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Beware the 'Loughborough School' of Social Psychology?: Interaction and the politics of intervention

Elizabeth Stokoe, Alexa Hepburn and Charles Antaki

[1]Department of Social Sciences, Loughborough University, Loughborough LE11 3TU, UK.

*Requests for reprints should be addressed to Elizabeth Stokoe, Department of Social Sciences, Loughborough University, Loughborough LE11 3TU, UK (e-mail: e.h.stokoe@lboro.ac.uk).

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Interaction and the politics of intervention

ABSTRACT

The authors explain the attractions of applying discursive psychology (DP) and conversation analysis (CA) by reporting three different examples of their engagement with practitioners and clients. Along the way, a case is made for separating DP/CA from other kinds of qualitative analysis in social psychology, and for deconstructing some commonly held misunderstandings and caricatures of DP/CA.

Keywords: Discursive psychology, conversation analysis, applied research, intervention.

THE 'LOUGHBOROUGH SCHOOL' IN SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

Over the past twenty-five years, the 'Loughborough School' has been at the forefront in establishing discursive psychology (DP) as a key method for social psychologists. Citation counts show that it has had remarkable influence in social psychology specifically, and across the social sciences more broadly. Since its inception, however, DP has also been at the centre of controversial debates between proponents of different kinds of qualitative work (let alone its battles with traditional quantitative psychology). Two worries have been expressed. First, by adopting conversation analysis (CA) as its primary perspective, DP has been criticized for its alleged pointless empiricism; its dangerous adoption of relativism; its focus on nothing but the text, and its failure to deal with subjectivity (for examples of such criticism, see Frosh, 1999; Parker, 2005: 91-92; for replies, see Edwards, Ashmore & Potter, 1995; Edwards, 2006; 2007). Secondly, DP's preference for recordings of actual interaction, as opposed to retrospective interviews (which it treats as more interaction) has been criticized by those researchers who take as their primary data what people say in interviews and focus groups (e.g., Griffin, 2007) – often under the aegis of 'psychosocial' and, particularly, 'thematic' or 'intepretative phenomenological' analysis (see Attenborough & Stokoe, frth.; Benwell & Stokoe, 2006).

There is a feeling, therefore, in some qualitative quarters, that CA-informed DP ignores power, politics, wider contexts and big pictures; indeed, that its adherents have somehow managed to find themselves 'on the wrong side' politically and ideologically. Some warn: "Beware the Loughborough school!". This worries and upsets us. In this brief paper, we want to make two points, in an attempt to set the record straight and make a positive case for what DP/CA offers; for what it is, and what it is not. First, we want to show, via three empirical case studies, how DP/CA can be a powerful tool for social change, by studying contexts in

which the politics of our applied interventions are, at least, reasonable and progressive. Second, we want to claim that DP/CA projects are *scientific*: rational, objective, theoretically coherent, empirically-based and open to public scrutiny. They are both qualitative *and large-scale* methods that examine the *anatomy* of members' practices in single-case analyses (e.g., Schegloff, 1987), whilst also identifying, across large datasets, robust *patterns* in the social actions that build our relationships and identities (Attenborough & Stokoe, frth.). Both these things make DP/CA exciting and rigorous, and its influence is testament to its appeal.

Applying Conversation Analysis and Discursive psychology

DP and CA are powerful tools for implementing social change, particularly when the matter at hand comprises recurring interactional business. Doctors deal recurrently with patients, therapists with clients, parents with children; through talk and embodied conduct in interaction. DP/CA identifies, minutely, how interaction works; how actions are accomplished (how doctors solicit patient histories, how therapists manage client resistance, how parents attend to children's eating habits). It is primarily and fundamentally a social *science*: it is about illuminating basic interactional mechanisms. But it can be applied, too. DP/CA can reveal where interactional practices go 'wrong', and how they might be put 'right'. Indeed, DP/CA recommendations will be an order of magnitude more precise and detailed than the kind of generalized advice one sees in text-books; based on folk theories or experiential reports of interaction, or on simulated encounters ("*use open-ended questions*"; "*listen actively", etc.* see Stokoe, frth.). As Peräkylä and Vehvilainen (2003) argued, practitioners' own 'stocks of interactional knowledge' may well be incomplete or even faulty. Since DP/CA comes to the data open-mindedly and without agendas, its anatomy of talk is finer, and it has a sophisticated sense of the relationship between the actions to be

