as an agency that purports to help constituents) both indicate that the 'can' formulations were offering, not merely explaining, available assistance. In Extract 4.10, however, CW is responding to a direct question about what the constituency office can do as an organization, instead of a troubles-telling, and explains the

office's general abilities, rather than specifically what potential actions could be offered to the client at hand. While the caseworker still uses 'can' (such as in Lines 16-17, 'we can write letter:s'), no benefactive stance is indexed. The explanation is characterized by the use of the present continuous voice, the use of the word 'often' (in Line 15, 'quite Often: coun-uhm contact the council'), and the phrase 'sorts of things' (such as in Lines 11-12 and 17), all indicating the general, scripted activities of the office (Edwards, 1994). Extracts 4.9 and 4.10 demonstrate how proposal-like designs (especially including the verb 'can') act either as explanations or as components in an offer. By using the 'can' design in turns that are offers, constituency office staff take advantage of this explanatory feature, combining both the offer and the explanation of what the constituency office is willing and capable to do for constituents. This implicit 'teaching' of the institutional rules is, as I noted earlier, important at the constituency office, where constituents often display uncertainty about what the constituency office can do. Proposal-offers are thus very useful as first offers at the constituency office, because they simultaneously explain and offer.

In the next section, I consider offers made in the form of announcements, used to repeat offers made earlier, as well as to renew efforts at assistance already underway.

### 4.3 Announcement offers

Offers made in the form of an announcement ('I will do X') are declarations of future intent. These offers do not typically make reference to the desires of the constituent nor make a response to confirm the course of action relevant. They were used to repeat already-made offers and to renew efforts to assist a client who had already been receiving or promised help. Announcement-offers were never used to offer a course of action for the first time (again, 'first' refers to the sequence of events in dealing with a specific case, rather than temporally in the interaction). In Extract 4.11, C has called to follow up on his case (a rat infestation at his council-owned house). C demonstrates that he is a repeat caller from the way he introduces himself.

#### Extract 4.11: MP01.Phone-1KK\_01

1 C: Uh: as for the housin:', we've not 'eard a peep from them,  
 2 so we don't know what they're:: up t[o,]  
 3 CW: [↓O]h:, ri::ght, okay,  
 4 .hhh  
 5 C: So:, I was j'st wondering what the outcome was on the  
 6 emails that you sent.=I mean obviously: (.) the uh council  
 7 got the email because .hh when the uh:: pest control man  
 8 come round he did mention the email from yourse:lf,

9 (0.3)  
 10 CW: Yeah.  
 11 (0.5)  
 12 CW: .hh[HH]  
 13 C: [so] wonderin' what did that mean.  
 14 CW: Um: I haven't heard from them y- the: housing people yet so  
 15 >I'm afraid sorry about that< I will chase them today::.  
 16 .hHHH um::ptk- But- w- HOW's it going though, is it- is it  
 17 quieter now: can you hear anything:,

C reports that he has not heard from relevant organizations and wonders if those organizations have spoken to CW instead (Lines 5-13). CW responds with an apology that she has not heard from any of the organizations in question, but includes an announcement-offer: 'I will chase them today::' (Line 15). The offer declares what CW intends to do, including when she will do it. As such, it does not make relevant a response from C and, indeed, none is forthcoming (in-breath and 'um' on Line 16 are a space for at least a minimal acknowledgement). In fact, none of the typical methods of making a response relevant are present. Interrogativity is one way to mobilize a response, but CW produces a declarative statement (Schegloff, 1984; Stivers & Rossano, 2010). Another way to make a response relevant would be to make the turn a phrase about a B-event (Labov & Fanshel, 1977), by giving information primarily in the domain of the recipient (e.g., 'you'll want me to call them then') which tends to elicit a response (Pomertanz, 1980; Heritage & Raymond, 2005; Stivers & Rossano, 2010). Here, the epistemic domain of the action is constructed as belonging to CW; it is her decision how to run her day, who to chase, and when she will do it. Finally, interrogative format would also make a response relevant, such as making it a yes/no interrogative (Raymond, 2003), but that is not the case either; it is a statement, not a question. So, we are left with the impression that CW does not expect a response from C, and may even have designed her turn such that the possibility of a response is reduced. However, we are told (Stivers & Rossano, 2010, p. 5, 26) that, canonically at least, when the action of offering is done, a response is relevant, typically an acceptance or rejection. However, unlike the offers in the proposal-offer section above, CW does not pursue a response. In summary, there are no features that make a response relevant, no acceptance or rejection is present, and there is no pursuit of a response. Why, then, call these announcements 'offers'?

Extract 4.11 fits my definition of an offer in every respect: It displays that the 'chasing' that is being promised is for C's benefit and indeed is happening only because CW has heard nothing and C is inquiring about the matter. CW displays that she will be the agent of the activity, and also includes when exactly she will enact this offer. By making an offer, CW portrays the assistance as a logical outcome of the assistance so far not having worked. It

shows a strong willingness and ability to offer help, because it is being announced, rather than proposed – it is definite, not potential. It also shows that the office is determined to help; in the face of failure to assist adequately so far, the office may appear to be weak, inept, or not trying hard enough to be of assistance to the constituent. By announcing further assistance (of a kind for which permission has already been granted) immediately in the face of this failure, the office can portray itself as persistent, and reassure the constituent that aid is being pursued in the process.

Announcement offers are not simply declarations of plans (Suchman, 1987) or unilateral decisions (Stevanovic, 2012). They still contain the crucial aspects of an offer – displaying willingness to do an action on behalf of the recipient. Compare, for instance, the following two extracts. In Extract 4.12, we get a common type of offer (even in non-institutional contexts, when taking messages on a home landline phone): ‘I’ll take a message for him:’ (Lines 9-10). C has been working with one of the two caseworkers, Jason, but Jason is not available that day to take the call. Ann, the other caseworker, offers to take the call. This kind of offer is ubiquitous in telephone conversations, and remains an offer, not an announcement, because of its focus on the willingness of the offerer to do the action.

Extract 4.12: MP01.Phone-1KZ2 02

1 C: = [It’s] Mrs. Gray’s daily cal [l:..]  
 2 CW: [O h]: hi Mrs. Gra[y, I uhhh]  
 3 C: [↑’s a bit]  
 4 different from the last time when I rang, =>this is really< good  
 5 ne[ws].  
 6 CW: [.hh ↑OH: >brilliant oh he< will be sad cause he’s not here:,  
 7 hh(h)e(h)e  
 8 C: [↑AOH:: what a shame:]  
 9 CW: [.hhh He’s on a training course in London:, but I’ll take a  
 10 message for [him:,]  
 11 C: [All r]ight. Will you Tell ‘im I’ve just had a letter  
 12 this mor::ning,

In contrast, Extract 4.13 is tilted towards making plans.

Extract 4.13: MP01.Phone-1KZ 01

1 CW: =Yea:s. Yes. I see your point, .hhhH Right. Well let me get  
 2 in contact with them anyway:, U[:m,  
 3 C: [Yeah,  
 4 CW: When you’ve put the phone down I’ll do one four seven one  
 5 an’ get your num:ber, an’ then I’ll get them to:, get in  
 6 contact with you if I may:,.hh  
 7 C: Yeah.  
 8 CW: All ri: [ght,]

CW says she will do ‘one four seven one’, which is a way to display the phone number that has just called. CW intends to do this because C does not know the phone number on which she is calling. In announcing this intention, however, CW is not emphasizing her willingness to do the action, nor the beneficiary nature (C does not have to phone back to provide the phone number). Several minutes earlier in the conversation, she requested permission to use ‘1471’ to get C’s phone number, and this utterance confirms that she still intends to do so. In Lines 5-6, CW follows up the ‘mere’ announcement of her intended action (using the 1471 telephone function) with an announcement offer, ‘I’ll get them to:, get in contact with you if I may:’. This latter statement is more than an announcement; it is an announcement offer, as it indexes CW’s willingness to do the action for C, and seeks permission in a tag statement ‘if I may’.

Another example of the announcement-offer can be seen in Extract 4.13. In this conversation, the constituent (C) has been attempting to schedule an appeal date. Although the difficulty in scheduling is not C’s fault, her benefits have been cancelled. This injustice brought C to the surgery, and she was promised to hear back within ten days. The ten days have elapsed without word, so she is calling to see what happened at the constituency office.

Extract 4.14: MP01.Phone-1LB 06

1 C: Hi:, you'al'right?=  
2 CW: =Yes not too bad.=n'you,  
3 C: Yes fine thank you, .hh um: s'j's wondering if you'd heard  
4 anything cause you'd- uh::m I think you spoke to my husband  
5 you said (.) hopefully to be able to tell 'im something  
6 within ten da:y[s].  
7 CW: [Ee:yeahs le's [just have-  
8 C: [pas' that nowhh Heh  
9 CW: R::ight, Okay. le's just have a l:oo:k UH::m .hhHH alright  
10 lemme jus' s:ee when I sent it o:ff:, te te te te  
11 Tehhh((singing)) on' one secon::d (.) .hhh I don't think I  
12 have is the short answer to that,  
13 C: Mhmm  
14 (1.3)  
15 CW: uhhum: but let me just checkhh (2.1) .hhhH uhm::righthh  
16 (10.1)  
17 CW: °ri::ght so that was sent on the eighteenth° hh an::d t-  
18 ten working days .hHHHHH OKAY no I-I've not hh'u:m: so um  
19 what I'll- what I can do: is I'll- I'll chase 'em up again  
20 an':: just to see if I can get a date for you,  
21 C: Oh all right [ okay °°( )°°]  
22 CW: [Uhm: So sorry] I've not- (.)  
23 C: [No tha- ]  
24 CW: [Not um::]  
25 (.)  
26 C: fi:ne (uh wh-) say we' been 'aving the problem with 'em all  
27 the- all the way along at [least it's bin]=  
28 CW: [ih' y:ea h :: ]

29 C: =about sixty two: weeks now so, .hhh=  
 30 CW: =so: (.) ih'yeah [well they- they're just in]CREdibly=  
 31 C: [ah hh:: hh hhhh hih]  
 32 CW: =busy but I- I will: le- you need a date so I'll um:: I'll  
 33 um:: get them tuh .hh tuh find one for you and- and  
 34 hope>f'llly get th'm< (.) >to come back to you with a< (.)  
 35 proper answer  
 36 C: O:kay well that's lovely

On Lines 18-20, the caseworker (CW) goes through several self-repairs to arrive at an announcement offer, 'I'll chase 'em up again'. It is repeated in 'I'll um:: get them tuh .hh tuh find one for you' on Lines 32-33). This fits with my previous analysis, as the offer occurs in an environment where CW already knows what the constituent would like, C knows what the constituency office has committed to doing and what they are capable of doing, and C has given her permission for the constituency office to act. A proposal-offer would be inappropriate, as it would imply that the constituency office has not paid attention to what C needs them to do. Furthermore, in this instance it would imply that CW had forgotten what he and the MP had committed to doing in the previous interaction with C: to get the appeals court to fix a proper date for the tribunal. Using an 'I will' statement here helps to portray the office as not only willing but proactive, and reassuring C of the constituency office's commitment to their prior offer by reissuing it in a stronger, more definite manner.

Especially in closings, announcement-offers are used to reiterate what has been offered so far, as a way of committing to the plans for assistance that have been set out during the interaction. For example, in Extract 4.15, the caseworker (CW) is just finishing taking down the constituent's (C) phone number.

Extract 4.15: MP01.Phone-1KS\_02

1 CW: Two one two three..hh Right. Okay, I'll email her straight  
 2 away an' come back to you when I've got an' answer,=all  
 3 ri:ght,  
 4 C: Thank you [very much,  
 5 CW: [Thanks then, [Buh bye  
 6 C: [Okay buh bye

Here, CW initiates closing, and as part of doing so, she repeats the offer that she has already made in this interaction: to email a specific council officer. Many closing portions of calls and surgeries include a component like this one, in which the offer, or offers, that have been given during that interaction are repeated for final evaluation and commitment.

To summarize, in this section I have shown that 'I will' is used to produce announcement-offers, in which the offer is declared as a definite action, not requiring the

input or acquiescence of the constituent. These turns should be considered as offers rather than statements of planning or intent because of the beneficiary nature for the recipient. These offers are often used when speaking to repeat constituents who have returned to the office with the same problem still active. They are also used during closings to reiterate what the future plans are for the constituent's case. In the final section, I will focus on 'request-offers', a style of offer that blurs the line between requesting and offering actions.

#### 4.4 Request-offers: "Let me..."

After proposal-offers and announcement-offers have been made, another offer format occasionally appears, which involves requesting constituents to do (or not to do) something in order that the offer can be fulfilled. The most common way to do this is using the phrase 'let me'. In Extract 4.16, the constituent (C) has been complaining about a longstanding neighbour dispute. Another agency told him to go and speak with his neighbour but C is fearful about making an approach.

##### Extract 4.16: MP01.Phone-14AE\_01

1 C: An' I mean he might've BIT me on the no:se,  
 2 CW: Ye:s, ye:s,  
 3 C: So I- e- they just not- they just don't Care::  
 4 CW: .hh[H Right, ]  
 5 C: [Cause Nobo]dy Ca:res.  
 6 (0.3)  
 7 CW: O:kay. Well, .hh I- I wo- I would HOpefully (.) Disagree  
 8 with that. Ay- I (.) do think that I'm talking to do  
 9 ca:re, .hhh u:m but it is just taking them a bit of time  
 10 to get it sorted.=But- .hh LEt Me Do chase them again.  
 11 That's absolutely fine to do that, S'no problem at  
 12 all:.=As I- as I say I thought it was resol:ved, .hh[hH  
 13 C: [No no.]

On Lines 1-5, C expresses frustration with the agencies he has been dealing with. The caseworker (CW) tries to reassure C that, at least at her end, some people at some agencies 'do ca:re' (Lines 8-9), even if it is taking 'a bit of time' (Line 9) to fix the problem. On Line 10, CW reissues her offer to track down the relevant agencies to try to resolve the problem faster, saying 'LEt Me Do chase them again.' By using 'let me X' (with additional emphasis from 'Do'), CW formats her turn so that it strongly prefers an acceptance. It not only requests inactivity from C, but promises aid if he says yes. CW mitigates any potential interpretation of burden on Lines 11-12, by saying that it is 'absolutely fine' and 'S'no problem at all:', which further helps reduce the possibility that C will reject the offer.



The formulation ‘let me’ breaks down the boundary between an offer and a request. On the one hand, ‘let me’ *requests* (or even commands) that the constituent do (or rather, not do) something, by issuing a directive. On the other, it proposes to benefit C by *providing assistance*. These offers were instrumental in creation the definition set out in the introduction: the beneficiary is largely the constituent, the caseworker is largely one who will enact the offered action, but there is extra work being done here which should not invalidate this turn’s basic status as an offer. To understand this extra work, we need to step further back in this phone call. Almost 100 lines earlier than Extract 4.16, CW makes her initial offer of assistance. By this point in the call, C has established himself as a repeat client, whose case has continued for over two years without resolution. Besides the frustration that he has expressed about this delay, CW did not remember who he was at the beginning of the call. She has also made it clear that the office does not have the correct information about C’s case, and so thought it was already resolved. Once C has corrected CW, the following lines occur.

Extract 4.17: MP01.Phone-2AJ\_01

1 CW: But- I will also raise it again with the council on your  
2 beha:lf, .hh but I KNOW they’re actually dealing with it, It’s  
3 just a case of me telling them look Mr. Humber’s been on the  
4 phone again:,  
5 (0.9)  
6 C: Yeah. (0.2) That ol: man:’s still: pest[’ring me  
7 CW: [↑kHaha>hahah<ha:h.  
8 .hh[y- that’s a]llow:ed, (.) .hh [That’s al↑low:↓ed.] .hh[h  
9 C: [Hehhehhoo ] [ ( ) ] [I’m  
10 s- I’m: seventy eight years of ↑Ag[e.  
11 CW: [↑↑Are you:, >Well< ↑All  
12 ↑ri:[ght ↑gosh.]  
13 C: [(Yeah an’)] An’ I need I: Nee:d .hhh uh- protection.  
14 CW: Ye:s. uh- Quite ri:ght.=  
15 C: =An’ I pay: ↓hundred and ↑thirty six pound a month,  
16 CW: [Yeah, ]  
17 C: [for my] rates, (0.3) An’ I: .hhh [have ]n’t (.) gone to the-  
18 CW: [ ( ) ]  
19 (0.3)  
20 C: sstep that I considered, (1.0) <I considered writing> to ‘im  
21 an’ saying “<until you do that> to put it ri:ght, (0.5) I’m not  
22 going to pay me ra:tes.  
23 CW: Yea-uh-well:: .hhh uh:m: [I wouldn’t necessarily ad]vise  
24 C: [I know::: (° °)]  
25 CW: that,=I un- you un:- must understan:d, [but]=  
26 C: [ ( ) ]  
27 CW: =Uh:m .hh But let me get back onto it again.=because, I know  
28 they’re in the process of working on it,=I know they  
29 are:.=Because .hhh I raise it practically every month at the  
30 housing meeting with ~them:, .hh[H ]=  
31 C: [Aoh↓]  
32 CW: =So: it’s not that they’re Not doing thing::s Uhm it’s just  
33 unfortunate[ly it takes ti:me. ]

34 C: [it's just that (.) they're u]nsuccessful.  
35 CW: .hhH Well, #ah-ee::iuh I# wouldn't say unsuccessful ye:t.  
36 (0.3)  
37 C: Mm.

On Lines 1-2, CW issues the first offer of the call, 'I will also raise it again with the council'. The call has now been established as a repeat call, so the format of 'I will' makes sense, as C's permission has already been sought, and given the frustration C is experiencing, a definite offer is appropriate. In response, C jokes that he is still chasing this issue, and goes on to make a case for needing assistance: he is elderly, needs protection (Line 13), pays his rates (i.e., his rent and taxes, Lines 15-17), and although he considered not paying his rates in protest (Lines 17-22), he has not yet taken this drastic step. CW recommends against that idea, and then at Line 27, reissues the offer, this time in a 'let me' format. This formulation may be an attempt to manage C's expressed frustration. By strongly preferring an acceptance, CW attempts to get C 'on side' with the offered course of action. There is no question of his permission any more, but it is important that he be satisfied with the help he is receiving. C's acceptance of the offer is required, both to demonstrate the acceptability of the suggested offer, and to stop C from continued complaining, which is preventing CW from getting off the phone and putting the offer into action.

By not accepting the offer in Line 1, C displays resistance to the offer. Such resistance has been documented elsewhere, especially in medical interactions (Toerien et al., 2011; Stivers, 2005; Heritage & Sefi, 1992; Hepburn & Potter, 2011a). In this respect, caseworkers offering courses of action are similar to doctors offering courses of treatment. In both contexts, the client is responsible for accepting or declining the offer, and this response carries the client's permission and 'buy-in' to the suggested process. Here, C displays resistance by not responding to the offer (Lines 5 and 6, delay on 36), by continuing to provide arguments for needing assistance despite having been made an offer (Lines 9-10, 13, 15-22), by negatively assessing the work so far (Line 24), and by otherwise only giving minimal acknowledgements that something has been said (e.g., Line 37) instead of more strongly aligning phrases (see Stivers, 2005, 2008). CW, faced with non-aligning turns, makes the offer again, on Line 27. The 'let me' formulation can be seen as an attempt to respond to the new arguments for assistance; to suggest that in order to provide help, C needs to let CW get to work, and to more strongly make an acceptance relevant. In Extract 4.16 above, we can see that CW reissues the 'let me' offer later on in the call. In fact, she does it yet *again* (in data not shown) before she receives an acceptance, shortly before the end of the call. The 'let me'

formulation both manages resistance by strongly preferring an acceptance (almost as if it were a request instead of an offer), and highlights that the ‘burden’ of the action will be undertaken by the caseworker. Although Extract 4.16 and 4.17 demonstrate that the ‘let me’ format is not necessarily immediately effective (given how long it takes to get C to *let* CW fulfil the offer), this is particularly agitated case. This format appears in other calls and meetings as well, but is the least common of the three formats considered in this paper – an unsurprising finding, given that constituents are usually eager to accept any help from the constituency office that is offered. It is only in cases where the office has had significant difficulty in finding an appropriate or successful course of action to offer that the ‘let me’ formulation arises. The ‘let me’ formulation creates a hybrid scenario: the format of a request, but the action of an offer of assistance.

In this section, I have shown how ‘let me’ offers blur the boundary between offer and request, as they request that constituents do something (or do nothing) in order to allow an offer to be fulfilled. However, these are still *offers* because they benefit (largely) the recipient, and are enacted by the offerer. These offers are used to help manage constituent resistance to courses of action.

#### **4.5 Discussion**

In this chapter, I have investigated how turns accomplish ‘offering’ at the constituency office. The MP and caseworkers use different offer designs at specific points, and these different designs accomplish additional work than ‘mere’ offering. Proposal-offers (e.g., ‘I can do X for you’ and ‘do you want’) are designed to highlight the need for permission and make acceptance relevant. They are the first offers given concerning a problem. The next offers are typically announcement-offers (e.g., ‘I will do X’), which re-state and confirm that an agreed upon offer will take place. These offers are often used at the close of a topic or the close of an encounter, as a way of summarizing what offers have been made. They also highlight what action will take place in the future, hence their similarity to expressions of plans or intent. Finally, request-offers (‘let me do X’) are a hybrid of requesting and offering, in which the staff request (or direct) constituents to do (or cease doing) something *so that* the offer can be completed. These offers are used during lengthy complaints to attempt to close down a topic.

I have not considered yet how these offers form part of a series, such as the kind of action series discussed in Schegloff (2007, pp. 207-215). This is because the offers in my dataset do not consistently belong to a series. A few offers discussed in this paper (Extracts 4.3, 4.6, 4.13, 4.15, 4.16, and 4.17) are part of a series of offers issued by the staff, which

move the trajectory of the project of assistance toward a mutually acceptable course of action. Some of these issue new offered actions (such as calling different agencies, or researching different areas), and some involve reissuing the same action (most easily seen in Extracts 4.16 and 4.17). This latter version involves switching the format to ‘request offers’, as a way of managing resistance. Other extracts show first offers in an interaction, although second or third offers concerning the proposed assistance (Extracts 4.11 and 4.14), and there are some that are later in an interaction but first concerning the course of action (Extract 4.2, 4.4, 4.5, 4.7, 4.9, and 4.12), the latter of which all fall into my category of ‘proposal offers’, since they are first offers of an offered action. Schegloff’s series thus overlap with how I characterize the data, but my analysis more accurately and specifically portrays what the offers are accomplishing in my data corpus.

Furthermore, while the series explored in Schegloff (2007) are temporally and sequentially close to each other, many of the offers presented here were related to topics discussed days or weeks prior, albeit by the same participants. Although the speaking roles (who issued the first or second pair part of the offer) remained the same (which is due to the institutional nature of the data) over time, it did not seem appropriate to label offers from separate interactions as part of the same series.

In the introduction to this chapter, I reviewed the way conversation analysts have previously defined and described offers-in-interaction. My empirical observations are most aligned with Couper-Kuhlen (2014)’s definition that offers are proposed actions that benefit the recipient and are carried out by the speaker. However, I suggest that this is not a clearly demarcated distinction; both parties must take some action, even if it is only providing permission (and, in the case of request-offers, it is sometimes necessary to withhold action, in order for an offer to be completed), and the benefits resulting from an offer can be shared. Furthermore, the turn designs I have reported frequently blur the lines between a prototypical offer and other actions, such as proposals, announcements, and requests (which are often stated to be the polar opposite and dispreferred alternative to offers – see Schegloff, 2007; Kendrick & Drew, 2014). Therefore, the offers I have analyzed support Sacks’s (1992) suggestion that requests, offers, proposals, threats, and so on, should be considered as part of a *continuum* of possible actions, rather than as opposites, or discrete concepts. Sidnell and Enfield (2014, p.433) have also argued against the categorization of actions, pointing out

a hearer does not need to *classify an action as being of a certain type* in order to know how to deal with it. A hearer uses the components of a move to figure out on the fly an appropriate response to a particular token move. (emphasis original)

In other words, the constituents are able to parse the MP and caseworkers' offers as more than solely offers; participants can assign more than one action to a turn, and appreciate the nuances that turn design components bring to each utterance (for a different context, see Mandelbaum, 2014). To attempt to categorize and delineate specific action types (as in Couper-Kuhlen, 2014) is to lose analytic purchase on the very nuances that participants are quite adept at understanding. Analyzing actions as fluid possibilities, rather than discrete categories, enhances our understanding of how and why participants use different formulations. As Schegloff (1997a) writes, "boundary cases are the sparks struck by the collision of two analytic practices" (p.539); making room for grey zones between and among actions demonstrates points at which more interactional work is being accomplished. Considering actions as part of a continuum or spectrum will likely prove useful beyond institutional data, as a more flexible conceptualization of action achievement in mundane talk as well.

I have shown in this thesis that participants have a use for making offers in several different formats. Proposal-offers allow caseworkers to gather more information about the case, and seek the institutional pre-requisite of permission. Announcement-offers allow caseworkers and politicians to appear proactive and helpful. Request-offers give caseworkers the ability to pursue permission and alignment with constituents. Yet these actions all still remain offers, as indicated by the beneficiary nature of the promised action. They are evidence that participants are not constrained to particular action categories, but use the matrix of options available to the advantage of whatever their communication needs happen to be, and conversation analysts should take care to allow for the flexibility in action formation that we observe.

In the previous two chapters, I have focused on the service transactions at the constituency office – the process of describing needs and offering help. These transactions comprised the majority of the topics discussed at the office and the majority of the time in the encounters. In the next chapter, I will address a more rarely raised topic: politics, political parties, and government policy. Although these topics were rarely raised, the presence of a politician at this institution makes a discussion of political comments relevant.

## Chapter 5:

### **Making ‘politics’ relevant: How constituents and a Member of Parliament raise political topics at constituency surgeries**

#### **5.0 Introduction**

In this chapter, I will examine how ‘political’ topics become relevant in constituency office encounters. Although one might imagine that constituents and politicians talk entirely about political issues at constituency offices, given that this is the only opportunity for constituents to meet in person with their democratic representatives, we have seen in previous chapters that constituents primarily come for help with local disputes and what they regard as bureaucratic red tape. Despite the MP being arguably *the* prototypical political figure, the data in this corpus do not provide many instances of clearly political talk (although the question of what constitutes ‘political talk’ is itself interesting; see Section 5.1). In this chapter, I will analyze the occasions of political talk that do occur, and discuss the challenges participants face in raising political topics. In Section 5.1, I will discuss how I came to identify sequences of ‘political’ talk. In Section 5.2, I will analyze the sequences in which I found the MP to make ‘political’ topics relevant. In Section 5.3, I will analyze sequences in which I found constituents to initiate politically-relevant sequences, namely criticisms. In Section 5.4, I will analyze how constituents may come to compliment the MP with respect to political activity. This latter, deviant case shows that constituents privilege the interactional contingencies of encounters with a politician over a possible desire to make a political statement. Overall, this chapter highlights the importance of considering the *interactional* norms to which speakers orient, as I will show how those norms impact constituents’ ability to raise political criticisms. This chapter will be of interest to those studying political discourse and conversation, even in more mundane settings (Ekström, 2016; Eveland, Morey & Hutchens, 2011; Schmitt-Beck & Lup, 2013), as it demonstrates the insight that analysis of actual recordings can bring to our understanding of how to achieve talk *as* political.

#### **5.1 What is ‘political’?**

There is a vast literature that attempts to define what counts as ‘political’ (see Section 1.1; Leftwich, 2004; van Dijk, 1997), which cannot be covered fully here, but few of these definitions are capable of defining how a stretch of *interaction* can be identified as ‘political’,

let alone what practices members use to *achieve* a sense of ‘political’ in an interaction. I did not treat the ‘mere’ context of being at the constituency office of a Member of Parliament as sufficient for labeling the interactions as political, for several reasons. First, as discussed in Chapter 1, most political discourse literature does not treat the constituency office as a political environment. Second, as this is a conversation analytic study, CA does not treat a context *as* any specific type of interaction (e.g., ‘political’) unless participants invoke or do work to *make* the talk so. Given that *no* constituents did work to show that their visit to the constituency office was for the express purpose of discussing policy, elections, or the MP’s job, the political topics were ‘buried’ in other conversational activities, and work was required to extract or make plain the political aspect of a turn. Third, given the lack of current research determining how everyday citizens invoke a sense of ‘political’ in the presence of their MP, I believe it is more interesting to analyze the data for how participants *achieved* ‘political’ sequences, or not, and any challenges they faced in doing so.

The sequences of talk that are considered political here rely on Hay’s (2007, pp.54-81) definition, wherein an issue can be characterized as political by highlighting the ways in which agency and deliberation were a part of the issue. In other words, talk *makes a topic political* (talk ‘politicizes’ the topic) by highlighting how some entity made (or could make) choices about the topic. Hay’s definition is especially useful as it avoids the requirement that talk be ‘political’ by virtue of having the goal of some political end – which is one common way to distinguish what is political or not (Dingwall, 2000; van Dijk, 1997). CA does not assume analysts have access to any mental states such as ‘goals’. After all, it may be that *every* constituent that visited this constituency office had some mental goal that was political, that every complaint about bureaucratic red tape was implicitly also a criticism of government policy about benefits. But to claim that there were political goals in the minds of constituents without clearly demonstrating said goals would be unscientific. We can only be certain of a political agenda when it is made evident, just as the participants could only be certain of a political agenda on the part of their interlocutors when such an agenda was made evident in the conversation. Hay’s definition also avoids the requirement of attributing power, as an abstract attribute, to one participant over another (common in political definitions such as Nicholson, 2004; Swift, 2004), which also remains true to the inductive conversation analytic method (for useful discussions of power in relation to CA, see Dingwall, 2000; Hepburn & Potter, 2011a; Nishizaka, 1992; Schegloff, 1997b). In this chapter, I focus on how the choices of larger scale, traditional political entities were made relevant – government, politicians, and political parties. These were the instances that most

strongly invoked a common-sense notion of ‘political’. Moreover, these matched the participants’ concern for emphasizing, or de-emphasizing, who was accountable for a policy, or for a situation. Participants showed an orientation towards the MP’s accountability even when it was indirect.

Hay’s (2007) definition can permit an analysis of how the constituents’ choices (for instance, whether or not to apply for benefits, what items to purchase while in poverty, or when to complain) could be politicized, but both for space reasons and for less quantity of data, this analysis has been saved for future research. The micro-scale choices embedded in the interaction itself (whether to offer assistance, what assistance to offer, whether to accept or resist, etc.) could also be politicized, but this begins to overlap extensively with the basic concerns of response relevance and action ascription in CA, and again, fails to address the more interesting question of how talk can be achieved as political, and when and where participants choose to do so. Note that I will not address the question of ‘face’ (Bull & Fetzer, 2010; Goffman, 1967), as there was not ample evidence to indicate that ‘facework’ was a participants’ concern (Arundale, 2006, 2010; Benwell & Stokoe, 2002). In order to show the way a sequence was *achieved* as ‘political’, and how it arises as a participants’ concern, I will also include analysis of an extract that was possibly political, but was not fully achieved as such (see Extract 5.7, Section 5.3). In the final section, I will show a counter-example (Section 5.4) of how constituents compliment (instead of criticize) the MP’s government, and how the practices for complimenting are significantly different than the practices for criticizing.

I found that the MP initiated political topics in order to show that the government and his political party were aligned with constituents’ interests. In the next section, I will analyze how the MP initiated political topics and made the political relevant.

## **5.2 How the Member of Parliament initiated political talk**

In the first analytic section, I will analyze how the MP raises political topics and makes political comments. The MP’s comments are direct references to political activity in government (i.e., to the majority, governing party’s policies and activity), and show proactive behaviour on the part of the government that is aligned with the constituents’ interests.

When constituents present a complaint, the MP can treat that complaint as politically relevant, and make a political comment. The MP can raise reports of details about current House of Commons proceedings or plans, for instance. By raising a political topic or issue, the MP treats the prior turn(s) as political and/or politically relevant turn(s). For example, in



the first extract, the constituents (C1 and C2) and MP have been discussing elder care homes in the United Kingdom (UK). The constituents' mother was seriously neglected in her care home, and the constituents want their mother's legacy to be preventing further abuse and neglect. The constituents have been suggesting possible problems with the system in the meeting, and are currently expressing concern about the lack of trained care home staff.

### Extract 5.1: MP01.Surgery-2CXx\_05

1 MP: An' they're al:ready saying, (0.2) they can't  
2 afford to run, (0.5)  
3 [uhm with what they're] doing,  
4 C1: [°But they're paying-°] They're paying  
5 the minimu[m wage] °don't they,°=  
6 MP: [I know.] =Well that's  
7 the trouble an' then it-  
8 C1: You kno[w:],  
9 MP: [So, (.) they pay the minimum wa:ge,  
10 They attract people who are (0.2) only prepared  
11 to work for, (.) you know,  
12 C1: Yeah,  
13 MP: Minimum wage, (0.2) An' therefore th- the- the  
14 people say:, th- the care homes will say:, say  
15 to- say to me, 'well actually there's no  
16 point#, °you know (les-) they- they're-°  
17 turnover is- .hhh  
18 MP: It's a vicious circle. [An' it's a ]=  
19 C2: [>You wouldn't want a<]  
20 MP: =↑bi:g problem in this count[ry].  
21 C2: [You wouldn't have  
22 somebody- you know a baby in a nursery being  
23 looked after somebody (0.5) [like that=  
24 MP: [No.  
25 C2: =then would you.  
26 C2: An' it- you know, an' [<↑elder]  
27 MP: [an' th]at'[s-  
28 C2: [person> is  
29 just as vulnera[ble].  
30 MP: [An' that's where we (.) are  
31 trying to get to, which [is=  
32 C2: [Mm,  
33 MP: =to a much Better system, [an' the care bill=  
34 C1: [Mm.  
35 MP: =on Mon- returns to the House of Commons on  
36 Monday an' T[uesday,=  
37 C1: [Mm:..  
38 MP: =to try an' get a <much (.) better,>  
39 C1: °M[m:,°  
40 MP: ['s a more joined up system in the enn ayтч  
41 es[s, ((NHS))  
42 C1: [Mm[:,  
43 C2: [Mm:..

This extract shows how a complaint develops slowly into a politically oriented sequence. The extract starts with C1 and C2 resisting the MP's concerns. The MP expresses concern on

behalf of the elder care homes (ECHs) that they cannot afford to run. C1 counters (literally proposing an alternative with ‘but’, Line 4) that the ECHs pay minimum wage. The MP aligns with C1 (‘I know’, Line 6), and explains the dilemma facing the ECHs (Lines 6-20). The MP concludes his explanation by suggesting that the problem is broader than the concerns of the constituents – that it is ‘a tr:g problem in this country’ (Lines 18-20), and thus goes beyond the ECH of the constituents’ mother. At this point, the MP’s explanation has not directly affiliated with the constituents’ concerns, but has diverged to address the broader, social-scale difficulties. C2, then, does not respond to these broader implications, and pursues affiliation for the complaint about the lack of training (Lines 19-23) (Jefferson & Lee, 1992). This resists the MP’s explanation (Hepburn & Potter, 2011b). C2’s complaint more strongly pursues affiliation by formulating the concern as something that anybody would feel (‘>you wouldn’t want’ Line 19; ‘you wouldn’t have’ Line 21). C2 also mobilizes response (Stivers & Rossano, 2010) with other strategies, such as the tag-question ‘would you’ (Line 25), and the extreme case formulation contrast of a baby and an elderly person (Lines 22-29). These kinds of complaint-pursuing environments, in which constituents continually pursue affiliation for a certain complaint, or repeat a complaint, can result in political comments from the MP.

The MP now affiliates with the constituents more strongly. First, the MP agrees with them: ‘No’ (Line 24). Note that the ‘No’ is an agreement in that it shows the MP to be of a similar opinion, that you *would not* want an untrained person caring for a baby. Second, the MP uses a political comment to demonstrate how he and his government have been proactively engaging with this issue already. On Lines 30-36, the MP mentions that the government is discussing ‘the care bill’ (Line 33) in a few days’ time, which shows that they are aware of the issue, are actively trying to find a way to fix the issue, and that they have already been preparing for the bill in the recent past. The MP also designs his turn so that the political activity directly addresses C2’s turn: ‘An’ that’s where we (.) are trying to get to’ (Line 30-31). The ‘An’ that’ (and) indexes how the utterance arises out of C2’s complaint, as if C2 has coincidentally formulated precisely what the government has been doing. In this way, the MP’s turn not only fulfills the relevant affiliation with C2, it also shows him to be proactively and independently helping the constituents. As Edwards and Fasulo (2006) have pointed out, demonstrating independence highlights the sincerity of the position.

Extract 5.1 shows how a political comment can be slowly developed, from possible-political topics such as the country-wide relevance of an issue, to more specific, overt political topics such as debating bills. The extract also shows how the MP can mobilize a

potential political sequence of talk to demonstrate an affiliative, shared position with the constituents – but also that said position is genuine, and independently claimed, since it is based on already-undertaken government activity. This kind of positioning could be very useful for a politician who needs to demonstrate how well they represent constituents and how they are actively assisting constituents, in order to keep their job in the next election.

Extract 5.1 also demonstrates initial differences between conversations at the constituency office and conversations in citizen participation shows (see Section 1.3.2). Firstly, the constituents are not mediated by a host. They are able to pursue concerns, contrary to findings in radio and TV settings (Ekström & Eriksson, 2013; Ekström & Moberg, 2015; Thornborrow & Fitzgerald, 2013). Secondly, the constituents do not pursue the MP's responsibilities through accountability questions, as in political interviews (Clayman & Heritage, 2002b; Djerf-Pierre, Ekström & Johansson, 2013; Ekström, 2009; Ekström, Djerf-Pierre, Johansson, Håkansson, 2015). In fact, the MP's personal accountability is not raised, and the constituents focus on the accountability of the care home.

One aspect mirrors political interviews: depoliticization of an issue and the explicit invocation of government policy is what closes the topic. At first, the constituents portray the care home's choices of who to hire and how much to pay as questionable and accountable, which politicizes said choices by suggesting other ones would be better. The MP depoliticizes these choices by saying they are caught in a 'vicious circle' (Line 18), in other words that there is no choice, and the difficulties are inevitable. When the constituents further pursue the issue, with their comparison to nursery care, the MP invokes current legislation being debated in Parliament, and this closes the topic. Depoliticization and invocation of current measures are tactics used in interviews (Ekström et al., 2015, p.12; Hay, 2007) to achieve answers without giving promises. The work done to make politics explicit closes the topic. The constituents minimally accept the MP's proposal that the new bill will bring a better outcome (Lines 42-43), without challenging it, and move on to the next topic.

The MP-initiated political comments follow the above pattern – explicit invocation of government, aligning with constituent interests, and changing or closing the topic. Extract 5.2 demonstrates this. In Extract 5.2, the constituent (C) has come to the MP to report an incident of legal aid fraud. Legal aid is a government program that supports low income families with the costs of solicitors and lawyers. It also had its funding dramatically cut by the government shortly before the recording. He and his family have unwittingly been a part of a law firm's fraudulent activity. After explaining (over eight minutes, from the start of the meeting) how

his family came to be involved and how the firm had hidden the details from them, C broadens his complaint to a society-wide concern.

Extract 5.2: MP01.Surgery-1KZ3\_02

1 C: Now, (0.3) What I'm saying is, (.) >a- How  
2 many< people are th- doing this towards, They  
3 just- e- Sur:ely it's illegal.  
4 (0.9)  
5 C: If they knew, (0.5) there was a- (.) a problem  
6 in the first place, (0.3) I'd a said- "Okay,  
7 (.) I'll accept tha[t,"  
8 MP: [Yeah.  
9 (0.4)  
10 MP: Yes.=You want to- y- ex[act ly. ]  
11 C: [I know wh]at I'll go  
12 by the law.  
13 MP: ↑Yeah.  
14 (0.3)  
15 C: But they carried on w↓ith i',  
16 MP: Well, (.) That's why:, as a government, (0.5)  
17 we ha- have- (.) Uhm <stopped,> (0.2) <legal  
18 aid,> (0.6) for: (0.2) you know,  
19 man[y many cases.]  
20 C: [There's too- too m]uch <waste.>  
21 MP: ↑Yeah. >Well an' lots of people were,< as you  
22 say making money, (0.4) [out of the tax=  
23 C: [Mm.  
24 MP: =payer on these things,

It is C, here, who first broaches the topic of wider social relevance. On Lines 1-3, he intensifies his concern about the law firm, suggesting that they have not only dealt fraudulently with him, but perhaps with many other people. C neutralizes his own involvement, claiming he would have said 'I'll accept that,' (Line 7), before continuing to pursue the complaint (Line 15). C has been pursuing his issue for eight minutes, the last three of which have involved direct complaints about the company. Thus, we are in a similar environment as in Extract 5.1, where a complaint is being pursued, and the broader social implications have been mentioned. This is a sufficient context for the MP to treat the sequence as politically relevant.