accomplished and the conversational structures that accomplish them. If one wants to encourage someone to talk freely, for example, the term "active listening" is too imprecise to capture the subtleties of how that is actually done in real talk, and how a person can come across as engaged, supportive and attentive. DP/CA can supply that subtlety.

The following section provides examples of application from projects that each of us has been involved with: neighbour dispute mediation; child protection helplines, and dealings between support staff and adults with intellectual disabilities. After those descriptions, we will conclude by discussing the risks of intervention, and how they might be confronted.

INTERACTIONAL INVENTIONS: THREE CASE STUDIES

A magical mediation moment: Elizabeth Stokoe

I came to Loughborough in 2002 with interests located more squarely in conversation analysis than discursive psychology, but in 'topical' or 'societal' issues rather than in the mechanics of interaction *per se*. I was attracted to CA because I was interested in gender and language, and was dissatisfied with the 'sex difference' model that dominated mainstream sociolinguistics (and, of course, psychology itself). For me, however, CA provided a method for making the *strongest possible* claims about the relevance of gender to interaction (e.g., Speer & Stokoe, 2011). Rather than close the door to cultural and ideological topics, as Parker (2005) and others have claimed, CA opens up these topics and shows how, say, gender categories – their dominant meanings; their hierarchical organization – figure systematically as resources for action in highly consequential settings of people's lives (e.g., in police interrogation: Stokoe, 2010).

Since the early 2000s, I have been studying neighbour relationships and the causes and trajectories of neighbour disputes. A 'base' study was funded by the ESRC[1] as part of the *Identities and Social Action Programme*. The project's dataset comprised 120 hours of audio-recordings of over 600 telephone calls to UK mediation, environmental health and antisocial behaviour services, and police interviews of suspects in neighbour-dispute crimes. The rationale for data collection was to document people 'being neighbours', or formulating their own and other people's conduct as incumbents of that category (rather than conducting interviews about neighbour relationships). Analysis focused on identifying recurrent instances in which, subtly or explicitly, matters of identity (including people's own categories such as 'bully', 'fishwife' or 'gypo', as well as category-resonant descriptions of actions, appearances, tendencies and dispositions) became relevant to the dispute. I wanted to discover *which* identities appeared in people's complaints; their *salience*, and their relevance to the *persistence* or *resolution* of conflict (e.g., Edwards & Stokoe, 2007; Stokoe, 2006; 2009; Stokoe & Edwards, 2007; 2009).

In the 'base' project, neither the practices of the institutional parties to these interactions (mediators, police officers, and council workers) – nor impact upon their practices – were a particular focus. Nevertheless, salient observations were reported to practitioners at regular feedback sessions, which evolved into training workshops using a role-play method I developed (Stokoe, 2011; the 'Conversation Analytic Role-play Method': CARM). CARM takes live calls from members of the public into mediation centres as the basis for role-play discussion. Because mediation training is done via traditional role play, mediators seldom, if ever, study their own practice with real clients. CARM works like this:

1. Data extracts are identified in which particular interactional problems arise, or in which 'successful' outcomes (e.g., a client agrees to mediation) are accomplished.

2. Data are transcribed and anonymized and presented line-by-line, synchronized with the audio file. Workshop participants 'live through' the call as it happens – they do not receive transcripts do not know how the conversation unfolds beyond the lines played to them.

3. Having played one or several turns in a call, participants then discuss possible trouble sources and formulate candidate next turns.

4. The next turn of the conversation is played, and participants evaluate it as a possible solution to the trouble displayed earlier in the call.