The MP's comment, Lines 16-19, highlights the way that his own government has proactively managed the problem of legal aid fraud, by dramatically reducing it. The MP specifically includes 'as a government (0.5) we' (Lines 16-17), which inserts into his turn both the role of the government, and the MP's role within that government in accomplishing the fix for legal aid fraud. In Hay's (2007) terms, it highlights the (government level) politicization of the decision to stop legal aid. The MP goes on to demonstrate a shared

knowledge of the problems of the fraud, such as in ‘lots of people were, < as you say making money (0.4) out of the tax payer’ (Lines 21-24). Including the ‘as you say’ helps to indicate, as was done in Extract 5.1, the way the MP shares C’s knowledge and opinion, and the way that the political comment arises out of C’s own talk. Not only does this show the MP to be on-side with C, it mitigates a possible hearing of this line as preaching or campaigning – taking the opportunity to discuss things not directly in the constituent’s realm of concern.

The MP treats C’s assessment of ‘There’s too much <waste.>’ (Line 20) as an agreement, and continues to describe the issues with legal aid. As such, the question of stopping legal aid acts as a transition to a new topic, which continues for some time after Extract 5.2. Again we see that raising political topics can transition away from a complaint sequence – by showing the MP and his government are aligned with the constituents’ interests, and by raising a new topic of discussion.

Extract 5.3 presents a third and final example of MP-initiated political comments. It will show that while the MP remains consistent in the way he raises political topics, the topic shift does not always move past the complaint. There are still ways for constituents to pursue their complaint, despite the MP’s attempt to show that the government is already trying to manage the issue. In this extract, the constituent (C) is visually impaired, and is visiting with a companion (V) who she met through a group that volunteers for the blind. Both have been discussing the difficulties raised by recent benefit changes that were brought into effect by the MP’s government. Here, V raises the issue of finding work when visually impaired, which is done to support the idea that C is not malingering or lazily taking benefits – she has no choice as she cannot get a job.

#### Extract 5.3: MP01.Surgery-1KZ3 04

1 V: I think one thing’s been- that’s been really  
 2 commendable about Amy is:, You have tried to find,  
 3 (0.4) you know, (0.2) <volunteering jobss,>  
 4 haven’t you in the pa[st,  
 5 C: [°Yeah, I did  
 6 [some volunteering°°  
 7 V: [An’ the first thing that (.) Amy sai:d was, (0.2)  
 8 you know (.) sh- “Get me a job an’ I’ll wor:k.”  
 9 MP: M[m:.  
 10 CW: [Mh[m:.  
 11 V: [And you know the difficulty is, especially in  
 12 you know, (0.2) °you know this-° (0.2) °the current°  
 13 financial situation i:s, .hhh that- you know  
 14 employers are- not going to take on, (0.6) <disabled  
 15 peop[le,>  
 16 MP: [.hhhh  
 17 (0.7)

18 V: You know >particularly,< uh:m people who are visually  
19 imp[air:ed,=  
20 CW: [Yeah:,  
21 V: =Where they have to employ somebody else to- to be  
22 with them.  
23 (0.7)  
24 V: You know [(to,)  
25 MP: [>Well it's uhm-< .hhh >I mean< you're right. An'  
26 I think it's one of the things >that I th- that-< the:  
27 >government, tha- the-< the disabilitie:s uh minister, uhm  
28 Lina Degra::t, There's a big disability employment  
29 strategy, that has been launched and is being changed all  
30 the ti:me, .hhh for >exactly< that reason

V complains about the challenge of finding work when disabled, given that even able-bodied people are having difficulty at the time of recording, due to the economic climate. The MP confirms V's version (Line 25), and then raises a current initiative that a co-member of government is running to help employ people with disabilities. As before, the MP's raising of an explicitly political initiative positions himself and his government as aligned with the constituent. The MP describes this initiative at length, beyond the end of Extract 5.3, and receives no verbal uptake from C or V (the first clear opportunity for an acknowledgement or continuer being Line 30, during the MP's in-breath). When C does respond, it is to tell a story about a painful experience in applying for a job.

#### Extract 5.4: MP01.Surgery-1KZ3 04 (continued from Extract 5.3)

((29 lines since end of Extract 5.3))  
59 MP: An' that's what we'd like- that's what we'd like to  
60 see is everybody (playing at-) the- you know, (0.3)  
61 doing (0.2) doing the right thing for them  
62 °basically.°  
63 (0.5)  
64 C: .tch Yeah o' cour:se. .hhh I mean I remember when I lived  
65 in Brigsby, .hhh I uh:m for a short while I was part of a  
66 group for:, that was call:ed, °.hhh° uh Job Club for the  
67 Disabled.=  
((9 lines omitted, mentions she tried calling for a job))  
77 C: An' then he said "↑Well:, (0.2) That's great thank you for  
78 your call.=You'll hear from us soon."=I said "↑Well before  
79 you ↓go:, (0.4) there's something I'd like to tell ya."  
80 (0.3) An' he said "Yeah go ahea:d",=  
81 MP: =[Mhm  
82 C: =[An' I says "I'm ↑bli:nd." .hhh And all >I got on  
83 the other end of the phone was< "↓What does that  
84 mean."  
85 (0.8)  
86 C: I says "Well:, my eyes don't wor[k."  
87 MP: [Mhm  
88 C: .hhh "Oh well if your eyes don't work your brain  
89 can't work °neither.°"  
90 MP: °tuh°

91 CW: Wha::[t?  
92 MP: [↑↑↑DID HE SAY ↑↑↑THA:↓T.

C's story (Lines 64-89) is a nuanced sequence. On the one hand, it is aligned with the MP's prior turns, in that it smoothly continues the sequence concerning the employment strategy. C starts her turn with a receptive 'Yeah o'cour:se.' (Line 64) and then prefacing the story with 'I mean' (Line 64). Both of these turn components portray the ensuing story as arising from prior talk, and as aligned with the MP's explanation of the government strategy. The story could be interpreted to support the *need* for the strategy, given the negative reaction C received from the prospective employer. On the other hand, the story *also* pursues the issue of not being able to find a job, by providing direct evidence of the problem. It returns to the prior complaint raised by V in Extract 5.3, challenging the MP's account that the government is managing the difficulties faced by people with disabilities. In other words, C is pursuing her complaint and her criticism of government policy, despite the MP's attempt at reassuring C in Extract 5.3. C gives an example of the discrimination she faces as a person with a disability seeking a job. This example gets C's difficulties on record – difficulties that implicitly criticize the government's policies as inadequate for helping people with disabilities. The story shows evidence of C's difficulties, thus supporting C's original complaint, without continuing to directly criticize the MP or government policy. Indeed, it is designed to be hearable as arising from and supporting the MP's talk (see Line 64, 'Yeah o'cour:se, .hhh I mean' ...), despite the critical work it accomplishes. However, the story still does not directly call the MP to account, suggesting that C is balancing the pursuit of a complaint with the interactional difficulties of challenging the MP more directly (as would be seen on a news interview; see Section 5.3).

In this section, I have shown how political comments arise out of sequences that involve complaints, and sequences that may have referenced a wider social implication of the constituents' specific concern. The MP takes the opportunity to make the talk politically relevant by demonstrating how he and/or his government have taken action on the issue. The references to government are direct and specific, and portray the government in a positive light – as aligned with the constituents' interests and concerns. Beyond the overt references to government, it is notable how the government is granted agency in these sequences. Governments are colloquially thought of as non-agents – as an ineffective group of people who usually fail to enact anything at all (Hay, 2007). Highlighting the agency of the government politicizes the government's actions in and of itself, according to Hay (2007),

suggesting that these sequences involve political action for their politicizing nature, not just their explicit references to mainstream political bodies.

The explicit and positive nature of the MP's political comments shows a marked contrast with the comments from constituents. In the next section, I will analyze constituent-initiated comments, where constituents must carefully manage the interactional challenge of criticizing a co-present person.

### 5.3 How constituents' initiate political talk

Constituents' comments are quite different from the MP's, in that when they raise political topics, they mostly speak vaguely and with markers of delicacy such as hesitations (see Silverman & Peräkylä, 1990). Constituents also mostly criticize government action or policy, thus portraying it in a negative light, and not as aligned with their interests. When constituents compliment the MP (see Section 5.4), they do not have markers of delicacy, and speak specifically.

The first example of constituent-initiated political talk is seen in Extract 5.5. Near the time of recording, the government had implemented two policies. First, it had implemented a system for assessing benefit claimants to determine their eligibility, which was controversial (Litchfield, 2014). In this extract, the constituent (C1) has multiple sclerosis, and has been told he is ineligible for benefits. C1 appealed this assessment, but the appeal kept being delayed and C1's benefits had been cancelled anyway, so C1 and his wife (C2) have come to see the MP for aid. The second government policy was to increase the age at which one could receive state pension (see Department of Work and Pensions 2014). A pension would have allowed the constituents more financial flexibility in the face of the benefits cancellation, and so the lack of pension is a complainable and frustrating matter. C2 complains about this second change to the caseworker (CW) and the MP on lines 9 and 10.

#### Extract 5.5: MP01.Surgery-13KO\_01

1 C2: I've had to go back to working five days,  
2 CW: R:ight o[kay. Yea:h. Yeah.  
3 C2: [Ahheh heh ba(h)si(h)c'ly cause °I  
4 haven't got money coming° [in an:' uh: ]  
5 CW: [Yeah o'course yeah]  
6 C2: °°You know:, °° '[mean I'm s]ixty,  
7 CW: [ <M k a y ]  
8 (0.4)  
9 C2: Nearly, an' (.) obviously our pension's been  
10 ↑moved [↑↑now hasn't it, (h)eh(h)eh=  
11 MP: [Yeah:, I know::, I know::=  
12 C2: =[hhhhhahhh ]



13 MP: = [I know- Well::] >unfortunately< [as you know=  
 14 C2: [You know,]  
 15 MP: =everyone's- having ta- you know,  
 16 C2: Mm,  
 17 (0.3)  
 18 MP: We're trying to sort out uh:, you know the big  
 19 black hole, and everybody's °° impacting on  
 20 ( ) °°  
 21 C2: Yeah  
 22 MP: °° ( ) Enough. °° [So,  
 23 C2: [That's right. Yeah.  
 24 MP: °An: ' you know and uh but basically, (0.4)  
 25 Difficult- difficult choices.  
 26 C2: Yea[h].  
 27 MP: [An' pensions has been- has been one of  
 28 them,  
 29 C2: Mm.  
 30 MP: So, uh:m,  
 31 C2: But I say this is just

C2 starts with a complaint about having to work extra hours, which transforms into a political issue, on Lines 9-10, 'Obviously our pension's been ↑moved ↑↑now hasn't it'. This comment makes the recent policy change about pensions relevant to the discussion, and creates a potential space for the MP to respond to it *as* a political comment (which he does, see below). C2's comment is built up as a pursuit of a complaint, as we have seen before, giving additional evidence (having to go back to work longer, Line 1, being too old, Line 6) for why the constituents' situation is difficult and in need of assistance. The use of 'Obviously' and the tag question 'hasn't it' (Lines 9-10) make it difficult to disagree with the statement (Hepburn & Potter, 2011b). However, C2 also builds markers of delicacy into her talk. The role of the government is left entirely implicit – the pensions have 'been ↑moved' (Lines 9-10), and the agent who did the moving is left unspoken (remember: the agent who did the moving was the MP's political party). There are laughter particles managing the problematic nature of not having sufficient funds (Line 3, see Potter & Hepburn, 2010b), as well as post-completion laughter particles (Line 10, see Shaw, Hepburn & Potter, 2013) managing the implied criticism of the MP. There are also significant pitch changes (Line 10) and low volume sections (Line 6), which also mark delicacy (Silverman & Peräkylä, 1990). Finally, the criticism is delayed to the end of the account of why the constituents are struggling. These are indicators of a delicate situation, used to manage the potentially problematic interpretations that may be available to the participants. In other words, C2 designs her turns that culminate in a political comment with speech markers that are regularly reported to manage interpersonally sensitive topics and actions. This suggests that C2 is careful, when making such a comment, to mitigate risks associated with doing such an action. In

complaining about a situation brought about by the very party to which the MP belongs, C2 risks criticizing the MP directly (Sacks 1992, p.795). As a result, C2 takes steps to reduce this implication, while simultaneously indicating that she is aware of it.

C2 does not go on record with an accusation (or even a direct statement) about the MP's behaviour, or about the MP's party's decisions or actions. As noted above (Section 5.2), this is unlike the reported practices in other interactions with politicians, namely in political interviews (Clayman & Heritage, 2002a; Eriksson, 2011; Ekström, 2009; Ekström et al., 2015; Heritage, 2002). C2 is not adversarial, and delays the more hostile negative interrogative tag question until the end of her turn (Line 10). Also unlike news interviews, C2 accepts the MP's explanation (see below), by giving continuing tokens (15, 20, 25, 27), treating it as sufficient.

It is worth noting that the complaint is displaced (Edwards, 2005) – it is tangential to the main complaint, the issue of the appeal about benefits. C2 would not be trouble-free even if the pension had not been moved. The comment provides another account for why the constituents are in need of the MP's aid. What it does as an action in the conversation is both the giving of an account, and the complaining about a policy. The constituent is not engaged in negotiating the responsibilities of the MP, but in getting help for herself and her partner. The political nature of the account makes it all the more relevant for the MP to provide aid – the MP's government was the source of the some of the difficulty, and so it is appropriate that the MP likewise fixes the problem.

The MP treats the complaint as deserving a political account, which proves that however subtle the comment may appear to analysts, the MP interprets it as politically oriented. The MP, by treating it as a political statement, acknowledges the way that C2 has politicized (by mentioning the negative impact of this action) the policy decision on pensions. The MP responds to this politicization with a depoliticization – making the decision appear as less of a decision or action, and more of a forced result. The MP accounts for the pension moving as part of an effort to fill the 'big black hole' (Lines 18-19), which refers to the lack of government finances and the UK deficit. He mentions that the change has been impacting on 'everybody' (Line 19), which neutralizes the constituent's particular claim to complainability about the pension move (although note that the reference to 'everybody' is a rhetorical device, Sacks, 1975). Lastly, he characterizes the change as part of 'difficult choices' (Line 25) that the government has made. Although the MP includes himself in the active effort of 'we're trying to sort out...the big black hole' (Lines 18-19), he leaves an agent out of 'difficult choices', letting it remain ambiguous as to who actually made the

difficult choices (and thus who actually has the blame of moving pensions). The ‘difficult’ component is key, as it highlights that while it *was* a choice, it was a forced, involuntary one.

The MP also makes efforts to be ‘on side’ with C2, empathizing with three repeats of ‘I know::’ (Lines 11-13) and prefacing his account with ‘unfortunately’ (Line 13). At the end of the extract, C2 herself moves the conversation back to the main issue of the appeals tribunal. The conversation never returns to the issue of pensions or the government in the remainder of the surgery.

Extract 5.5 is the prototypical example of a constituent-initiated political comment, wherein the constituent shows efforts to mitigate the potential delicacy of the comment. The comment is typically a criticism, and, by virtue of being part of the political party that created the problem in question, the MP is implicated in the same criticism (Sacks 1992, p.795). Criticizing another person to their face is a highly problematic action to do in conversations (Edwards, 2005; Stokoe & Hepburn, 2005; Heinemann, 2009; Traverso, 2009). Constituents may need to express their criticism, as it supports their case for needing the MP’s assistance, but they need to manage the interactional difficulties as well. Furthermore, there may be even more difficulty in expressing a *politically-oriented* criticism, as Ekström (2016) has found that people may treat politics as delicate and an unsafe topic.

The same pattern repeats itself in Extract 5.6. In this extract (which involves the same constituent as Extract 5.3, but earlier in the meeting), the constituent (C) has come to explain the difficulties she has been having due to the recent changes in benefits policies. The extract begins just as she is invited to begin (Line 1).

Extract 5.6: MP01.Surgery-1KZ3\_04 (see also Extract 5.3)

- 1 MP: you carry on we’ll uhm, Ann’ll take notes.  
2 C: Right.=Lovely.=Thanks. .hhhh Uh:m, It’s regarding the  
3 uh:m::, hhh tch, benefits changes,  
4 MP: Yeah.  
5 C: <And how belittling> they’ve made me feel.  
6 MP: °Oh I’m s[orry.] Yeah.°  
7 C: [Uhm, ] e- They: haven’t taken into  
8 accou:nt at all about my disability.=They’ve- .hhh  
9 I’ve been made to fee:l, like I’m the only one.  
10 (0.5)  
11 C: .hhh Uhm They- th- fhhffff e- the assessment was  
12 absolutely awful.

C’s case is unusual, as she has come partially *to* discuss an issue that is policy-relevant: the benefits changes (she has also come to ask for aid and resources in a dispute with her ex-partner, discussed after the benefits, in data not shown). This is important to note to underline

that she is still hoping to receive some aid from the MP during her visit). C's opening line is marked with disfluencies (Lines 2-3) such as 'uh:m' and 'tch': markers of delicacy about the topic. This shows C is oriented to a potential delicacy in raising her concern, which is consistent with the way politically-relevant topics have been treated so far. C also frames the benefits changes as a mutually known ('*the...benefits changes*', Lines 2-3) but agentless item, by refraining from mentioning how the benefits changes came about. The benefits changes in and of themselves become the source of feeling belittled (Line 5) or 'like I'm the only one.' (Line 9) – rather than the person or organization (the MP's party) that caused the benefits changes. C also frames the problems with the benefits changes through the first-person perspective – 'they've made *me* feel' (Line 5) and 'I've been made to fee:l' (Line 9). This framing highlights that the views are subjective. In contrast, when C assesses how the disability assessment process occurred, she frames it as an objective issue ('the assessment was', Line 11) (see Edwards & Potter, 2012). This may be because the assessment centre is more distantly related to the MP – it is only the centre that is accountable for its actions, rather than the MP. Finally, note that C uses an extreme case formulation to describe the assessment centre ('absolutely awful', Line 12), whereas the descriptions of the benefits changes themselves are more downgraded, in part because of the subject-side assessments ('*like* I'm the only one' Line 9). Overall, C designs her turn to carefully manage who is accountable for the problems she is describing. For the benefits changes, in which the MP is more closely implicated, C uses more delicacy markers and does not assess the MP personally. For the assessment centre, she directly assesses the centre with an extreme case formulation. In this way, we can see how constituents manage statements that could potentially be critical of the MP – a co-present interlocutor.

Although a constituent may attempt to raise a topic as political, the MP can efface the relevance of the political aspect of the turn. The MP can choose to respond to possible political comments without addressing their political nature. This does more than depoliticize the issue – it treats the political nature as irrelevant. In Extract 5.7, the constituent (C) is attempting to sponsor an immigrating family to the UK. But he missed the UK Border Agency's (UKBA – the UK immigration services) phone call to him, in which he was supposed to provide sponsorship information. There is no way for an average citizen to contact the UKBA and no helpline available, so the constituent has no way of communicating with the UKBA to rectify the misunderstanding. If he cannot complete his role in the process, the immigration application will fail. He has come to the MP to ask for them to contact the UKBA for him.

### Extract 5.7: MP01.Surgery-13KO\_05

1 C: But again there was no email an' no ↑telephone  
2 number.  
3 (0.3)  
4 CW: No. As it happens that's <where I call,> so,  
5 C: Oh I s[ee.  
6 CW: [Don't worry about [that.  
7 C: [ >Brilliant,< But-  
8 (0.3) °it's (a) frustrating.°  
9 MP: Mm.  
10 C: There's <got to be:,> at least, you know, All  
11 er- All I woulda done was, (0.2) an' hour or  
12 two later, (0.2) °picked up the° pho:ne, (0.4)  
13 an' even if there was an <Answer phone.>  
14 (0.6)  
15 C: to say:., .hhh "This is such an' such, you rang  
16 me two hours ago, Please give me a ring:., with  
17 reference to."  
18 CW: Yes.  
19 MP: Ye[ah.  
20 C: [(B- Uhm an' that's, (0.3) that's #eh-  
21 #°yeahhh,=It's° something that's wor:th, (0.2)  
22 perhaps making a point but (that is/at least)  
23 there is some way,  
24 (0.6)  
25 C: [<of:> getting in==  
26 MP: [For you to get in touch=  
27 C: =[<in ] ↑co[ntact.>]  
28 MP: =[with them,] [Yeah. ] W- Yeah.  
29 CW: Mm,  
30 C: >You know i- w- It's< an ↑E[mail.  
31 MP: [ >We can< explain it  
32 an' then when A[nn ca:lls,  
33 CW: [Yes,  
34 MP: Y- We' [ll explain what's] happened,  
35 CW: [Yes I'll ex- ]  
36 C1: Mm.

On Lines 1-2, C is accounting for why he needed to contact the MP's office for assistance, rather than managing the issue himself. He is demonstrating his efforts at self-help (Edwards & Stokoe, 2007). This is the third separate time he has mentioned that there was no way to contact the UKBA, meaning that this is once again an environment that is simultaneously accounting for the desperation of a constituent's situation, as well as pursuing a complaint. The caseworker (CW) does not take up the possible-complaint her response on Line 4 – but instead reassures C that she will call precisely at the UKBA office he has tried to contact. C accepts this reassurance, but again remounts his complaint on Lines 7-8 – 'But- (0.3) °it's (a) frustrating.°' In continuing to explain his complaint, C starts with an insistence that 'There's <got to be:,>' (Line 10), before self-repairing, and moving away from that trajectory of

sequence. Instead, C repairs to a more neutral, less insistent proposal, in which he minimizes the effort it would take to make the UKBA contactable (Lines 10-17).

The MP and CW still do not do more than a minimal acceptance of C's complaint – instead of the more relevant affiliation and demonstration of an independently agreed stance. As a result, C does one more pursuit of the complaint, this time making the political potentially relevant. C says, 'It's<sup>o</sup> something that's wor:th, (0.2) perhaps making a point' (Lines 21-22), suggesting that it may be worth making a bigger point about the contactability of the UKBA. C does not specify who should make the point – whether it is himself to the MP, or the MP or CW to the UKBA – but does broaden the impact of his issue. As seen in Extracts 5.1-5.3, this can make the political relevant. C can be seen to be politicizing the choice of the government and/or UKBA to keep the public from contacting the organization, by suggesting it is better to *allow* contact.

However, the MP does not respond politically. Following a series of collaborative completions, which help to show the MP is aligned with C, the MP says they will explain the issue to the UKBA (Lines 31-34). This implies that C's central concern was expressing his own worries about being unable to contact the UKBA, rather than wider worries about the very contactability of the UKBA as an organization. With this turn, the MP retroactively ascribes C's meaning to be about his personal concern, rather than a politically relevant wider concern. In this way, the MP removes the relevance of a politically oriented answer, and removes any need to make a statement about his own position, or the government's position on the matter – but without overtly refusing to answer (Ekström, 2009).

Extract 5.7 shows how it is necessary for both parties to collaborate in the creation of a sequence as political. It cannot be achieved by one person alone (the organization of the chapter as MP- or constituent-initiated is for convenience – in both sections it can be seen that the interlocutor needs to accept the political aspect and collaborate in its role in the sequence). This further shows how 'the political' is the product of interactional work by conversation participants, not by extrinsic or analyst's labels. Individual participants can initiate the possible relevance of the political, but both parties must engage in political implications in order to continue a sequence of turns that discuss political topics.

In this section, we have seen that constituents raise politically relevant comments by highlighting the potential choice involved in making a policy – often through criticism – in other words, by politicizing certain actions taken by government. When criticizing these actions, the constituents are indirect, showing markers of delicacy. In contrast to news interviews, constituents do not ask accountability questions, nor do they pursue the political

aspect of their complaint. Given the indirectness of constituents' turns, it is also possible for the MP to ignore or not take up the (potential) political aspects of a constituent's complaint. In the next and final section, I will show a deviant case, in which the constituent explicitly compliments the MP's political party leader, and how that compliment is managed differently than the criticisms above.

#### 5.4 Complimenting instead of criticizing

All extracts until now have involved criticisms of the government and the party to which the MP belongs (including critical implications of the complaints in Section 5.2). The final case, Extract 5.8, involves constituents complimenting the MP and his party. Unlike the previous extracts, the constituents here are explicit and specific in their comments, suggesting that the action of complimenting raises different interactional contingencies than criticizing. The constituents (C1 and C2, partners) are visiting the surgery for a series of concerns, most of which are critical of local government and police. However, at one point, they begin to discuss the available national parties and their thoughts on the previous election.

#### Extract 5.8: MP01.Surgery-2BG 03

1 C2: Eh- (0.4) The Labour guy:s, (0.2) I think the  
 2 Labour leader is, (0.2) °ay grade Ay pratç° (.)  
 3 I'll be hon[est with you,=  
 4 CW: [u h ↑ (h)uh,  
 5 C2: =[I <really do,>=  
 6 MP: [°(h)eh(h)eh↑(h)eh°  
 7 C1: =KHHhhhhh(h)eh  
 8 C2: You w- Obviously know 'imç (0.2) an'- an' 'ave  
 9 e- Will have met 'im an[:',  
 10 MP: [I've- well \$I've  
 11 S[EE:N 'im,\$=  
 12 C2: [Yea:h,  
 13 MP: =\$I Wouldn't say [I ↑KNOW: 'IM,=YEa[h.\$  
 14 C2: [Yeah, [But,  
 15 (1.5)  
 16 C2: No time for him at'all,  
 ((6 lines omitted, discussing Liberal Democrats negatively))  
 23 MP: >What do you think of< ↓David Cameron, come  
 24 on,=Tell me,  
 25 C2: I'll be honest with ya,=I think he's an  
 26 °<absolute gem.>°  
 27 (0.5)  
 28 MP: ↑DO ↑y[ou:,  
 29 C2: [That's an opinion of- of my [own,  
 30 MP: [s- (.) >I  
 31 shouldn't [sound s]urPRised< should I,=  
 32 C2: [I think,]  
 33 MP: =but I'M deLIGHTed to- Yeah:,=That's great.=

On Lines 1-3, 16, and 18-21 (latter not shown), C2 explicitly assesses other political party leaders negatively. In contrast, C2 assesses the MP's party leader positively (Lines 25-26). The assessments are not mild or neutral – ‘a grade Ay pratj’ (Line 2) is strongly negative, and likewise ‘an °absolute gem.>’ (Line 26) is strongly positive. He twice uses honesty phrases (Lines 3 and 25; Edwards & Fasulo, 2006), which both portray him as sharing a thought that is usually held privately, and that is independently his own. He also appends ‘I <really do,>’ (Line 5) and ‘That’s an opinion of- of my own,’ (Line 29), which respectively underscore the strength of his stance, and the independently held nature of his stance. C2 accurately predicts that he needs to do work to show how genuine his assessments are; the MP expresses surprise at his positive assessment, and although he certainly needs to get the MP's assistance with his troubles, it is socially inappropriate to compliment merely to receive the MP's aid. The MP, though, may be expressing surprise in order to mitigate the possible interpretation of accepting a compliment for oneself; since he is associated with the positively assessed leader, to immediately accept the compliment would be to also accept a compliment for oneself. Usually, speakers self-deprecate and deny compliments (Pomerantz, 1984). It is also possible that the MP may simply have expected further negative assessments after several in a row.

Extract 5.8 shows how compliments can be dealt with much more directly than criticisms. This is likely because compliments (despite often being denied by the recipient) are preferred actions and more socially acceptable (Pomerantz, 1984). Criticizing a person directly is unusual and requires very careful management (Edwards, 2005). Complimenting requires different management – the demonstration of sincerity. Criticizing a mutually disliked party can also be a source of affiliation and social solidarity (Clayman, 2002b; Clark, Drew & Pinch, 2003; Edwards, 2005), although Extract 5.8 also shows the MP disavowing any personal knowledge of or ability to assess the Labour leader (Line 13, possibly similar to Drew & Walker, 2009). Extract 5.8, although showing different features, proves a rule – that constituents are highly concerned with managing the interactional contingencies inherent in speaking to the MP. These contingencies apply across complaints and situations, and across the small sample of population characteristics. The central fact remains: dealing with criticisms must be delicately managed due to the interactional issues related to social norms, such as not criticizing a person directly.



## 5.5 Discussion

In this chapter, I have shown how Members of Parliament and their constituents raise political topics in constituency office surgery interaction. Although the data come from a small sample, consistent patterns were found across the data set. Political topics tend to arise in complaint sequences. The political aspect of a topic is made relevant turn-by-turn, reminiscent of the stepwise topic transition described by Jefferson (1984a). Both parties (constituents, and constituency office staff) must participate in the building of the topic as political – otherwise the topic remains only possibly politically implicative, and is not formulated *as* political. When the political nature of the setting is invoked and made relevant by the MP, it portrays the government as a proactive organization with the same interests and values as the constituent. When constituents make politics relevant, it is often to criticize the government. However, making a criticism directly to a member of the criticized organization is interactionally difficult, and constituents design their turns carefully to manage the delicacy of the situation. When constituents are complimenting the MP or the MP's party or government, they are more explicit.

I have proposed that constituents privilege the interactional and relational nature of the meeting over any potential grievances or possible political agendas. Constituents' concerns must take a back seat to the interactional contingencies of speaking to the MP. This supports prior research that has found that people pay attention to the setting in which they raise political topics, and to whom they speak (Ekström, 2016, Schmitt-Beck & Lup, 2013). People also treat politics as a potentially delicate topic (Ekström, 2016, p.17), and are careful to manage how they express disagreement (Schmitt-Beck & Lup, 2013, p.529).

My findings also support research that has found that interactional contingencies are always of critical importance to analyzing talk (Schegloff, 1997b) – the observations made could only have been discovered through an understanding and analysis of interaction. This calls into question much of the research based on self-report surveys, given that these surveys can provide no insight into interactional practices that may influence how and when we do political talk – as Eveland et al. (2011, p.1086) put it, “the empirical literature is built on shaky ground.” As demonstrated in Extracts 5.8, sequential position alone may change what opinions are expressed, suggesting it is unwise to treat political attitudes or values as stable across settings and time (as in Dalton, 2000).

The findings in this chapter differ from past findings concerning complaints to institutions (Ekström & Lundström, 2014; Orthaber & Marquez-Reiter, 2011), wherein the complaints were about the institution being called, rather than a third party. In these studies,

the call takers were implicated in the complaint by being members of the complained-about company, and the callers complained directly to them. This contrasts with the delicate way in which constituents managed a similar situation with the MP and the MP's party. Possibly because of the indirect formulations of the constituents' complaints, the MP also affiliated and/or aligned with the constituents, unlike in the studies above. The cause of this difference is uncertain. First, it may be due to constituents seeking help from the MP, but this is unlikely, as callers also needed service in the Ekström and Lundström (2014) study. Second, it may be due to talking to a politician in person, although this also seems unlikely, given how adversarial citizens act in citizen participation shows (Ekström & Eriksson, 2013; Ekström & Moberg, 2015; Hutchby, 2006). Finally, it may be due to the face-to-face nature of the constituency office encounters, or the personal nature (the MP's personal details, and the constituents, were known and available to both parties from the outset, including name and residence area) of the encounters.

Political topics were used to achieve certain ends in conversation. Constituents used political topics to underline their need of assistance, and to enhance their complaint. The MP used political topics to show the government as aligned with constituent interests, but also regularly achieved a closure of complaint sequences. Showing the government is already acting on an issue has a certain 'unanswerable' quality – there is no further need to complain, because the issue is being dealt with, but there is no way to evaluate yet how well the complaint is being managed (see Ekström et al., 2015, for similar practices in news interviews). Furthermore, referencing the government allows the MP to show himself as aligned with constituents without necessarily affiliating with their stance towards an issue (Stivers, 2008). For instance, he does not agree that benefits changes have been bad (Extract 5.6), or that care homes are poorly run (Extract 5.1) – but instead makes relevant the action being done by government to improve the situation. This is a useful way to defer or reduce the relevance of affiliation, although it can be seen as evasive.

Many of MP's comments presented in this paper could be evaluated as 'evasive' (see Bull, Elliott, Palmer, Walker, 1996; Bull, 2008). But while many researchers have investigated how politicians are evasive or 'slippery' (Bull, 2008; Hamilton & Mineo, 1998; Bavelas, Black, Chovil & Mullett, 1990), no one has ever investigated whether and how constituents themselves are evasive when talking about politics. While politicians and political media interviewers have license in debates and broadcasts to be aggressive about their points, average citizens and MPs at a constituency office are engaged in a comparatively everyday style interaction, and do not have license to act in such an adversarial way. In this

paper, most of the talk reported portrays the MP as being relatively direct (with explicit references to government action) and the constituents as relatively indirect (or evasive) when raising political issues. This demonstrates why it is so crucial to investigate politics in its everyday setting, and why detailed examination of actual interactions is necessary for understanding what people actually do when discussing politics with their MP. We cannot rely on how MPs act in Parliament or media to see how they act when engaging constituents directly.

The asymmetry of an MP's relative ease and a constituent's relative delicacy raises a question: are MPs in a privileged position in surgery settings? Constituents face difficulty in raising criticisms that implicate the MP, while the MP has rights to knowledge about government activities, allowing them to provide and claim a more informed status (for example, in the face of policy criticism, they have greater rights to explain and/or deny certain 'facts' about the policy). It is tempting to conclude that MPs, as a result of the interactional contingencies, have an advantage or 'power' over constituents. Political analysis is regularly concerned with the distribution of power, and with understanding goals and motivations - things that conversation analysis usually avoids (Sidnell, 2010; but see Hepburn & Potter, 2011a; Nishizaka, 1992). One problem with attributing power is that constituents may have as much power over MPs as MPs do over constituents. MPs are potentially using the surgery as a way to secure a vote (through the personal vote, see Chapter 1; Butler & Collins, 2001; Cain, Ferejohn & Fiorina, 1987; Norris, 1997), but constituents did not leverage this over the MP in the data above, through bargaining or threatening. It is key to avoid attributing power *a priori*, as an attribute of certain roles. The MP and constituents had differently distributed actions available to them, as is common in institutional encounters. The MP has access to inside government knowledge, and can offer help; constituents have the ability to complain or build a case for aid, but not to offer assistance, or to easily critique government actions. Neither the MP nor constituents are *powerless* to act – they can still do actions that are more typically done by other participants, but these actions require additional interactional work, such as accounting. As a result, no 'power' or 'privilege' to do certain actions is absolute, only relative and accountable.

Most importantly, this chapter demonstrates a necessary corollary to any interest in 'power' in everyday talk; if 'power' is supposed to influence how people talk, to what extent does the status of 'fellow interlocutor' influence how people talk? How does this affect constituents' ability to criticize and interact with their government? How does this impact our understanding of what voter engagement (specifically via voter discussions of politics) might

look like? Future work with more constituency offices and more politician-to-constituent interactions may help answer these questions, and shape how we conceive of the ‘political’ discussion between represented and representative.

This chapter has given a partial, setting-specific response to Eveland et al.’s (2011, p.1097) call for studies that put “an emphasis on understanding how and why individuals engage in political conversations, what they actually convey during these conversations....” Eveland et al.’s study was of mundane, ordinary conversations, however, and the data in this thesis are not directly comparable in any way. I answer, although only for the constituency office, that the MP initiated political topics to demonstrate how he and his political party were aligned with constituents’ interests and proactively helping them in Parliament. Constituents appeared to initiate political topics to pursue and provide supporting evidence for their complaints. I suggest that Eveland et al.’s call could be modified to encourage researchers to examine what political topics or sequences *achieve* in conversation, locally. As seen in Extract 5.7, not all potentially political topics are ultimately achieved as political, and there is interactional work required in *making* a sequence political, even in a setting where a politician is present, and a connection to the traditionally political realm of ‘government’ is available. In order to compare to Eveland et al.’s (2011) inquiry, this question must also be examined in a non-institutional environment (Ekström, 2016). In mundane contexts, participants may act more certainly as ‘equals’ (Schmitt-Beck & Lup, 2013), with equal rights to conversational actions and relatively equal rights to claim access to information, unlike at the constituency office, where the MP may be said to have greater rights and greater access to government-related information. However, this chapter does provide insight into a setting where the political talk is spontaneous and naturalistic, in an environment that is not typically considered ‘political’, and where participants do not typically attend for the sole or main purpose of engaging in political work.

Overall, examining political work done at constituency offices is challenging due to the rarity of political topics that occur (although this finding may also hold true across a larger data set in the future). But it is necessary, in order to see the relationship that MPs create with their constituents, and vice versa, and to get access to the more nuanced, balanced, and realistic views that constituents hold about their government and MPs. If the goal of modern democracies is to re-engage the citizen, the best place to start is where citizens have the most access to government officials and government policy: the constituency office.

In the next and final analytic chapter, I will analyze how relationship building with the MP may work, and how MPs might build a ‘personal vote’, via the concept of ‘rapport’.

## Chapter 6:

### **Rapport in interaction: Practices, outcomes, and client stake in rapport**

#### **6.0 Introduction**

In the last chapter, I analyzed instances of political talk in interactions at the constituency office. The presence of a Member of Parliament (MP) in the data and the MP's political associations spurred the investigation in the previous chapter. Similarly, this chapter was prompted by the pervasive concern of how (and whether) MPs can earn 'personal votes' at the constituency office (see Section 1.2.1). One way to get a 'personal vote' is to establish 'rapport': a connection or relationship with constituents that would promote a sense of trust in the MP (and thus incline citizens to give that MP their vote). In this chapter, I will investigate the concept of 'rapport', and whether 'rapport-building' activities are useful tools for the MP in building relationships with constituents. I will demonstrate that 'rapport' has been poorly conceptualized in the past, and that it is not available as a resource in interaction for participants. Rapport studies have also overlooked the stake that clients have in rapport, a detail that is particularly salient in interactions at the constituency office, where constituents are asking for the MP for special assistance. Clients are not merely stoic and passive recipients in interactions; they have a stake in building rapport for their own purposes. This stake makes it even more challenging for rapport researchers to determine what (or whose) rapport may be 'being built' at any given time, as well as whether the effects of rapport-building strategies are due to rapport itself or to the client stake in a positive interaction.

In Section 6.1, I will discuss how the term 'rapport' is used, chiefly as way to describe feelings of trust or connection in institutional relationships that promote more effective encounters: in other words, as a means to an end. I will distinguish between three aspects of rapport studies that previously have been inconsistently applied: studying rapport as a feeling, rapport via the set of practices or behaviours people use, and studying the outcomes that may be linked to rapport (such as a 'personal vote'). In Section 6.2, I will examine two commonly proposed rapport-building activities in interaction, pointing out that the presence of 'rapport' is not available to participants, but the practices and their local outcomes are available. Next, in Section 6.3, I will investigate how constituents demonstrate their own concerns with 'rapport', and how they use practices that have traditionally only been analyzed as arising from institutional practitioners, rather than clients. Finally, in Section 6.4, I will discuss these findings, concluding that 'rapport' may be a misleading concept. If we wish to find practices

that improve the effectiveness of communication, we first need to include an interactional perspective, but more importantly, we then need to see how practices (which are available to and co-constructed by all participants) are linked to the ends (or outcomes) we seek.

## 6.1 Defining rapport

To begin defining rapport, it is useful to see an example of how the term rapport is used by laypeople. In the following extract, one of the advisors for United States President Barack Obama is discussing the difficulties the President had in passing a healthcare reform bill. In the process of convincing politicians to vote for the bill, a block of politicians refused to sign the bill unless anti-abortion legislation was added to it. The President's team was looking for supporters in the Catholic Church to help convince the politicians that such a step was not necessary.