Figure 1: CARM workshops in Perth, Dublin and London

Extract 1 provides a brief illustration of data used in CARM workshops. It comes from a call to a mediation centre. Given the precarious funding situation of mediation services in the UK, it is important that 'callers' are converted into 'clients' of the mediation service; it is only once an initial interview has been arranged that mediation 'proper' has started. We join this call after the caller (C) has explained her 'noisy neighbour' problem and the mediator (M)

has explained the process of mediation. Having analyzed many such calls, I found that it is often after such explanations that mediators begin to 'lose' potential clients.

Extract 1: EC-37

```
01   M:   [.hhh ((cough)) does that sound .hhh like it might be
02        helpful to you?
03            (0.7)
04   C:   I- uh-  (0.2) it might be but um:: (0.3) I'm not too sure at
05        this stage about (0.6) you know, how long- i- seein' this:
06        gi:rl, [at all,
07   M:          [W'yeah.=↓yeh,but you'd be willin' t'see two of
08        our media[tors jus' t'talk about it all  .hhh ]
09   C:            [Oh of course. Yeah. Yeah definitely.]
10   M    Yeah.=all right my love, .hh um::  (0.5) .pt ↑WHen's the best
11        t(h)i(h)me for you t'be in.
```

In response to M's question about whether mediation sounds "like it might be helpful", C's turn follows a classic 'dispreferred' format for turning down an offer: it is *delayed*, it starts with an *appreciation* ("it might be") and offers an *account* (C is "not too sure"... about "seein' this: girl, at all,": lines 4-6). But M makes a second attempt to convert 'caller' into 'client', constructing a declarative that attributes a moral-characterological disposition to C: "but you'd be willin' t'see two of our mediators jus' t'talk about it" (lines 45-46). This is a productive move: C accepts enthusiastically (line 9). Thus M upends a rejection-implicative trajectory by appealing to C's reasonable and moral character: it would be quite difficult for C to deny her 'willingness' to 'just talk' with a mediator (with no strings attached). Having secured acceptance into the first stage of mediation, M moves on to make arrangements.

This short fragment of data shows how attending to small details can have large impacts; how formulating a turn one way rather than another can alter dramatically the direction of an interaction. In CARM workshops, I play lines 1-6 to participants, and get them to role-play a possible line 7. Participants cannot intuit what the real mediator does in response, despite the fact that I have observed this pattern across numerous calls in a 400-call database. Mediators make such moves, but their knowledge is tacit. Extract 1 marks a revelatory moment for CARM workshop participants. It demonstrates an empirically grounded, usable, and transferable strategy for subsequent training, and, crucially, one that could not be simulated hypothetically, in standard role-play training, before seeing such data. I am currently engaged in an ESRC-funded knowledge transfer project delivering CARM across the UK, Ireland, and the US. After more than thirty workshops, feedback is overwhelmingly positive (e.g., "CARM ... was, quite simply, one of the most fascinating workshops I have attended in eleven years of going to conflict resolution conferences and events. I think one of the reasons I found it so interesting is because it challenges in a very fundamental way much of the received wisdom on how we train mediators to communicate with their clients" (*Brendan Donaghy, Editor, Mediation Digest*).

A crucial moment in a child protection helpline call: Alexa Hepburn

For a critical psychologist in the 1990s, DARG seemed like the place to be. An opportunity arose to join the Department in 2002 and I didn't think twice. At the time I had just finished writing a book on critical social psychology (Hepburn, 2003), in which I argued for a fundamentally social, relational and interactional view of psychological life. I was also collecting calls from the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children's (NSPCC) Helpline (a total of 180 calls were collected). This seemed like the ideal

opportunity to spend more time in an inspiring place that would give me more ideas on how to analyze these calls and, most importantly, to help me gain insights into what was happening for callers and Child Protection Officers[3] (CPOs) so that I could be of use to the people working there.