### Extract 6.1: Wallis/BBC - Obamacare, 40:31-41:07 minutes

Simplified verbatim transcript

Na (narrator), CK (Carol Keehan), ND (Nancy-Ann DeParle, Director of Health Reform)  
(background material and staging in italics)

- 1 Na: The Whitehouse turned to a powerful ally within the Catholic  
2 Church to help them remove abortion from the healthcare debate.  
3 *[visual of CK speaking at an event]*  
4 CK: *N- uh Madam Secretary, ((addressing podium))*  
5 Na: Sister Carol Keehan was CEO of the Catholic Health Association,  
6 the largest nonprofit provider of healthcare in the US.  
7 *[visual of interview with ND]*  
8 ND: She and I talked quite a bit about it and I suggested that the  
9 President call her and he did. And uh she was convinced- They-  
10 they had a good **rapport** and trust, and she was convinced that  
11 uh President Obama had no intention of covering abortion.

Here, Nancy-Anne DeParle, an advisor to the President, explains how she connected the President with Carol Keehan, a Catholic nun who eventually helped promote the bill. DeParle uses the word 'rapport' (Line 10) to describe the relationship between the President and Keehan, and moreover that this 'rapport and trust' was why Keehan was convinced to support the President's bill. The information about rapport was important enough to DeParle that she suspended her narrative at Line 9 to do a self-repair, temporarily abandoning the story of how Keehan was convinced. Once the comment about the President and Keehan's rapport and trust is inserted, DeParle returns to the narrative of Keehan being convinced (Line 10-11). Rapport was an important part of explaining how the President got the assistance he wanted from Keehan. This is an excellent example of how we treat the concept of rapport – as a

means to an end. While some rapport research may be motivated to study rapport in and of itself, many studies, especially those of institutions such as medicine or sales, look at rapport as a means to accomplishing more effective service, or increasing customer satisfaction (Beach, Keruly & Moore, 2006; Fogarty, Curbow, Wingard, McDonnell & Somerfield, 1999; Hojat et al., 2011; Holmberg & Madsen, 2014).

Researchers and institutional practitioners have been investigating how to define and how to ‘build’ rapport for decades (Egbert, Battit, Welch & Bartlett, 1964; Garbarski, Schaeffer & Dykema, frth.; Harrigan, Oxman & Rosenthal, 1989). Rapport has been defined and redefined countless times (Marcus, 2001; Spencer-Oatey, 2005), and it has been studied in a wide variety of disciplines, from psychology and nursing to services and sales (Clark, Drew & Pinch, 2003; Macintosh, 2009; Thompson & McCabe, 2012; Travelbee, 1963). Most of these studies have been motivated to study rapport so that practitioners of all kinds can be better equipped to use rapport as an interpersonal tool when practicing their trades. Rapport has long been considered to be an important way to create client satisfaction and more effective service relationships (Fogarty et al., 1999; Gremler & Gwinner, 2008).

Rapport is usually only used to describe institutional relationships, not friendships or family relationships. Rapport, after all, is typically an institutional concern (Drew & Heritage, 1992), because it is built in order to achieve an institutional goal, such as therapeutic alliance with a patient (Thompson & McCabe, 2012) or better evidence in police investigations (Alison, Alison, Noone, Elntib & Christiansen, 2013; Fogarty, Augoustinos & Kettler, 2013; Vallano & Compo, 2011). Studies of relationships and friendship focus on other concepts such as ‘connection’, ‘trust’, or ‘friendliness’, rather than on rapport. For example, this extract is from a speed date between a man and a woman who have just met for the first time.

Extract 6.2: SD-2 (from Stokoe, personal communication)

1 M: And you seem like you’ve got a nice personality as  
2 well. But I think, speed dating, I’ve learned  
3 that the main thing is you have to have that  
4 connection, when you sit down with someone, like  
5 you’re very easy to talk to which is good because  
6 I- I when you sit down with someone you’ve got to  
7 be able to connect with them

Here, the participant is describing how necessary it is to have that ‘connection’ with someone, especially when speed dating, where one only has a few minutes to evaluate a person and decide if you will continue a relationship with them. Although ‘rapport’ could

have been used here, it would suggest a more ends-oriented relationship, which may not be ideal in a scenario where one is attempting to start a relationship based on genuine interpersonal interest. Also, beyond service encounters, when researchers build rapport, such as in interviews (Abell, Locke, Condor & Gibson, 2006; Bedi, Davis & Williams, 2005), or ethnography (Berger, 2001; see Marcus, 2001 for counterpoint), there are ethical questions surrounding the ‘fake’ friendship of rapport-with-informants and interviewees (e.g., Duncombe & Jessop, 2002). When people do or build ‘rapport’, rather than ‘connection’ or ‘trust’, there is a purpose to it.

Many studies classify rapport as either present or absent (e.g., Beach et al., 2006; Fogarty et al., 1999; Harrigan et al., 1989), which neglects the complex processes required to create and maintain rapport. It is unfortunately common for studies in rapport literature to define neutrality with interactional features and practices that are actually hostile, rude, or anti-social (this also begs the question of whether there can be ‘unrapport’ or negative rapport, as well as absent rapport). For instance, no-rapport conditions in experiment-based studies included dropping items on tables abruptly (Collins, Lincoln & Frank, 2002), acting stern (Almerigogna, Ost, Bull & Akehurst, 2007), sitting “in intimidating silence” (Davis & Bottoms, 2002, p.193), face threats (Campbell, Davis & Skinner, 2006), and interruption (Walsh & Bull, 2012). These studies are uninformed about what constitutes an acceptable interactional minimum of politeness or sociability (see Clayman, 2002b; Davidson, 1984; Georgakopoulou, 2001; Potter & Hepburn, 2010b; Stokoe, 2013a). In the ‘low rapport’ or ‘no rapport’ test conditions, participants or experimenters display behaviours that most people would never display even to a stranger. While experiment-based studies may see this as necessary to create a significant enough difference between conditions, it means that they have no ecological validity.

Another problem in rapport studies is that different studies have different directions of causation. Some studies, for instance, claim that rapport builds trust (e.g., Campbell et al., 2006), while others say that trust is part of building rapport (e.g., Norfolk, Birdi & Walsh, 2007). Furthermore, many studies rely on self-report as a means to testing the presence of rapport. For example, survey and interview studies regularly ask either practitioners (Joe, Simpson, Dansereau & Rowan-Szal, 2001; Vallano, Evans, Compo & Kieckhaefer, 2015) or clients (Beach et al., 2006; Fogarty et al., 1999; Gremler & Gwinner, 2000) to report on what techniques successfully built rapport in past encounters. We now know a lot about what people *report* to have created rapport, but very little about what may have *actually* created rapport (Alison et al., 2013; Fogarty et al., 2013). There are no studies that examine whether



participants can recognize rapport as it happens in the moment-by-moment unfolding of interaction.

In summary, rapport is of longstanding interest to institutional practitioners, and is treated as a means to achieving (or more easily achieving) an outcome, such as client satisfaction or improved evidence. Studies of rapport could be improved if they were informed about the complexities of interaction, such as the appropriateness of certain practices in context. Furthermore, these studies never address whether the rapport was recognized by participants *in situ* during the interaction, rather than assigned *ex post facto*. In the next section, I will use a more interactional approach to distinguish between the practices that people may use to build rapport, and the outcomes related to rapport.

### *6.1.1 Rapport, practices, and outcomes*

There are three aspects of studying rapport: 1) studying the subjective, self-reported feeling or state of rapport in a situation or relationship ('rapport itself'), 2) studying the practices or behaviours that people use to create, build, or maintain rapport ('practices'), and 3) studying the outcomes of rapport-as-a-state or of rapport-building practices, such as increased client satisfaction ('outcomes'). In this section I will argue for studying interactionally situated practices and the relationship of practices to various outcomes.

Practices can include demonstrating empathy, appropriate laughter, using first names (Bedi et al., 2005; Norfolk et al., 2007), or something more complex like making easy-to-affiliate-with assessments (Clark et al., 2003). It is common in studies of rapport to equate rapport with certain practices, test for the presence of these practices, and then take that presence to mean that there is rapport. However, these studies only test for the individual practices, rather than for rapport itself (e.g., Ädel, 2011; Alison et al., 2013; Harrigan et al., 1989; Joe et al., 2001; Krupnick et al., 1996; Lipovsky, 2012; Macintosh, 2009; Simmons-Mackie & Damico, 2011). This means the studies suggest a relationship between rapport itself and the desired outcomes, rather than between the practices and the outcome. The role of the practices is neglected.

The above rapport studies also do not address or appreciate the interactional context in which the practices are situated. However, even in studies that do appreciate interactional norms, rapport is often equated with practices. Past conversation analytic (CA) studies have equated rapport with specific, and limited, practices. Lavin and Maynard (2001) investigated how laughter can be taken as a sign of building rapport in the face of trouble in phone surveys. Clark et al. (2003) investigated how sales representatives built rapport with their

‘prospects’, or potential buyers, by engaging prospects in lengthy affiliative sequences of talk. The sales representatives did interactional work to extend the affiliative sequences, and to ensure more aligning responses. Fogarty et al. (2013) equated rapport with progressivity, the tendency for conversational sequences to structurally favour responses that move the sequence forward. A smooth sequence, in which progressivity is high, may be a characteristic of conversations that we as analysts tend to judge as being high in rapport as well, since things such as coordination (Tickle-Degnen & Rosenthal, 1990), ‘dialogue’ (Collins et al., 2002) and responsiveness (Garbarski et al., frth.) are all present as well. As Fogarty et al. (2013, p.399) put it, “We are making the more modest claim that progressivity is likely to be present in interactions that are judged as containing signs of rapport...” These three CA studies succeed at analyzing practices, with an understanding of interactional norms, but the results are limited to addressing one potential practice at a time. The very fact that each study chose a different practice suggests that rapport cannot be contained in one practice, and instead may result from or be seen in a variety of practices. These studies also overlook the client stake in rapport (see Section 6.3). While these studies examine interactionally appropriate practices, with an understanding of how sequence and turn design affect results, we still need to investigate whether the practices studied generate *participant-recognized* rapport during the interaction.

We can examine participant recognition of rapport through an analysis of ‘local’ outcomes. Most studies of rapport examine long-term ‘distal’ outcomes, such as client satisfaction, increased sales, or voting for an MP. The presence of rapport is necessarily assessed ex post facto, either by analysts or by participants in surveys or interviews. However, it is possible to analyze ‘local’ outcomes: the unfolding of alignment, affiliation (Clark et al., 2003), progressivity (Fogarty et al., 2013), resistance or acceptance of services (see Chapters 3 and 4), and so forth. ‘Local’ outcomes are observable to both participants and analysts, and unfold in the interaction itself. They do not necessarily suggest that rapport itself (as a feeling, or assessed quality) is present, but the local outcomes themselves are useful for the institution. For example, Fogarty et al. (2013) report that police officers employ practices to promote progressivity when interviewing child witnesses. This reduces the chance that the child will fail to answer the question at all, or answer only partially. The local outcome is higher responsiveness from the witness, as well as avoiding non-response, which is beneficial to the police investigation.

In this section, I have outlined further distinctions in the question of what ‘rapport’ may look like in interaction. Namely, I have distinguished between rapport itself, which is a

feeling or subjective state, practices, which are the interactional tools that can end up creating rapport or an outcome, and outcomes, which are the results of interactional practices.

Outcomes can be further divided into ‘distal’ outcomes, which are assigned ex post facto by analysts or participants, and ‘local’ outcomes, which are the interactional effects, as seen in subsequent turns.

In the next section, I will analyze two commonly proposed practices for generating rapport in institutional encounters. The purpose of this analysis is to demonstrate that while ‘rapport’ itself may be unavailable in situ, the practices and local outcomes are available to participants.

## **6.2 Finding rapport in interactions**

In this section I will look at two commonly suggested practices (Gremier & Gwinner, 2008; Walsh & Bull, 2012) that are meant to build rapport – displaying common ground, and using small talk. In each extract, I will demonstrate the practice being used, and examine its local outcomes. We will see that while there are clearly visible local outcomes, they do not necessarily show that rapport has been or is being created, neither for us as analysts nor for the participants in the interaction. This suggests that rapport as a subjective feeling is not available to CA methods, *nor to participants*, and that it is therefore unnecessary for the analysis of local outcomes.

### *6.2.1 Displaying common ground*

One common recommendation in rapport literature is finding ‘common ground’ (Gremier & Gwinner, 2008; Macintosh, 2009). In rapport studies, ‘common ground’ refers to a colloquial definition, which involves displaying shared features or similarities between practitioner and client (rather than maintaining or displaying *intersubjective* common ground, Sidnell, 2010, 2014). One practice that can achieve ‘common ground’, in CA terms, is co-membership categorization (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006; Sacks, 1992; Stokoe, 2009). The extract below shows the MP aligning with the constituents by referencing their joint ‘Britishness’. The constituents (C1 and C2) are there because their benefits have been cancelled, as C1 has been incorrectly assessed as fit for work. They have been discussing the assessment questionnaire that they took, in which they were asked if C1 could do things like make a cup of tea or do the washing up.

### Extract 6.3: MP01.Surgery-1KO\_01

1 C1: [I can do the washing] ↑up.  
2 C2: [U h : m : ] Yeah.  
3 C1: You know:,  
4 MP: >I know the Trouble is of course we're all very<  
5 British when we [do ] these,  
6 C1: [Yes.]  
7 MP: An' actually the- the answer,  
8 C2: Mm[::, ]  
9 MP: [The-]th-th- the answer probably is no.  
10 (0.4)  
11 MP: Uh:,  
12 C1: [WELL:, yeah. ]  
13 MP: [So when they ask] you, can you do these the answer's [no.  
14 C1: [Heh  
15 heh [heh hih .hh  
16 MP: [Actually I can't. [An' we're all] very good at  
17 C2: [Yeah, ]  
18 MP: trying to s- be: as confident an' capable as we=  
19 C2: =[That's ri:ght,  
20 MP: =[can be,  
21 C2: Yeah.

On Line 1, C1 insists that he can 'do the washing up'. The MP responds with an agreement, 'I know' (Line 4), and then categorizes C1, C2 and himself as 'all very British'. This is referencing the idea that British people have a 'stiff upper lip', and will present themselves as capable people even in the face of illness. The MP later continues the co-membership categorization (of 'we') as people who are 'very good at trying to s- be: as confident an' capable as we can be,' (Lines 16-20). The MP categorizes all of them together, as British, and as British people who try hard to be capable even when facing trouble. This is a very positive kind of category, and as such it both pays a compliment to C1 and C2, as well as displaying empathy towards the way they answered the assessment questionnaire.

The MP's suggestion that it is due to being 'very< British' and 'as confident an' capable as we=can be,' also avoids another potential implication from the constituent's complaint – that the MP is accountable for the problems brought on by the Workplace Capability Assessments (WCAs). WCAs were implemented to reduce benefit fraud by testing citizens' level of disability and have been heavily criticized by the public and by experts (Litchfield, 2014). The MP belongs to the political party that implemented the WCAs, and it is due to the WCAs that the constituents are now facing financial difficulties. By blaming C1's responses on the 'stiff upper lip' idea, the MP pushes aside his own accountability for his role in implementing the WCAs. The MP's turn simultaneously accomplishes a compliment to C1, for showing a 'stiff upper lip' attitude, while averting the implication that the WCAs are inherently flawed.

C2 aligns with the MP's suggestion, with 'Yeah' (Line 17 and 21) and 'That's ri:ght' (Line 19). C2's responses progress the interaction forward, and position the participants as aligned and in agreement. 'That's ri:ght' (Line 19) especially demonstrates this outcome, as it portrays C2 as fully committed and agreeing (Pomerantz, 1984), more so than mere continuers like 'mhm' (Goodwin, 1986). On C2's part, the MP's practice of displaying common ground appears to create a positive local outcome, of commitment and alignment. C1 does not display the same alignment, although there may be other contingencies at play. On Line 12, C1 says 'WELL:;', which forecasts a disagreeing turn (Heritage, 2015), suggesting that he is about to resist the MP's suggestion that he should answer 'no' to these kinds of work capability questions. C1 also laughs in Lines 14-15, suggesting that he is either displaying troubles resistance (Jefferson, 1984b) or managing the potential inappropriateness of portraying himself as incapable for work (Potter & Hepburn, 2010b) or both.

Rapport is not empirically explicit in this extract, which is precisely the point I wish to show. The constituents make no utterances that might express their feelings of connection, trust, harmoniousness, or rapport. However, the practice that the MP used – displaying common ground by constructing joint membership in a category – is assumed in many studies above to produce rapport, and in this extract the practice produced the local outcome of an aligning sequence (see Clark et al., 2003, although the MP does not do 'extended' aligning sequences reported there). For the MP, who must navigate the sequence live, without the benefit of questionnaires or explicit questions about rapport, C2's alignment, and C1's lack of alignment, are readily available. The MP cannot ask about rapport, since any divergence from the constituents' concerns would make the MP appear disinterested or self-serving. Instead, the MP can see the local outcomes of these sequences live, while still focusing on the constituents' concerns, and without any overt attempt to seek rapport.

Another assumption concerning 'common ground' is that it is the responsibility of the institutional practitioner, the MP, to initiate and achieve its establishment. The first problem with this assumption is that it is necessary for 'common ground', as with any interactional practice, to be achieved as a coordinated sequence in interaction: the interlocutors must collaborate in achieving the practice. The second problem is that other participants in the interaction may also initiate the practice. Extract 6.4, below, demonstrates both of these issues. In the extract, the constituent (C) is visiting the MP to give an update about a charity she runs which focuses on exercise for the elderly. C has recently acquired a 'Moves App', software for smart phones that tracks physical activity such as walking and reports on the user's health.

### Extract 6.4: MP01.Surgery-1K3\_01

1 C: .hh >I donno if you-< (0.7) if y- you've ever ah:- I  
2 find, ih go- y' got the [moo:] the mo:ves app.  
3 MP: [Yes.]  
4 (0.5)  
5 MP: [mN o: , ]  
6 CW: [Oh I've go]t that.=  
7 MP: =Have yo[u,  
8 C: [Is[n't it ↑great.]  
9 CW: [Yeah=Ye:ah it i]s good.=Yeah.  
10 MP: Is that one that [COU:nts your: ste:p[s an::d,=  
11 C: [( )] [↑Yeah.  
12 CW: [Yeah  
13 MP: =[Yeah:.  
14 CW: [Yeah=yeah.  
15 C: But it's free- >I got the< free version.  
16 CW: Yeah I have. Yeah.  
((8 lines omitted - describing software))  
25 C: [You know you get=  
26 MP: =I have heard [about it,  
27 C: [You get a [summary every day,  
28 CW: [Ah yeah. Yeah.  
29 (0.5)  
30 C: You get a summary every day,  
31 (0.5)  
32 C: I mean- s- hhh(h)ah I finally walked- We walked for (0.2)  
33 °about fifty four° minutes today.=I walked for  
34 [two and a half ho(h)urs (to[day).  
35 CW: [I know. [I got a hundred percent  
36 yesterday I was- I was very impressed with  
37 [it so,[ Yeah yeah.]  
38 C: [Oa::h I [think ya (nearly) ↑did] though↓].  
39 MP: [Oh: :↑:: :: :↓: :: ]  
40 CW: Ye[ah.=  
41 C: [Yeah.  
42 CW: =I must've walked for halfway across London s[o,  
43 C: [e (H) A (H) AH  
44 MP: [e (h) eh (h) eh=

On Lines 1-2, C is the one who initiates the potential for an expression of common ground. C asks whether the MP has the Moves App. While this inquiry could have been initiated in order to establish intersubjectivity concerning the software, what results from C's utterance is a sequence between the caseworker (CW) and C in which they express a shared enjoyment of the software; in other words, they achieve a display of common ground. As the MP is saying he does not have the Moves App (Line 5), CW says that he does (Line 6). C assesses the software, and CW agrees, although with a downgraded assessment of 'good' instead of '↑great' (Lines 8 and 9). The MP shows that he has intersubjective understanding, that he knows what the software is, by describing it (Line 10), but cannot assess or partake in the expression of common ground. The MP appears to show that he feels it necessary to

participate in the sequence as much as possible, by showing that he knows what it is, and repeating shortly thereafter that he has ‘heard about it’ (Line 26). C pursues the beneficial aspects of the software (Lines 15, 27, 30, 32-34) until CW shares a lengthier personal story that shows his appreciation for the software and its positive uses (Lines 35-37).