One of the things that CPOs asked me to help with was dealing with callers who became upset, as this could often disrupt their gathering of vital information that could save infants and children suffering abuse. From an academic perspective, the interactional aspects of crying are also relevant to a broader DP/CA project of respecifying emotion as an interactional accomplishment. Emotion is an exciting 'hard case' for DP/CA as it is often treated as something close to physiology; something underlying language and maybe even culture. Social psychologists have typically treated it as a causal variable that exerts a distorting effect on cognition (e.g., Park & Banaji, 2000). As a consequence, quantitative research has worked overwhelmingly with participants' *reports* of crying rather than on crying itself. At the time of the initial study (Hepburn, 2004) I could find no work that used direct observation of real upset in real settings, or attempted to provide situated descriptions of crying. The irony here was the contrast between traditional 'empirical psychology' working with what people say and critical, constructionist, DP working with the 'raw behaviour' itself.

An early research task in this empirical project was to develop ways of representing precisely different features of crying such as sobs, wet sniffs, aspiration and changes in voice quality (e.g. lowered volume, pitch shifts, tremulous or creaky delivery). This meticulous description of crying, drawing heavily on Jefferson's (2004) existing conventions, provided a way of making public the way that different activities in crying and crying recipiency are organized together. To illustrate the benefit of this type of transcription, consider the following fragment from one of the calls, in which a grandmother is expressing her concerns

about her son's violent treatment of her grandson. The form of representation here is the one overwhelmingly used in contemporary qualitative traditions in psychology (and quantitative traditions where there is any attempt to represent interaction). They are discussing the son and the caller has said she feels scared of him:

Extract 2a: HC Grandmother and friend

```
1    CPO:     How long have you been scared of him for?

2    Call:    I've been scared of him right across a long time.

3    CPO:     Mm take your time.

4    Call:    A long time.

5    CPO:     So this has been hurting you and you've been worried about

6             this.
```

One mystery for the analyst with this impoverished transcript is the CPO's turns on lines 3 and 5 – why does she tell the caller to take her time? Has she been talking too fast? And how does the CPO know that the caller has been 'hurting' and 'worried'? The caller has not mentioned feeling these things. A more developed transcript allows analytic work that can start to explicate interactional features:

Extract 2b: HC Grandmother and friend

```
01   CPO:     How long've you been sca:red of him for.

02   Call:    I've been scare:d of 'im (0.2) right across::

03            (0.8) a ↑long thhime.

04                   (0.4)

05   CPO:     ↑Mm::, hh

06                   (3.5)

07   CPO:     °Take ye time.°

08                   (5.1)
```

```
09   Call:      Hhh

10              (0.7)

11   Call:      A log tibe.

12              (1.1)

13   CPO:       Tch.hh (0.2) so this has been hurting you:,=

14              and you've been worried about this:.
```

Note on lines 2-3 that the caller delays her response, by both pausing and stretching the

delivery (across**::**). At the end of her turn on line 3, we can make two further observations: an

upward pitch change on 'long' and aspiration through the word 'thhime'. In an environment

where there has been no upset up to now, these small features of delivery are sufficient

displays of upset for the CPO to respond with sympathy on line 5 – her 'continuer' 'Mm' is

delivered with a pitch shift upward and a stretch: the whole thing sounds 'sympathetic'. A

delay of 3.5 seconds ensues, followed by the CPO's quietly delivered 'take your time', a turn

which licenses the caller's lack of elaboration at this point. After longer delay the caller

recycles her prior turn on line 11, her delivery hampered by nasal blockage. The CPO then

topicalises the upset on lines 13-14, formulating features of the caller's mental states,

identified as one element of 'empathic receipts' (Hepburn & Potter, 2007).

This close attention to detail is not an analytic fetish impeding our understanding of the

participants' thinking; rather, it illuminates precisely those specifics of delivery that are

important for the participants. As this extract shows, CPOs take these features seriously and,

as Hepburn (2004) noted, when they miss them things can start to go wrong. If we wipe these

features from our transcripts we lose their emotional embodied delivery. But this is not to

assume that we can see emotion 'behind' the talk. By taking *discursive practices* rather than

emotions as primary, we move away from seeing emotions as inner objects that influence

behavior and are perceived by looking inwards, to seeing them instead as public, social

entities that have a role in getting things done (see Edwards, 1997). In addition, we move away from the abstract concerns of experimental psychologists and start to consider issues that arise as important for people in their everyday lives.

A common complaint that DP/CA encounters is that our work seems to be all about talk, and little bits of it at that. Surely we are missing the big picture: the feelings of the caller, or the vulnerable children that are the whole point of it all? How might it actually help the NSPCC do their job? First, and most specifically, this kind of study provides an analytically-grounded account of why problems might appear in calls such as this, and therefore suggests directions for how CPOs might counter them. As Hepburn (2006) argued, this research starts with the orientations of the participants – it begins with what the participants themselves treat as crying. It is not attempting to improve on the understanding that is embedded in these practices; rather it is trying to make that understanding explicit and track its organization. Tracking these different elements of crying shows us just how subtle Child Protection Officers can be in identifying and responding to callers' upset. As such this type of analysis helps DP researchers to develop training aids that can allow CPOs themselves to "step through digitized calls with analytic observations and suggestions about them" (Hepburn & Potter, 2003: 195).

Secondly, this research has a broader theoretical aim, which is to contribute a different vision of the way emotion can be understood in psychology. DP studies of this kind show the way that issues and actions which we understand as emotional can be tractable to interaction analysis. This broader intellectual and scientific debate about how persons and psychological issues should be conceptualized and analysed is fundamental in psychology and social science. The outcome will be hugely influential not simply for research, but for the way disciplines such as psychology input into social services, health, education, organizations and so on.

A telling moment from a support staff member's dealings with a resident with intellectual disabilities: Charles Antaki

Like my colleagues, I came to Loughborough because of DARG. Although I had been happily employed elsewhere, in one of the UK's most liberal and open-minded Departments of Psychology of the time (the eighties and early nineties), it still felt dull and constraining for anyone wanting to work with language. DARG promised exciting times, and so it proved. The strand of its work that fired me up was CA. CA is a demanding and technical business, but it pushes you directly to where the action is. No more questionnaires and retrospective interviews to get at what people do with each other: you go out, record the world as it is, and bring back the goods for analysis. I still don't quite understand why not every social psychologist doesn't do exactly that.

Let me give an example of CA being applied to interactions involving adults with intellectual disabilities. With my colleagues Mick Finlay and Chris Walton, I spent time recording and analyzing a corpus of 30 hours of videotape documenting interactions between five adults with intellectual disabilities who lived together in a shared house, and the staff who supported them[4] (e.g., Finlay, Walton & Antaki, 2008; Antaki, Finlay & Walton, 2009). One practice that struck us was the staff members' ways of offering choices to the residents: 'offering choice' has become a priority in welfare services, conscious that vulnerable people have traditionally had very little choice in the way they get support, and indeed even in the small decisions that make up the round of the normal day. But the staff, in trying to ensure that residents have a full range of alternatives to choose from, would often use conversational strategies that led only to confusion. Indeed, they sometimes seemed to prompt residents to suppose that their original choice was simply wrong, and to change their mind in the face of a repeated query. For example:

```
((Staff member Tim and resident Alec are in the kitchen preparing food. Tim
is asking Alec which potato peeler he wants to use.))
1     Tim:    Which one do you wanna use (0.2) thi:s one or
2             [this one
3     Alec:   [That one that one                              ]
4             [((Points toward peelers, which are out of shot)) ]
5     Tim:    °Go on°
6     Alec:   ((Picks up one of two peelers now in shot and inspects it))
7     Tim:    [Are you gonna use that one              ]
8             [((Points toward peeler Alec is holding)) ]
9             [or this one                              ]
10            [((Points to peeler on the worktop))]
11               (0.3)
12    Alec:    >That one< ((Puts down first peeler and picks up the
13            other peeler))
14    Tim:    ((Turns away)) (°Well y'go on°)
```