Again we see that rapport is not made explicit, as there are no utterances that express feelings of trust or connection between participants. Also, C is the one who initiates the common ground talk, not the institutional practitioners (CW or the MP). C and CW are the ones who participate in the sharing of common ground, rather than the MP. This contradicts previous understandings of using common ground to build ‘rapport’; the MP is the one who is ‘supposed’ to initiate rapport practices, and is also the one that is ‘supposed’ to be building a personal vote. The common ground sequence ‘should’ be done by him and with him in order to improve the ‘rapport’ with the practitioner in charge. Instead, any attempts by the MP to participate are not sustained by the other participants. When first asking if it is the software that counts steps, C and CW confirm this fact, before C returns to praising the software, pointedly disjoining it from the prior talk, ‘But it’s free-’ (Lines 11-15). The MP’s second attempt receives no response, and C overlaps the talk well before the end of the turn-construction unit (Lines 26-27). In other words, the local outcomes for the MP are not demonstrating any successful rapport-building, whereas the local outcomes for C and CW are displaying shared positive experiences with the software.

The above extract suggests there is more to displaying common ground (and more to the achieving of common ground) than has previously been assumed in most rapport studies. The constituent, the client, initiated and pursued the common ground here, rather than the practitioners. Furthermore, simply initiating the display of common ground will not necessarily generate a positive local outcome, let alone a useful distal outcome. Next, I will examine a different practice that supposedly builds ‘rapport’: the practice of ‘small talk’.

### *6.2.2 Small Talk*

Another commonly recommended practice is engaging in ‘small talk’ with clients. It is rarely made clear in communication training what a practitioner is to do once they have ‘finished’ with small talk. It is implied that once small talk is done, rapport has been established, and the rapport task is over and done with, leading to the problematic ‘rapport stage’ concept (Walsh & Bull, 2012; Fogarty et al., 2013). For present purposes, I will examine talk that is tangential to and does not serve the institutional goal of the CO meetings: for example, expressing condolences on a recently deceased family member, or discussing the weather

(see Coupland, 2014, for a full discussion). This happens especially at the beginning or end of meetings, when the MP or constituent raises talk about topics that are not clearly related to or serving the cause of the constituent's visit to the office that day.

Extract 6.5 is a brief example of this kind of sequence. The two constituents (C1 and C2) have just entered the meeting room of the CO, to find the MP waiting there for them (as another meeting had just finished).

Extract 6.5: MP01.Surgery-1KZ3 03

1 MP: How're you both.  
 2 (0.9) ((C1 and C2 taking off coats))  
 3 C1: [Heh heh heh heh heh heh heh ] heh (.)  
 4 MP: [(>(Let's meet/to be) here on a Friday evening<)]  
 5 C1: .hheh .hh [Ye:s. ]  
 6 MP: [A↑heh h↑eh] hah [↑↑hah hah hah hah heh=  
 7 C2: [Yeahh,  
 8 C1: It's been a long: (0.3) we- (0.2)  
 9 C2: [(This week.)  
 10 MP: [Well we- (0.2) We just ↑said ↓that actually, >>it has  
 11 been-<< just feel, (like ih-) >a very< long week,=  
 12 C2: ↑Yeah:,  
 13 (1.9)  
 14 MP: So:.  
 15 (1.2)  
 16 C1: °Yhesss, °=

The 'small talk' occurs from Lines 1-12, in which the MP and constituents are engaging in the first turns of their meeting. C1 and C2 are taking off their coats (C1 goes off camera during Line 3, making it unclear why she is laughing). The MP raises the fact that it is a Friday evening, thus the workweek is officially over and this meeting is likely not the most fun activity to be doing on what is stereotypically a time for entertainment. C1 aligns with this implication by adding that 'it's been a long:' week, which is collaboratively finished by C2 (Lines 7-8). The MP agrees, upgrading to a '>very< long week' (Line 11). Note that the MP prefaces his agreement with 'we just ↑said ↓that actually' (Line 10). This preface establishes the MP's agreement as speaking on behalf of the whole office ('we'), and as coincidentally thinking along the same lines as the constituents. By portraying the agreement as coincidentally the same line of thought as the constituents, the MP does more than agreeing – he categorizes the constituents, himself, and his staff as part of the same group, who all think alike (see Section 6.2.1 on displaying common ground, above). The MP and constituents subsequently move the conversation to official business: the MP starts with 'So:' (Line 14, see Section 3.1), and C1 aligns with this move (Line 16).



Theoretically, the MP has now built rapport. The local outcome of the small talk was ratification from the constituents, seen in their aligning turns that participate in the activity of small talk (the ‘Yeah’s on Lines 5, 7, and 12, as well as the more significant uptake of discussing the workweek). Again, we still lack any access to the distal outcomes (will the constituents be satisfied, for instance), but at this point in time, we have the same information as was available to the MP – that the practice of small talk was taken up by the constituents, and thus seems to have been successful for local purposes.

The next extract also ‘breaks’ one of the ways small talk is expected to operate in rapport studies (National Crime Faculty, 2000; Walsh & Bull, 2012). Small talk is expected to happen before the encounter, but in Extract 6.6, it appears *after* the encounter. The constituent (C) and the caseworker (CW) and MP had been discussing a problem with parking lots. The MP had initiated the closing of the encounter, and C is collaborating in that closure on Line 1.

Extract 6.6: MP01.Surgery-2BG\_02

1 C: Thank you. ((standing up))  
 2 MP: No: it's my pleasure. ((CW stands))  
 3 (0.3)  
 4 MP: An' I'm so- >it was-< it was your mum °I'm guessing° who-  
 5 who died.=  
 6 C: =Yes it [was.  
 7 MP: [Yeah I'm [sorry about that,=  
 8 C: [>Yeah yeah< no:..  
 9 MP: =I'm sorry to [read about anyway. Yeah.] ((standing))  
 10 C: [>No no no no< No ] No problem.  
 11 (0.7)  
 12 C: Yeah it's very- >it's uh-< It's very sad [but] uh: [you know,  
 13 MP: [( )] [°Mm,°  
 14 (0.7)  
 15 C: [( )]  
 16 MP: [It sounds] like she had a- she had an amazing li- in  
 17 the [magistr-  
 18 C: [sh:e-  
 19 MP: I had the [( )] to be a ma[gistrate you know ( )]  
 20 C: [Yeah, [Oh: no no she'd-] m-  
 21 the- magistra:te\_ and uh: very <stout supporter of> the  
 22 Conserva[tive party >for many years,=.hhh<  
 23 CW: [Mm:.. ((MP gives thumbs up))

As C prepares to leave, the MP gives condolences for the death of C's mother (Lines 4-7). C responds with an idiom-like phrase 'It's very sad but' (Line 12), which aligns with the condolences but does not progress the sequence further. The MP does not stop at giving condolences, however; after the silence on Line 14, the MP pursues the discussion of C's mother, opening the topic of her life. However, C relates the topic of his mother to her

support of the MP's party (Lines 21-22). C has now initiated an expression of common ground (see Section 6.2.1), that C's relative was a supporter of the MP's governing party. As with Extract 6.4, C is the one doing this initiation, rather than the MP. In terms of local outcomes, the sequence is aligning, but there is no clear indication of rapport. The MP's expression of condolences is not one that indicates his trust in C, nor vice versa. C expresses that his *mother* (not he himself) supported the MP's party, but this is not the same as expressing a feeling of rapport with the MP currently. Again, the practices generate reasonably positive local outcomes, but do not conform with how rapport is presented in the non-CA literature.

In this section I have analyzed two practices, displaying common ground and small talk, and pointed out the difficulty in locating 'rapport' in these extracts. I have shown that these two practices are not necessarily only initiated by the MP, but also by the constituents, and that the practices may occur in unexpected parts of the sequence, such as at the close of the encounter instead of at the beginning. These extracts support previous findings by conversation analysts that affiliation (Clark et al., 2003) and progressivity (Fogarty et al., 2013) are common in sequences that appear to have rapport-like qualities. Although these are just two practices, they demonstrate how one can analyze potential rapport as a set of practices and local outcomes, without resorting to using rapport-as-subjective-feeling as an explanatory variable. Practices and local outcomes are the best rapport-related resources to which participants have access in interaction. The local outcomes could be due to rapport specifically, or to practices that build rapport, or solely to practices – the actual direction of causation does not matter, so long as practices and local outcomes are available to participants.

I have noted above that constituents are frequently the initiators of supposedly rapport-building practices. The role of rapport for constituents or clients has never been analyzed, as researchers have focused exclusively on the institutional practitioners, such as the MP. In the next section, I will examine how constituents use practices that supposedly generate rapport, and show that they have a stake in doing so.

### **6.3 Client stake in rapport**

Rapport literature does not acknowledge an important aspect of the client-practitioner rapport process: clients have as much stake in building rapport as do practitioners. Clients experience rapport, and their experience is worth investigating (Bedi et al., 2005; Gremler & Gwinner, 2008), given that they must necessarily partake in building and accepting of rapport. As

Kerekes (2006, p.30) puts it, “The establishment of rapport depends, however, on both interlocutors. It takes cooperation and, as such, is co-constructed.” It is important for rapport research to recognize that clients have a vested interest in building rapport *for their own purposes*, and not only in experiencing or helping to construct rapport for the purposes of the institutional practitioner.

A doctor has a stake in rapport because it (supposedly) leads to better and more effective interactions, which leads to better treatments. A salesperson has a stake in rapport because it (supposedly) leads to better sales. But in these encounters, the client also has a *stake*, a vested interest in having rapport with the practitioner. The patient wants to receive the best possible treatment; the buyer wants the best price. As a rule, clients want the best service, along with easy access to this service, and any perks or extras that the practitioner is willing to perform for the client’s benefit. Clients are not passively accepting (or not) rapport strategies, nor are they merely co-constructing rapport for the practitioner’s sake. Clients have their own interests, and their own stake in rapport being successful.

Consider the next extract. In this phone call, the constituent (C) has previously met (two weeks prior) with the MP and caseworker (CW) to discuss her husband’s benefits, which were erroneously cancelled. CW promised to call C with news before ten working days had passed. But now C has called the office, because CW failed to do so. CW has just explained what had happened and is apologizing (for the second time) at Line 1.

Extract 6.7: MP01.Phone-1LB\_06

1 CW: Uhm: So sorry I’ve not- (.)  
2 C: [No tha- ] (.)fi:ne (as I) say we’ been ‘aving the=  
3 CW: [Not um::]  
4 C: =problem with ‘em all the- all the way along at  
5 [least it’s bin]=  
6 CW: [ih’ y:ea h :: ]  
7 C: =about sixty two: weeks now so, .hhh=  
8 CW: =so: (.) ih’yeah [well they- they’re just in]CREdibly  
9 C: [ah hh:: hh hhhh hih]  
10 CW: busy but I- I will: le- you need a date so I’ll um:: I’ll  
11 um:: get them tuh .hh tuh find one for you and- and  
12 hope>f’lly get th’m< (.) >to come back to you with a< (.)  
13 proper answer  
14 C: O:kay well that’s lovely

C excuses CW for his failure to act on her behalf (Line 2), saying ‘No that- fi:ne’, and adding she has likewise experienced a long delay (Lines 2-8). This expresses understanding and empathy for CW’s situation, as it mirrors her own. However, C’s turn design also includes a ‘jab’ element: she includes the length of time she has been waiting. Not only is it a very

precise amount of time ('sixty two: weeks'), the inclusion of a tag 'now' highlights that the time is ever-increasing. In other words, C formats her turn in a way that foregrounds a traditional rapport-generating practice – displaying common ground – but simultaneously implicitly criticizes CW.

Leaving aside that we cannot tell if C or CW are *experiencing* rapport, notice that it is the client, C, who is offering a supposedly rapport-generating practice to CW, the practitioner. This is the reverse of the expected scenario. We also see that the rapport-like practice of displaying common ground promotes a sense of entitlement to service (Curl & Drew, 2008), by demonstrating how long C has been waiting for aid. By looking at this practice in situ, we can see that it accomplishes more than merely (potential) rapport, but also an element of requesting. The local outcome of the practice is that on Line 10, CW acknowledges C's need for aid ('you need a date') and concludes with an offer of assistance (Line 10-11, 'I'll um:: get them tuh .hh tuh find one for you'). C's reason for calling, to follow up with the office about her case, has now been accomplished and she has received a new offer. In this extract, C has used a practice that has traditionally been considered to build rapport in order to achieve a useful local outcome, the offer of assistance. It is not the MP here, but a constituent who utilizes rapport building practices.

Similarly, in Extract 6.8, the constituent (C) has a complaint about how local council government is dealing with businesses.

#### Extract 6.8: MP01.Surgery-2BG\_02

- 1 C: An' also >they're taking into account< N:o consideration for  
2 local business.  
3 MP: Yeah:,=  
4 C: =You know, .hhh we- You know. Y- you're a Branxsome person  
5 yourself, (0.5) We 'ave gone through the toughest  
6 [five years ]=  
7 MP: [Absolutely.]  
8 C: =that Branxsome's Ever gone through,

On Lines 4-5, C categorizes the MP as a 'Branxsome person', the name of the town. By virtue of being a person of that town (not just a person *from* there, but a person defined by that town name), the MP is in the know about how hard the last few years (of the economic crisis) have been for the town and its people. C's utterance on Line 4, 'You know.' suggests a contrast with an unspoken party by the way 'You' is emphasized. C puts himself into the category of Branxsome people on Line 5, with 'We 'ave gone through'. C shifts footing to an inclusive 'we', including both himself and the MP in the category of people who understand

the situation. All of this is said as part of C's argument that the local council is not dealing with local businesses appropriately. Again we see a constituent – a client – engaging in rapport-building practices, and receiving positive local outcomes (the MP's agreement on Line 7, 'Absolutely.'). Regardless of whether either participant can tell if there is a feeling of rapport present, the local outcome is available for the constituent to use. Since C's stake is in getting aid from the MP about challenging the local council, any movement towards that aid is positive for him. Whether or not C's actions are undertaken in order to create rapport, the practices progress the interaction towards a positive local outcome.

Constituents regularly apologize or account for their request, or for the time they are taking from the MP, as seen in the following extracts.

#### Extract 6.9: MP01.Surgery-1KZ3 04

1 C: Ri:g[ht. (0.3) Hi:,] uhm,= ((speaks with soft voice))  
 2 CW: [( )] ((passing paper))  
 3 C: =Thanks for taking the °time by the wayh.°  
 4 MP: No:!! Well thank you for coming ↑i:n.  
 5 C: °°Pleasure.°° Uhm, if I can just start by <askin'>,  
 6 (0.4) .hhh that I do have some more issues t' talk to  
 7 you abou:t, [bu:t,=  
 8 MP: [°Right,°  
 9 C: =I under<stand that> you know you're very busy, Would I  
 10 have to make another appointment to see you  
 11 abou[t this. ]  
 12 MP: [>Well let's see how we] get on< with- with this  
 13 appointment,

#### Extract 6.10: MP01.Surgery-2BZ2 01

1 C: .tsk It's- it's horrendous.=I don' wanna go on it  
 2 because I know I've got limited time.=  
 3 MP: =Yeah,

#### Extract 6.11: MP01.Surgery-2BG 02

1 C: >>But this is just a<< ↑little thing, I know it's a nuisance,  
 2 but I'm creating a nuisance ↓(eh-) out of it.  
 3 MP: ↑No:=↑Yeah, [I feel- >it- [quite- quite-<]  
 4 C: [Because to [me it's im]portant.  
 5 MP: ↑No it's important >>an' in- in a- an'<< >the number of people  
 6 you're talking about< suppor:ting the [local businesses,]  
 7 C: [°Yeah yeah° ]Yeah,

#### Extract 6.12: MP01.Surgery-2BG 03

1 C: You might (.) think these (.) insignif[icant,=  
 2 MP: [↑No::;]  
 3 C: =[O r : : but it's just th]ings=

4 MP: [ >I don't think they're insignificant at all.< ]  
5 C: =like that that- .hhhh

In Extract 6.9 and 6.10 the constituents orient towards the difficulty in taking up too much time, since surgery appointments are meant to be limited to 15 minutes. In Extract 6.9, C demonstrates her understanding that the MP is 'very busy' (Line 9), and in Extract 6.10, C mentions she knows she's 'got limited time.' (Line 2). Constituents display this orientation publicly, which makes their self-policing available to the MP and caseworker. The local outcomes of these accounts about time do not receive 'go aheads' or things such as 'take all the time you need', likely because time is constrained beyond the MP's control. However, the constituents do get their concerns on record, and are able to portray themselves as 'good' constituents who are not selfishly claiming all the MP's time and efforts.

In Extract 6.11, C acknowledges that he is making a big deal out of what might be considered a small complaint (Lines 1-2, 'I know it's a nuisance'...). C accounts for his pursuit of the complaint, despite the 'nuisance' aspect (Line 4, 'Because to me it's important'). In Extract 6.12, C similarly acknowledges that her concerns may seem 'insignificant' to the MP (Line 1). These practices, of acknowledging and accounting for a request being potentially inappropriate, typically receive a reassuring utterance from the MP. In Extracts 6.11 and 6.12, the MP gives the constituents the preferred response to a self-deprecating type of utterance – he contradicts the constituents, and reassures them that their concerns are legitimate and important (Lines 5-6 and 2-4 respectively). As local outcomes, this provides the constituents with the reassurance to continue making their request, and that they will likely receive some sort of assistance. Similar to Extracts 6.7 and 6.8, the constituents here put on record their concern for the MP's time and efforts, and demonstrate that they would not willingly saddle the MP with inappropriate concerns.

Constituents even make statements that appear to give the MP an 'out', or a way to make it structurally easier for the MP to deny assistance. In the following extract, the constituents (C1 and C2) are co-workers at a factory that will soon close. They have been fighting the closure, and the MP has been attempting to help them do so. The company nevertheless announced shortly before the meeting that the closure would go ahead. This extract occurs just after the constituents have sat down, at the beginning of the meeting.

#### Extract 6.13: MP01.Surgery-2Cxx\_01

1 MP: I think, th==>did they make an< announcement  
2 [at this- [the- (.)=

3 C1: [.hhhh ((nods)) [Yeah th-=  
4 MP: =site.=yesterday, (ye[as),  
5 C2: [(nods))  
6 C1: =we- °e- e-° (0.3) >>Basically<< we're given ay:h, a  
7 briefffhh,=uh: to the: (.) the petrol people, an': we  
8 got a letter,=an' you can have a rea:d? ((slides letter  
9 across table, MP takes it)) (0.3) Basic'lly they want to  
10 progresssss to: .hhh moving: [the: ]  
11 MP: [°That's what he] sai:d.°  
12 Yeah. ((while looking at letter))  
13 C1: production <toolerly,>  
14 (3.7) ((MP reading letter))  
15 C2: °.hhh >I mean°< we don't really think there's any- well-  
16 thing much- (.) <you can do now:.> ((opens hands towards  
17 MP)) Now it' [s- ((shakes head slightly))  
18 MP: [Well, hhh >The trouble is I said to him an' what

On Lines 15-16, C2 allows that the MP may not be able to do anything substantial to help them now. This is, in some respects, a remarkable thing to say. The utterance allows for the possibility of a next turn that refuses aid. Yet C1 and C2 have come to this meeting to seek aid from the MP, and now C2 is saying that they nevertheless no longer 'really think' there's 'much-' the MP 'can do now:.' (Lines 15-16). The suggestion is full of hedges, such as 'we don't really think' and 'much-', allowing for the MP to contradict C2 and say that there *is* something that the he can do. The utterance reverses the preference of the MP's response (Pomerantz, 1984; Clayman, 2002b), allowing a negative response from the MP to be more structurally aligned to C2's turn. As the MP had begun to discuss the difficulties he has had in preventing the factory closure on lines 1-3, C2 may be projecting the upcoming failure, and her turn makes it structurally 'easier' for the MP to continue in that disappointing vein. This is not to say that if C2 had not taken such a turn that the MP would have given 'different' news, but C2 could have taken the opportunity to lament the closure, express disappointment, or push the MP for other possible avenues for preventing the closure. By avoiding being pushy, and by allowing for the likelihood that the MP can no longer help, C2 demonstrates that she is prepared for disappointing news. This kind of bad-news anticipation is common in other settings, such as medical offices (see Maynard, 2003). Furthermore, by specifying that there is not much the MP 'can' do, C2 implies that it is beyond the MP's control, and subtly absolves the MP of needing to provide aid. All these turn design features foreground alignment and affiliation over entitlement to aid, which suggests that C2 is privileging the rapport-building, relational aspects of the interaction over other contingencies.