INSERT FIG. 2 ABOUT HERE

Alec, one of the men with intellectual disabilities who lives in the house, chooses one peeler.
The video still shows it to be a perfectly adequate implement for the task in hand. At line 7
Tim, the staff member, might simply produce a positive assessment of Alec's choice, and the
business of peeling the potatoes could proceed. But Tim re-issues a question ("*are you gonna
use that one or this one*"), which implies that the decision has not yet been made. We might
ask why the staff member requires confirmation of what looks to be Alec's decisive choice.
Perhaps Tim knows that the peeler that Alec first chose is not suitable. In any case, the effect

is that Alec, taking the hint that his answer was wrong, 'changes his mind' and complies with the alternative choice. Repeat questions, after an answer has been given, are powerfully effective ways in which staff members (like teachers, for example) can get the people in their care to change their minds. We could multiply many times over the examples of staff practices, which – though almost always well-intentioned – operate to constrain, or shape the possibilities open to the client with intellectual disabilities.

By capturing such fleeting (but consequential, and frequent) moments, CA allowed us to throw light on the kinds of things that routinely happen in the rather closed world of a residential institution. The practices we identified were a source of bother and frustration to staff and residents alike, and our feedback sessions suggested that there could be a productive dialogue between researchers and practitioners. The application of CA won't be easy, and practitioners will always have their own agendas to worry about; but the grain of the data, and the specificity of what we could say, will give our recommendations an enviable face validity.

WHOSE SIDE ARE WE ON?
THE POLITICS OF INTERVENTION

In this paper, we have shown how large-scale discursive psychological and conversation analytic research can work in ways that deal with the 'big pictures' of people's lives. We are not 'taking sides' with or against our participants (see Antaki *et al*, 2003) as a short-cut to analysis; yet in the selection of our settings to study, we are making choices relevant to emancipatory projects (e.g. see Antaki, 2011; Hepburn & Wiggins, 2007, for collections of CA/DP studies in which the complexities of application are considered). Like most DP/CA researchers who find themselves in contact with agencies who might want to use our

findings, our partnerships arose in part by chance and in part by a long and sometimes difficult period of negotiation. Usually it is we who make the overtures to groups of people in which we have a tentative interest, and who might fund our research. As Antaki (2011) puts it in a recent chapter on applied CA, "CA is not yet in the phone book, and has not reached the point where calls come in from outside agencies wanting CA help. Rather, it is the CA researcher who sees the possibility of working in collaboration with others to solve a problem, and do some funded social science in the process".

So far the kind of agencies we have been involved with are 'socially responsible': the children's help-line is officially a charity and so must conform to legal definitions of promoting a social good; support services for people with intellectual disabilities are, again, legally committed to the well-being of the people they serve; and mediation agencies offer non-bureaucratic, even-handed support to disputing parties. We are aware that these descriptions could be countered, or at least that a critic could object that in each case we are seeing the provision of service from the point of view of the provider, not the client. Our response is that our analyses focus on *interaction*, meaning the orientations of all parties must be analysed. This allows us to develop a practical and procedural understanding of the needs and concerns of clients in these organisations, as well as insights into the institutional specificity of the actions performed by service providers.

Finally, in the spirit of this special issue of BJSP, we want to acknowledge our colleagues in DARG, who together have provided our intellectual home for the past decade and longer, and with whom we have developed our academic identities. We are proud of DARG and its achievements, and hope that this paper has taken a small step in perhaps countering the notion that one should 'beware the Loughborough School'.

NOTES

1. ESRC grant number RES-148-25-0010 "Identities in neighbour discourse: Community, conflict and exclusion" held by Elizabeth Stokoe and Derek Edwards.

2. ESRC grant number RES-189-25-0202 "Mediating and policing community disputes: Developing new methods for role-play communication skills training" held by Elizabeth Stokoe.

3. As they were called at the time of collecting these calls.

4. ESRC grant number RES-*** "Identity conflicts of people with learning disabilities and their carers" held by Charles Antaki and William M.L. Finlay.

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