C2's turn achieves other actions in the sequence as well. C2's turn may be a bid to find out *whether* there is 'any- well- thing much' the MP 'can do now:.', via the use of a fishing device (Pomerantz, 1980). C2 may also be justifying her presence at the office in spite of the

factory's announcement about the closure. C2 prefaces her utterance with 'I mean', which Maynard (2013) has shown to appear regularly in complaint sequences as a means of defending one's position. Since the factory closure is now clearly definite, one potentially relevant complaint is that the MP failed to prevent the closure, but to do such a complaint to the MP directly would be very face threatening and unusual. The 'I mean' prefaced utterance averts the sequence from a potential complaint about the MP to a fishing device and/or a discussion of other options. Clark et al. (2003) also found that sales representatives preempted potential implications that could have damaged outcomes.

In this section, I have shown how constituents regularly use practices that have been traditionally considered to build rapport. These practices show an orientation towards the relationship they have with the MP, and how that relationship may or may not affect the MP's decision to offer them aid. As such, these practices show an orientation towards rapport, and the need for rapport to achieve an end. I suggest that the constituents oriented to these matters because they had a stake in getting the best service possible (or indeed, getting any service at all). The practices shown here are not *necessary* for successful interaction, as it is possible to go through sequences with office staff without these practices, and still receive service. However, future research needs to disentangle 'rapport' practices from interactional contingencies.

#### **6.4 Discussion**

The analysis above has demonstrated that clients use practices traditionally thought to generate rapport, and they do so with a personal vested interest in the interaction progressing well. We have seen that while it is difficult to pinpoint 'rapport' as a subjective experience in real interactions, it is possible to see the practices that participants use to generate local outcomes. These outcomes are available to participants (live) and to analysts, and they permit constant evaluation of the degree to which participants align, which in turn allows participants to judge what practices to use next. Practices are directly related to local (interactional) outcomes. Using one practice over another can lead to statistically significant differences in local outcomes (see Heritage, Robinson, Elliott, Beckett & Wilkes, 2007; Stokoe, 2013b).

While the participants in the data presented here had strong motivations for building rapport (the MP to build the personal vote, and the constituents to get assistance from the MP despite it not being part of the MP's main job mandate), there is reason to expect that clients build rapport and have a stake in rapport in other institutional contexts. Ekström, Lindström



and Karlsson's (2013) study of a loan service show examples of clients having a stake in connecting with the loan practitioners, in order to better negotiate their loan contract. Sikveland et al.'s (2016) examination of patients calling their doctor's office shows examples of patients initiating extra actions when faced with uncooperative secretaries. In contrast, it is harder to see rapport, especially client initiated rapport, in data such as Clark et al.'s (2003) interactions with sales representatives. Comparing the stake that each party has in the interactions may provide insight into when and how rapport practices arise, as opposed to, or in conjunction with, practices such as recruitment. Future research should compare rapport to practices of recruitment (Kendrick & Drew, 2016), as well as examining what practices may be used to resist rapport and recruitment.

Traditional rapport studies may find it trivial to examine local outcomes instead of distal outcomes (such as purchasing, satisfaction, quality of testimony, etc.). However, the study of local outcomes allows analysts to see what practices generate useful and effective outcomes, and what practices cause interactional difficulties and local problems. This information can be transmitted to practitioners as concrete, specific instructions on what practices work best. The Conversation Analytic Role-play Method (CARM, see Stokoe, 2013a, 2013b) systematizes the training process, permitting practitioners to see real interactions with an analyst's eye, and see how local outcomes can be cumulatively built into more macro-scale results. One major challenge for CA researchers today is to determine precisely how effective CARM is at creating distal outcomes, such as patient satisfaction (see Sikveland et al., 2016). CA research has often been resistant to linking practices with distal outcomes, not least because it is difficult to determine which practices, of the hundreds of instances of practices that occur in any interaction, are the ones that connect to any given distal outcome. This is one challenge that CA researchers should tackle, however, if they wish to create usefully applied results.

One difficulty in finding 'rapport' in naturalistic (Potter & Hepburn, 2005) settings is that overt or direct indications of rapport may be considered heavy-handed, insincere, or false; since rapport is created for a purpose (see Section 6.1), rather than for the sake of friendliness, its presence can suggest alternative motives. Stokoe, Sikveland and Huma (2016) reported that efforts to build rapport explicitly in sales cold calling (in which the sales representatives call prospective buyers unannounced) were seldom reciprocated, and treated as inapposite. Practices such as opening the calls with 'How are you today' or engaging in small talk did not progress the call's purpose, and were inappropriate given the lack of familiarity between the cold caller and the call taker. This suggests that rapport building

practices may need to be done subtly, and that ‘successful’ rapport (in the sense of reciprocated practices with local outcomes that promote progressivity or affiliation) may be *necessarily* implicit or unexposed. ‘*Doing* rapport’ may be problematic: doing genuine friendliness (or affiliation) that happens to build rapport (or effective local outcomes) is not.

Future research needs to extricate not only which practices lead to what kinds of local and distal outcomes, but also whether the practices should be considered as building *rapport* at all. Many of the practices examined above are considered part of everyday interactional contingencies – a natural part of (polite, non-aggressive) interaction. While it is possible that the practices do *both* rapport building and other conversational actions – and that participants have the option to take up either aspect in their next turns (Sidnell & Enfield, 2014) – it does raise the question of whether rapport building practices are doing anything above and beyond mundane conversational norms. For instance, is rapport only ‘rapport’ when done in an institutional context, where some mundane norms may be altered or missing? Can we see rapport as anything beyond ordinary affiliative interaction? If it is not, why is it such a central concern for institutional practitioners, who have access to interactional norms when outside institutional contexts? More research is needed to assess how rapport as a concept fits into conversational norms. This similarity between rapport building and ordinary conversational practices may account for much of the difficulty in ‘seeing’ rapport in interaction.

In conclusion, my analysis raises two challenges. First, for studies of rapport, the challenge is to examine rapport building as a set of practices that take place in live interactions, and to determine what contingencies shape how rapport is done, and whether rapport is a useful concept above and beyond ordinary conversational norms. Second, for CA, the challenge is to determine whether we can link practices with distal outcomes, whether we can see how local outcomes may build cumulatively to distal ones, and whether these practices are associated with changes in relationships and expectations. Both of these challenges are unconventional for their respective fields, but both will result in improved opportunities for practitioners, and a better application of research to training.

## **Chapter 7:**

### **Discussion**

#### **7.0 Summary**

In this thesis, I have made two main contributions to our knowledge of the constituency office. First, I have provided, to the best of my knowledge, the first interactional analysis of the constituency office, a frequently overlooked part of political life that is more accessible to the ordinary citizen than ‘mainstream’ political settings such as Parliament. Second, I have contributed to the conversation analytic literature by being the first to analyze a previously unstudied institution, which also provided unique insights into institutional talk. I will summarize my analytic findings below, before turning to the overarching findings of this thesis, its limitations, potential avenues for future research, and its potential applications in training constituency office staff.

I began this thesis by demonstrating that the constituency office has been neglected by both political discourse literature and conversation analytic studies. In the research on political communication, Cain, Ferejohn and Fiorina (1987) said that constituency office work was “belonging to a category ranging from baby kissing to bribery – best kept out of serious academic discussion.” Their statement continued to hold true to this day, especially for research that investigated the actual activities (and interactions) that comprise constituency office casework. Most research only considered the possibility that constituency casework helped to build rapport and the ‘personal vote’, and thus improved the MP’s chances for re-election (e.g., Butler & Collins, 2001; Johnston & Pattie, 2009; Norris, 1997). I discussed the difficulty in finding research that was up-to-date (Norton, 1994, and Rawlings, 1990a, 1990b, for instance, are based on letters) or that examined actual casework (most are based on reflections about casework, and those reflections are only from the MP- or staff-perspective, e.g., Koop, 2012; Le Lidec, 2009). The conversation analytic literature has likewise failed to examine the constituency office, providing the motivation for the research in this thesis. While institutional studies have examined politicians in other settings (such as on public broadcasts, e.g., Clayman & Heritage, 2002a; Ekström & Patrona, 2011; Ekström et al., 2013), as well as other settings that involve service provision (e.g., medical interactions, Heritage & Maynard, 2006; or street-level bureaucracy, Bruhn & Ekström, 2015), none of these were identical to the constituency office. My thesis has addressed these shortcomings in both sets of literature, by providing the first analysis of this setting.

In the first analytic chapter, I examined ‘requests’ at the constituency office (or rather, the lack of turn designs traditionally considered to constitute requests). I found that constituents use their turns-at-talk to build a case for assistance, achieving the recruitment of assistance, rather than requesting it outright. I proposed that this is due to the ‘unknown’ nature of the institution, as some institutional roles and procedures are better known than others (see Stokoe, 2013b). Constituents used methods for achieving recruitment (Kendrick & Drew, 2016) that have been well-documented before, focusing on demonstrating legitimacy and reasonableness (see e.g., Curl & Drew, 2008; Heritage & Robinson, 2006; Stokoe & Edwards, 2007; Stokoe & Hepburn, 2005), and using ‘narrative description’ turn formats (Zimmerman, 1992). Concerning the question of ‘relevance’, constituents more often displayed the *ir*relevance of seeking help from other institutions, rather than the relevance of the constituency office; this also further supported the idea that constituents were managing the challenge of the ‘unknown’ nature of the institution. All participants oriented to the relevance of a transaction of assistance, and any lack of transaction (i.e., no help offered) was treated as accountable and pursue-able. Finally, I also found that the constituency office staff guided the way the encounters progressed, by their timely use of offers as compared to affiliations. The staff used fewer and fewer offers as the meeting progressed, and more and more affiliations, which reduced the relevancy of offers and allowed the staff to implicitly instruct constituents on what items were ‘requestable’ or ‘offerable’.

The staff also guided the constituents through the use of different offer formats, a finding that was discussed in the next analytic chapter. The initial offers for any given transaction of assistance typically took the format of ‘can I/we’, which treated the offer as a ‘proposal’. Initial offers thus oriented to the potential contingencies associated with offering (whether the offer was appropriate or desired), and allowed for constituents to act as agents and decide whether or not to accept. Second offers took the format of ‘I will’, and ‘announced’ that an offer would be completed. These offers did not orient to the constituents’ agency, and treated the offer as already accepted. Further offers took the format of ‘let me’, or ‘request-offers’. In these offers, staff now *asked* constituents to permit the offer to be completed. This allowed constituency office staff to make an acceptance more strongly relevant, which helped to progress the interaction forward. The ‘request-offer’ was a useful format for guiding the interaction towards closure, and helped to close off further discussion on that particular transaction of assistance.

The variety of offer designs has implications for how we, as conversation analysts, describe turns and actions. The additional action aspects of the offers (proposal,

announcement, and request) created overlaps beyond traditional action category ‘boundaries’. The action of offering can be accomplished through the turn design of a request. Actions do not always fall neatly into categories or types, and we should not attempt to be more specific in describing action than participants are in designing one (Hofstetter & Stokoe, 2015; Stokoe, 2012). CA needs to be better attuned to the multiple trajectories that turns can accomplish. Also interesting was the way that the offers were oriented to the contingencies inherent in making an offer – despite the fact that contingency is more usually associated with requests (Curl & Drew, 2008). This was forecast by Kendrick and Drew (2014), and my study further analyzes and provides supporting evidence for how contingency can be actualized in offer design. Finally, Chapter 4 found that offers cannot be solely determined by who is benefitting from a transaction (Clayman & Heritage, 2014; Couper-Kuhlen, 2014), given that the MP is certainly benefitting from *doing offering* by appearing to be aligned with and supporting his constituents. Even the simplest transaction can have benefits on both sides, and quantifying these potential benefits does not seem to instruct us about how the action is carried out.

The third analytic chapter investigated the sequences in which political topics were made relevant, deconstructing several common tropes in political discourse literature. Political topics were not raised often, contrary to the expected purpose of constituents in visiting the constituency office: constituents are expected to use the office as a form of political engagement or to express political views (Hansard, 2015; Norton, 2012, see Section 7.1). In actual constituency office interactions, the MP tended to raise political topics to demonstrate the way his political party was aligned with the constituents’ interests. The constituents tended to raise political topics to complain about a policy that was affecting their lives. However, as is well known in CA, a topic cannot be selected by one side alone – interlocutors must all participate in order for a topic to be successful. It is possible for constituents to attempt to make a political sequence relevant, and for the MP and caseworker to leave the political components unaddressed (see Chapter 5, Extract 5.7). Another common assumption in political science literature is that citizens hold political beliefs, values, or attitudes, and that these attitudes are stable over time. However, within the span of a few minutes, constituents were seen to adopt different stances towards political issues. The sequential context was crucial for understanding the attitude expressed, and yet sequential information is rarely considered in political science studies (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). This suggests that many findings in political surveys are suspect, and that attitudes may be more reliant on sequential position than on ‘stable’ personal characteristics or opinions. Finally,

constituents were vague when expressing political criticisms, and treated the topics as delicate. When complimenting the MP, this vagueness vanished. This suggests that constituents orient to the interactional contingencies of making criticisms *first*, and the political concerns they may hold *second*. Constituents privilege the interactional norms, such as not criticizing an interlocutor, especially not directly, over making political criticisms known. This has implications for studies that wish to understand how citizens interact with their representatives and how they can express their political voice. Constituents cannot separate their political representative from being a conversational interlocutor, so interactional norms will apply. If we are to understand or change how citizens interact with their representatives (or indeed other political people, such as union leaders, protest leaders, bureaucrats, etc.), we need to address first the interactional norms that promote certain behaviours and challenge others. We cannot tackle the issue of citizen disengagement from political conversations without tackling the question of interactional rules.

The final analytic chapter investigated the question of ‘rapport’ in conversation. ‘Rapport’ was particularly salient in this study because of the supposed need for rapport in building relationships and trust. MPs have a strong interest in building and maintaining rapport and relationships with constituents, as these feelings are perceived (by MPs and political staff, Fenno, 1978; see Section 1.2.1) to directly correlate with their future job prospects: re-election. However, constituents at the constituency office are typically asking for favours – for the MP to do work beyond their mandated role of legislating new bills and representing the constituent in Parliament. The MP is not officially a general-purpose ombudsman, but constituents nevertheless ask for special treatment. Thus, constituents *also* have a vested interest in rapport. This is likely true in most service encounters, where the client wishes to receive the best service. I have found that constituents show a vested interest in ‘client-side rapport’, and that rapport is not solely the concern of the institutional practitioner, as it has long been thought to be. I have also found that rapport is typically conceptualized as a feeling (or outcome) that influences future behaviour, and that it is sought in order to achieve outcomes. However, CA as a method is capable of tying various practices to outcomes, bypassing the need to investigate rapport at all. It is possible to determine what practices lead to better outcomes in service encounters without resorting to a study of rapport.

The main limitation of my thesis is that the data was restricted to one constituency office. My findings cannot be said to be representative of all British constituency offices, especially with the wide variances between offices that have been described in the past (Fenno, 1978; Rawlings, 1990a, 1990b). However, the data in this thesis represents 68

different constituents, 56 different cases, and was spread out over the course of six months. This suggests the data are not solely a case study, but a reasonable first look at the interactions at this institution. Importantly, the data showed clear and consistent patterns, suggesting the findings are robust. My findings also show interactional features that are consistent with prior CA research concerning conversational norms (for instance, the challenge in criticizing a person face-to-face, see Chapter 5). My data can be compared with the datasets made available through published CA research, which will contribute to the wider generalizability of both my own research, and the CA field.

Overall, my thesis has provided the first analysis of in-person interactions with a politician and caseworkers at the constituency office. We now have a set of data that demonstrates how constituency casework is managed, and the central role of interaction in its accomplishment. I have analyzed how constituents, the MP, and the caseworkers negotiate services, and challenged assumptions about how these actors might engage in politics or build ‘rapport’. I have added to our understanding of institutional interactions, by analyzing this ‘new’ institution, and investigating other ways that requests and offers may be accomplished. In the next section, I will return to some questions that were raised in Chapter 1, and discuss some future avenues for researching this institution.

### **7.1 The personal vote, context, and communication training**

The constituency office has long been examined for its role in creating the ‘personal vote’, or a sense of rapport or obligation prompting constituents to vote for an incumbent politician (see Section 1.2.1). My study cannot provide any conclusive evidence as to whether any constituents would vote for the MP, based on the interactions in this data corpus. I did not collect data concerning constituents’ voting past behaviour or future intentions, and the fact that the data came from a single MP’s office means I cannot conclude that any comments concerning voting behaviour were widespread. As I have mentioned in my analysis of ‘rapport’ (see Chapter 6), there was limited evidence available to the MP or caseworkers (or to analysts) as to whether the constituents felt a growing rapport with the constituency office staff, or whether the distal outcome would be in the MP’s favour. While my analysis cannot conclude whether the MP gained a ‘personal vote’ from any given constituent, I have shown that the MP and the caseworkers are likewise uncertain about earning a potential vote. This may explain some of the variance studies find in politicians’ beliefs about the effectiveness of constituency casework at creating a personal vote: they receive no confirmation in interactions with constituents as to whether the constituents will be more inclined to vote for

the politician in the future. Asking constituents whether they would vote for the politician after receiving services breaks several social conventions (an institutional practitioner requesting a favour from a client, for instance), but moreover, my data shows that in at least one constituency office the MP and caseworkers simply do *not* ask.

However, I can address what it is like for citizens to interact with a politician in person. Citizens have limited opportunities to directly speak to a politician. In the past, studies have examined news interviews with public phone-ins or audience participation, and found that the host or journalist mediated the talk (see Section 1.3.1 and 1.3.2). The host decided when a politician had satisfied a question, and when the topic was closed. At the constituency office, citizens had unmediated access to the politician. The caseworker's main role was to take notes or provide information, rather than to mediate discussion. Constituents were able to, and did, pursue talk of their difficulties. They collaborated with the MP concerning whether an offer was acceptable. They engaged in non-business related 'small talk' at various points in the encounter, which was not an option in radio or television participation shows. The MP's were only occasionally in a position to account for their own actions or for government action (see Chapter 5; Ekström, 2009), rather than constantly. In summary, the constituency office is a very different interactional environment from participation shows and news media. My data is more similar to other, service-related institutions (see Section 1.3.3, 3.1, 3.2).

Both institutional studies and political discourse studies may be interested in how this data may be a new starting point for the consideration of how context may influence interaction. Political (discourse) scientists who have encountered my work have been reluctant to accept CA's disinterest in macro-scale contextual details, such as political party preference or membership, gender of participants, socioeconomic status, and so forth. As I have mentioned in this thesis (see Chapter 2), these macro-scale contextual details were not analyzed, in part because CA has consistently found that these details do *not* influence how interaction is accomplished (Fitzgerald, Housley & Butler, 2009; Schegloff, 1997b; Stokoe, 2008). Consider the status of the constituents in Extract 5.5 as elderly: this detail was not (empirically) demonstrably used by the MP or caseworker (e.g., as a basis to make a specific offer, as a basis to empathize about difficulties) until it was made relevant by the constituents concerning their lack of pension. Extract 5.5 and the whole encounter show how such details may be 'true', but not *relevant*, until such time as the participants make them so (Sacks, 1992; Schegloff, 1997b). Despite the disinterest of CA in examining demographic details as context, the subfield of institutional studies allows that context may influence how utterances are interpreted. For instance, Fox (2015) points out that service settings encourage service



providers to hear utterances as requests. Likewise, at the constituency office, descriptions of problems are heard as making assistance relevant (at specific points). When it comes to personal attributes, however, such as party affiliation, CA is reluctant to ascribe interpretative reasoning to the attribute, unless explicitly made relevant by the participants. However, a future comparison of several constituency offices could provide insight into how personal attributes, such as party affiliation, may provide a context that influences talk.

As mentioned in Chapter 5, constituents who engaged in criticizing the actions of the current government appeared to know that such criticisms implicated the MP (who belonged to the current governing party at the time), and constituents modulated their criticisms according to interactional norms to address this fact. That the constituents assumed the MP was implicated in the criticism implies that the constituents may have known to what party the MP belonged. In other words, the constituents' choice of actions may have been influenced by the MP's party affiliation, something that could be said to be a personal attribute. This attribute was never discussed within the interaction, and yet it may have influenced how the constituents chose to criticize the government, and indeed whether they chose to criticize at all. Future work could involve continued efforts to collect data from both government and opposition MPs. An opposition MP, *in theory*, might not be assumed to be implicated in the same criticism of government policy, since an opposition MP's role is to criticize the government's policy too: they have a reduced accountability for legislation that is passed. As a result, constituents might be able to criticize the government 'safely', and/or an MP may be able to use his or her affiliation as a resource for welcoming criticizing or aligning with the constituent. This could provide convincing insight into how macro-scale contextual details may or may not affect micro-scale interactional proceedings.

However, comparing the influence of opposition and government MPs on constituent complaints relies on constituents knowing both the MP's party affiliation, and how government roles work, neither of which is certain. It is difficult to know whether constituents *did* in fact know to what party the MP belonged in the data in this thesis. After all, it is possible that the constituents assumed criticizing government simply meant criticizing *all* MPs, including opposition MPs. The MP and caseworkers reported that constituents did not consistently know the MP's name, gender, or age, let alone his party affiliation – after several years of serving as MP! Likewise, the Hansard Audit of Political Engagement (2015) has found that 28% of citizens surveyed did not know the political affiliation of their local MP. Without data concerning an opposition MP, it is not possible to

know whether constituents are aware of these changes in context, let alone whether the change would be made relevant or would influence interactions.

It would also be useful to collect data from ‘secure’ and ‘insecure’ constituencies, given the significant amount of statistical literature investigating the relation between election security and constituency casework (see Section 1.2.1). The security of the constituency (how likely the constituents are to vote for the incumbent MP) is reported to be linked with the efforts of the MP in doing constituency casework, and this effort may be reflected in constituency office practices. Although CA has resisted the inclusion of macro-scale contextual details, such a study could demonstrate whether items such as party affiliation or job security influence the way the practices are achieved. It is certain that similar actions will be carried out (the MP will still make offers, the constituents will still balance reasonableness and legitimacy while making complaints or telling troubles) – but the way in which they are done may vary systematically. The constituency office provides an opportunity for CA – *and other discourse analytic fields* – to re-examine the way it treats context.

My thesis should also prompt fields in political science to re-examine the way they consider citizens’ political activity. Although Norton (1994, 2012) says that constituents contact their MP for the purpose of raising political concerns, my thesis does not support this assertion. It is possible that Norton’s evidence, being from a survey of written letters from the 1980s, is both out of date and of an incomparable format. The letters analyzed by Norton do not provide the same interactional environment as the encounters in my thesis. Furthermore, we do not know whether the constituents in Norton’s letters were seeking assistance with some issue simultaneously to making a criticism. Norton’s claim concerning why constituents contact their MP is too broad. My results suggest that constituents contact the MP, at the surgery at least, to solve personal issues and avoid political concerns. This supports other studies that have focused on the way casework is a last resort for desperate constituents (Ortiz et al. 2004; Young Legal Aid Lawyers, 2012, 2013). This also supports survey findings that suggest citizens rarely contact their MP for political purposes; the British Social Attitudes Survey (BSA) found that only 26% of people have ever contacted their MP (Simpson & Phillips, 2015), and the Hansard Audit of Political Engagement found that only 12% of people had contacted their MP in the last year (2015). Both of these surveys found that more citizens reported they would be *willing* to contact their MP if they ‘felt strongly enough about an issue’ (Hansard’s wording) (Hansard 33%; BSA 40%), but being willing and actually doing an action are not the same. My findings provide some explanation for this discrepancy. The interactional difficulty of criticizing a person implicated in the criticism is a

challenge that constituents must overcome in order to criticize government policy to their MP.

Finally, the findings of this thesis can be applied to create training programs for MPs and caseworkers. CA findings have successfully been applied in the past to create training material (Drew et al., 2010; Heritage, Robinson, Elliott, Beckett & Wilkes, 2007), most notably with the Conversation Analytic Role-play Method (CARM - Stokoe, 2014). Stokoe's CARM program presents CA findings directly to practitioners, so that they can see how sequences unfold 'live', and benefit from an understanding of how interactional norms govern our practices. A brief CARM workshop was given as feedback to the constituency office in this study, focusing on the practice of opening calls and meetings with 'How can I help' (see Section 3.1). The use of this opening move officially begins the encounter, even after non-business oriented talk has taken place. One caseworker at the office in this study reported that, after my CARM feedback session, she implemented the practice of 'How can I help', consciously. She reported that it could be implemented to reduce the length of her meetings with constituents by several minutes, and was extremely useful for curtailing the sometimes over-long pre-meeting 'small talk'.

There are several other potential practices that will likely be useful for training. I highlight a selection here, based on the Chapters in this thesis (although there are others):

- a) Affiliation can be used to reduce the relevance of an offer. When a constituent complains or tells a trouble, it is possible to reduce the interactional pressure of making an offer by affiliating.
- b) Constituents appear to have little knowledge of what a constituency office can do. MPs and caseworkers can guide constituents through the meeting and implicitly 'teach' constituents what is requestable and/or offerable. The design of offers is crucial to guiding constituents on whether they should press for further or different assistance.
- c) Constituents appear to resist the closing-aspects of turns, such as offers. More overt closings are required to end the meeting.
- d) Constituents appear to resist information about government activity that supports their cause, as the pre-existence of that activity makes their difficulty less legitimate and urgent.
- e) Rapport need not be a concern. Practices are a better way to train staff. Current training for caseworkers still focuses on building rapport (see Work for MPs 2016).

It is worth noting that there was very little interest in training for constituency office staff (as opposed to the widespread difficulty reported by doctors in soliciting additional concerns in consultations, see Heritage et al., 2007; or the difficulty in convincing clients to try mediation, see Stokoe, 2013b). MPs and caseworkers across Canada and the United Kingdom seemed surprised by the idea that their talk practices could be improved. I suggest that this is in part due to ignorance of available training options, such as CARM, but also due to the desperation of the constituents who visit the office. *Any* aid, even if it is inefficiently or ineffectively done, is likely to be received with enormous gratitude, given the circumstances of many constituents. Furthermore, in this particular corpus, there were few interactional difficulties that consistently led to problematic outcomes – unlike the consistent difficulties faced by mediators in securing clients (Stokoe, 2013b). This may be due to the highly experienced caseworkers, who had been working in the field for many years. Future studies may wish to target constituency offices where the caseworkers are less experienced in order to see potentially less effective practices.

Overall, this thesis has provided a new perspective in the study of institutional talk, from a new institution with its own unique features. I have laid a foundation upon which future studies of constituency offices can build. Furthermore, future studies of political interaction, especially interaction between ordinary citizens and politicians, now have a point of comparison. Our understanding of the relationship between citizen and representative has been enriched and expanded, and many disciplines can benefit from this new knowledge.

MPs and their staff have been quietly providing services to constituents for decades, with little academic interest in how casework is accomplished. Now, we finally have an understanding of the central role that interaction takes in assisting constituents, and an appreciation of the kind of work that MPs and their staff provide everyday. It is precisely this ordinariness that should inspire investigation, and prompt continued research into overlooked settings.

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## Appendix A:

### Jefferson Transcription Symbols

t[alk [Yeah,	Square brackets mark the start and end of overlapping speech. They are aligned to mark the precise position of overlap.
↑ ↓	Vertical arrows precede marked pitch movement, over and above normal rhythms of speech. They are used for notable changes in pitch beyond those represented by stops, commas and question marks.
Under <u>lining</u>	Indicates emphasis; the extent of underlining within individual words locates emphasis and also indicates how heavy it is.
CAPITALS	Mark speech that is hearably louder than surrounding speech. This is beyond the increase in volume indicated by <u>underlines</u> .
°I know it,°	‘Degree’ signs enclose hearably quieter speech.
(0.4)	Numbers in round brackets measure pauses in seconds (in this case, 4 tenths of a second).
(.)	A micropause, hearable but too short to measure.
((staccato)) ((lines omitted))	Additional comments from the transcriber, e.g. about features of context or delivery. Also to indicate material omitted for brevity.
(I know)	Text in single round brackets to indicate best guess at hard-to-hear utterance. Can also be blank to indicate something spoken but unhearable.
she wa::nted	Colons show degrees of elongation of the prior sound; the more colons, the more elongation.
hhh	Aspiration (out-breaths); proportionally as for colons.
.hhh	Inspiration (in-breaths); proportionally as for colons.
Yeh,	Comma: ‘Continuation’ marker, speaker has not finished; marked by weak rising intonation, as when delivering a verbal list.
y’ know? okay¿	Question mark: strong rise in intonation, <i>irrespective of grammar</i> . Inverse question mark indicates tone between a comma and a question mark in rise.
Yeh.	Full stop: marks falling, stopping intonation (‘final contour’), <i>irrespective of grammar</i> , not necessarily followed by a pause.
bu- u-	Hyphens mark a cut-off of the preceding sound.
>he said<	‘Greater than’ and ‘lesser than’ signs enclose utterances that are faster than surrounding talk.
<he said>	Reverse indicates utterances that are slower than surrounding talk.
solid.= =We had	‘Equals’ signs mark the immediate ‘latching’ of successive talk, whether of one or more speakers, with no interval.
sto(h)p i(h)t	Laughter within speech is signalled by h’s in round brackets.



## Appendix B:

### Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form

*Note: originally on 2, single sided sheets of A4*

Loughborough University  
Leicestershire, UK, LE11 3TU  
Tel: +44 (0) 1509 263171



## The Constituency Office: A study of the surgeries of Members of Parliament in Canada and the United Kingdom

### Participant Information Sheet for Surgery Visitors

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research project, run by Prof. Elizabeth Stokoe and Emily Hofstetter of Loughborough University. Prof Stokoe is an expert in human conversation, and has been working with professional organizations to record interactions since 1997. She researches conversations to identify effective practice, which feeds back into training programs. Ms. Hofstetter is completing her Doctor of Philosophy degree, under the supervision of Prof. Stokoe.

This project examines communication between politicians and their constituents, as well as telephone inquiries into the offices of Members of Parliament. Ms. Hofstetter is interested in examining how communities use the services of MP surgeries, and how MPs communicate with the public. The project involves making recordings of how MPs and their surgery staff interact with the public, both on the telephone and in person.

### What do I have to do?

Nothing! Your meeting will be recorded as it would normally run, using a video camera. All the information recorded will be kept confidential. The recordings cannot be used as part of any parties' legal proceedings.

You have the right to withdraw from the research until publication (timing varies). If you would like to withdraw, please contact us, and if publications have already occurred, we will remove your data from any future work.

### Ethics and confidentiality

1. Any recordings made will be **stored securely** and only **anonymized** data, in which participants (MPs, office staff, and constituents) cannot be identified, may be used in research papers and training workshops. Prof. Stokoe and Ms. Hofstetter use software that deletes names and other identifying features, and transform voices by altering their pitch.
2. As a doctoral student of Loughborough University, Emily Hofstetter is bound by professional codes of conduct. As an employee of Loughborough University, and as a Chartered Psychologist, Prof Stokoe is likewise bound by professional codes of conduct. Because Prof. Stokoe also works with police investigative interviews she has also been subject to 'CRB' checks.

All this means that if either Ms. Hofstetter or Prof. Stokoe were to use the data in an unethical way she would be guilty of academic misconduct. She will work with your data responsibly. If participants are unhappy with how the research is conducted, the University has a policy relating to Research Misconduct and Whistle Blowing: [www.lboro.ac.uk/admin/committees/ethical/Whistleblowing\(2\).htm](http://www.lboro.ac.uk/admin/committees/ethical/Whistleblowing(2).htm), and participants may contact the Secretary for the University's Ethics Approvals (Human Participants) Sub-Committee: Ms. Green, Research Office, Hazlerigg Bldg, Loughborough University, Epinal Way. LE11 3TU. Tel: 01509 222423. Email: [j.a.green@lboro.ac.uk](mailto:j.a.green@lboro.ac.uk)

**Contact Emily Hofstetter, Loughborough University, LE11 3TU, UK**  
**e.c.hofstetter@lboro.ac.uk +44(0)7462 315345**

**Or Prof. Elizabeth Stokoe, Loughborough University, LE11 3TU, UK**  
**e.h.stokoe@lboro.ac.uk +44(0)1509 223360**

## Participant Consent form for MPs and Constituent

*This form accompanies a **Participant Information Sheet** outlining the purpose of the research project.*

Please tick all that apply

I have read and understand the **Participant Information Sheet** and this consent form.

I **understand** the purpose and details of **the research project**.

I have had an opportunity to **ask questions** about my participation.

I understand that as part of this project audio/video\* recordings of me will be made while participating in the research.

I understand that the data will be **stored securely** under password-protection.

I understand that I have the right to **withdraw** my **consent** at any time during the research without reason and that the data collected will be destroyed.

I understand that **all** names and other **identifiable information** in recordings will be kept **confidential**.

I understand that the collected **un anonymized recordings** (the 'raw data') will be seen and stored only by Prof. Stokoe and Emily Hofstetter.

I agree that the **anonymized transcripts** *in which I cannot be identified* can be used by Prof. Stokoe and Emily Hofstetter in their academic papers and presentations.

I agree that the **anonymized recordings** *in which I cannot be identified* can be used can be used by Prof. Stokoe and Ms. Hofstetter in training workshops for MPs and staff.

I understand that all the information I provide will be treated in strict confidence and will be kept anonymous and confidential unless it is judged that confidentiality will have to be breached for the **safety** of the participant or others.

Name:

---

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

CASE REFERENCE: \_\_\_\_\_ TYPE OF ENCOUNTER: \_\_\_\_\_

**Contact Emily Hofstetter, Loughborough University, LE11 3TU, UK**

**e.c.hofstetter@lboro.ac.uk +44(0)7462 315345**

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Appendix C:  
Recruitment Brochure

# The Constituency Office Project:

*Evidence-based training for  
communicating with constituents*



 **Loughborough  
University**



# The Constituency Office Project

## Project overview

Voters engage with their Members of Parliament in two main ways. They call their constituency office, where they have conversations on the telephone and face-to-face with the staff who work there. They also talk to their local MP in surgeries. The *Constituency Office Project* focuses on **two main issues**. The first is a survey question: **what do people need help with from their MP about?** The second is a language and communication question: **how do people communicate with and receive advice, support and help from their MP?** This booklet outlines the research and training benefits of the research for constituency offices.

## Our data and method

We are collecting audio recordings of telephone inquiries into and out of offices, and video recordings of surgeries, when parties consent (MPs, office workers and constituents). Permission is always asked when making a recording, and anyone can withdraw from the research at any time, even afterwards. All data are stored securely. Data are both content-analyzed to address the first issue, and analyzed using *conversation analysis* to address the second.



*Anonymized video still of an MP surgery*

## Anonymizing recorded data

We work regularly with the kinds of confidential information that is often exchanged during these conversations. Conversation analysts research doctor-patient, police-suspect, and many other kinds of sensitive workplace interactions.

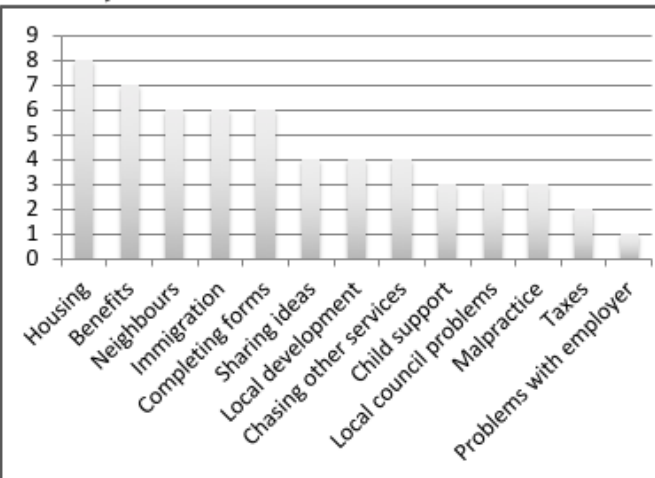
It is part of our standard ethical practice to anonymize all recordings and transcripts. This means that we digitally alter voices, remove features from faces, and we delete identifying names, addresses, and numbers.

# The Constituency Office Project

## Preliminary findings and the direction of the research

The recordings that we make are very rich. First, they provide a naturally-occurring survey of what sorts of problems people call or visit about; what they expect from MPs; where they have tried to get help; what happened next, and so on (see Tables 1 and 2). Second, we have started to show that the different ways that requests and offers are made (by MPs, caseworkers and constituents) can shape the trajectory and outcome of encounters – including what is effective and what doesn't work (see Box 1).

**Table 1: What people call offices about, over ten days**



**Table 2: Where people turn for help, before coming to their MP**

Previous steps taken	Frequency
County Council (UK)	26%
Citizen's Advice Bureau	15%
Lawyer	4%
...	...

### Box1: Requests and offers: An example call from a constituent with a rat problem!

<p>An example of the sort of technical transcript that we produce for our analysis – it captures every 'um' and 'uh'. Measuring pauses to the nearest tenth of a second (.) enables us to pinpoint turbulence in the call – here, at line 5...</p>	<pre> 1 CW: Um: I haven't heard from them y- 2 the: housing people yet so &gt;I'm 3 afraid sorry about that&lt; I 4 will chase them today:.. 5 (.) 6 CW: .hHHH um::ptk- But- w- HOW's it 7 going though, is it- is it 8 quieter now: can you hear 9 anything:, 10 (0.4) 11 CW: ^^hh^^ 12 C: Funny enough uh:: th-the wife 13 last night she heard them:,                     </pre>	<p>1 The caseworker (CW) reports to the caller (C) that they haven't heard from housing and offers to 'chase them today' (lines 1-4).</p> <p>2 The caller does not respond to the offer (e.g., by saying "thank you", or "that would be great") – we see that in the very tiny pause at line 5.</p> <p>3 What is the CW's solution to the caller's lack of response? They ask a rapport-building question about 'how things are going', and the caller starts to talk again.</p> <p><b>A 'trainable': How to build rapport</b></p>
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# The Constituency Office Project

## Evidence-based training for MPs and office workers

Our research enables us to offer unique research-based communication skills training using the 'conversation analytic role-play method'(CARM). CARM takes research insights about what works and does not work in workplace interaction as a basis for training, rather than traditional role-play or simulation (which our research has found does not accurately mimic real interaction). CARM uses anonymized data to enable trainees to live through real-time encounters to discuss what they might do in particular communicative situations, and evaluate what real practitioners (in this case, real MPs and office workers) actually do and say. CARM has been taken up across the community and family mediation sectors, police interview training, medical encounters and sales. CARM work has also underpinned new materials promoting family mediation developed by the Ministry of Justice in the UK.

## Next steps

This project will help us to understand the function and work of constituency offices and what is effective when MPs and office workers communicate with their constituents. It will inform MPs and constituents about how constituency offices work on a day-to-day basis.

We're looking for more participants (MPs and their offices) as well as offering training. Get in touch.

## Who we are

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## Learn more about our research via these links

- The *Constituency Office Project* website: <http://homepages.lboro.ac.uk/~ssech/>
- BBC Radio 4 'The Life Scientific' with Prof. Stokoe: [www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b02ykg4w](http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b02ykg4w)
- The Conversation Analytic Role-play Method: [www.carmtraining.org](http://www.carmtraining.org)



## **Appendix D: Equipment List**

**Audio recorder (telephone):** Olympus Digital Voice Recorder VN8100PC

**Audio telephone jack converter**

**Encrypted hard drive:** Satechi Lockdown encrypted hard drive enclosure

**Video recorder:** Canon Legria FS306

### **Software:**

Audacity (audio editing: anonymizing, trimming clips)

Adobe Audition (audio editing: transcribing, anonymizing, trimming clips)

Adobe Premiere (video editing: trimming, anonymizing)

QuickTime (video editing: trimming)

Word (transcripts and writing)

Excel (data logs, literature reivevs)

Mendeley (literature storage)