Emotions in action: Telephone-mediated dispute resolution

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Abstract

The present study investigated emotions as they were made visible and responded to in a particular institutional setting. Following discursive psychology the aim was to provide a rigorous account of emotion as observable in talk-in-interaction. Using conversation analysis a focus was on the temporality of emotion in turns of talk and over the course of an interaction. Data were recordings and transcriptions of calls to a dispute resolution service for consumers’ problems with electricity and gas. The analysis identified systematic practices callers’ use for describing and doing upset. Call-takers rarely displayed emotion in the body of the calls and typically responded to institutionally relevant aspects of the callers’ troubles and not the emotional ones. In the absence of any kind of endorsement of the callers’ emotional stance, emotionality could escalate. Emotional affiliation regularly occurred at the end of the calls. The escalation of emotion in the absence of its endorsement and the occurrence of emotional affiliation at call-closing evidences a sequential property of emotion that has been largely overlooked.

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Emotion is a complex topic. How best to understand and account for human emotions is an ongoing debate within social psychology. Harré (1986) challenged and invigorated a social psychology of emotions (Wagner, 1988) by advancing a constructionist approach to emotions. Discursive psychology promoted an analytic shift away from cognition to talk and texts for examining how emotions are described and invoked in mundane and action-oriented ways (Edwards, 1999, Hepburn & Potter, 2007). More recently, Wetherell (2012) proposed ‘affect’ replace emotion as the object of study because it further broadens the subject to capture its pervasively temporal, embodied and moral dimensions.

Transcending theoretical and conceptual disputes, is a widespread recognition of the need for emotion research conducted in everyday contexts. In a comprehensive review of emotion research and language, Majid (2012) noted that studies of conversation data were critically important for showing emotions in their natural ecological setting. Wetherell (2012) has also emphasized the importance of grounding social research on affect and emotion as actual practices performed *in situ* . Following discursive psychology (Edwards & Potter, 1992, Edwards, 1995, Edwards, 2012, Potter, 2012) and using conversation analysis the present study investigated emotions as they were displayed and consequential in a telephone-mediated complaint resolution service. An aim of this work is to further develop a discursive understanding of emotion by studying it within a particular institutional setting.

Much contemporary discursive psychology using conversation analysis examines various institutional settings as natural sites for examining language in use (Hepburn & Wiggins, 2005; Potter, 2005). Research on telephone helplines has been one productive focus for studying psychological topics and concerns (Edwards, 2007; te Molder, 2005). Telephone-mediated service provision has a number of features that make it particularly amenable to systematic and rigorous investigation. Like co-present institutional interactions, participants talking over the phone are jointly oriented to accomplishing the business of the call. As a consequence the relevant actions and interactional practices are typically, and more or less straightforwardly, observable in the interactions. For telephone-mediated services the institutional business is largely conducted through talk alone, which makes the analysis less complex. Multi-modal resources are involved in emotional displays and responses in co-present interaction (Kupetz, 2014). Furthermore, call-takers and callers in helpline interactions typically have no prior relationship (but see Shaw & Kitzinger, 2007), which means analysts have at their disposal the same kinds of resources for understanding what is going on as the participants themselves.

Emotion in helpline interactions has been a focus of some conversation analytic work in discursive psychology. Conversation analysis is well placed to address the interactive aspects of emotion. A basic unit for understanding talk-in-interaction is the adjacency pair - two turns of talk, where a second speaker responds to a first speaker (Schegloff, 2007). The adjacency pair is a fundamental structure in the organization of talk and for the accomplishment of actions. Furthermore, it has been found to scaffold the production and expression of particular emotions, including surprise (Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 2006) and disappointment (Couper-Kuhlen, 2009).

An interactional perspective such as conversation analysis treats emotions or affect as stance displays in the context of actions over sequences of turns of talk (Ruusuvuori, 2013). There are a variety of verbal, prosodic and non-verbal resources for displaying affective stance (Sorjonen & Peräkylä, 2012). For example, both laughter and crying are accomplished, in part, by prosody. Specialized transcription conventions have been developed that capture important characteristics (e.g., onset and termination) of emotional displays such as laughter (Jefferson, 1985) and crying (Hepburn, 2004). Some of those features, such as breathiness are also practices for displaying what is termed affective stance. The precise placement of breathiness particles is fundamental to what they do. Potter and Hepburn (2010) showed that aspiration within words can function to modulate action. They found breathiness particles placed within extreme descriptions of events allowed the simultaneous expression and moderation of a strong affective stance.

The affective stance taken towards something can be part and parcel of an action. Complaining, which is the reason for the call in the present study, involves expressing feelings of discontent about some state of affairs. Research on complaints in everyday interaction has shown them to be a delicate interactional matter. The complainability of something – for example, the timing of a phonecall - can be oriented to in the absence of any actual complaint being made (Schegloff, 2005). Furthermore, complaining tends to emerge progressively so that a complaint recipient may ultimately explicitly articulate the complaint (Drew & Walker, 2009) – a pattern that functions to work against the attribution of the complainer being a “dispositional moaner” (Edwards, 2005). A relevant response to a complaint in everyday settings is affiliation or affective stance alignment, which can be displayed both verbally and vocally (Couper-Kuhlen, 2012).

Institutional roles can influence the interactional activity of complaining. When complaining is not the main focus of an interaction – for instance in health care consultations – the service provider may only progress relevant institutional business and not respond to the complaint (Ruusuvuori & Lindfors, 2009). Institutional role can also influence how emotions are responded to, which can be consequential to the unfolding of the interaction. For example, in calls to a child protection helpline, Hepburn and Potter (2007) showed that the absence of supportive receipts by call-takers to caller’s emotional displays could result in caller’s terminating the interaction by hanging up. The temporal aspect of emotion is examined in the present study in two ways – in terms of adjacent turns of talk (i.e. callers emotional displays and the receipt of them by call-takers) and also with respect to the overall structure of the call.

The sequential organization of emotions is one focus of this paper which seeks to understand emotions as they are displayed and responded to over the course of an institutional interaction – telephone mediated dispute resolution for callers with inquiries and complaints about the provision of their utilities. A particularly relevant matter in the interactions examined is the issue of neutrality. The mandate of the organization being examined is the provision of *independent* dispute resolution. Being neutral has been examined in other institutional contexts including small court arbitration (Atkinson, 1992) news interviews (Clayman, 1992) and mediation for neighborhood disputes (Edwards & Stokoe, 2007). The present study contributes to that work by examining emotional displays and their receipts when there is an institutional mandate for doing neutrality.

Method

The data comes from a corpus of 162 calls to New Zealand and Australian-based dispute resolution services for customers with complaints about their utilities. The smaller New Zealand service handles around 6000 calls a year. They do not routinely record their calls so ethical permission was sought from callers by call-takers. A total of 42 calls from the New Zealand service, taken by 5 different call-takers, were recorded over a 6 month period from late 2008. The Australian service receives over 60000 calls a year which they routinely record. A sample of 120 calls from a two month period in 2009, taken by 5 different call-takers were provided from the organization to us for research purposes. Calls ranged in length from a couple of minutes to nearly an hour, with a typical length of about 20 minutes.

Both services are non-governmental, not-for-profit, free to consumers, funded by utility companies who are required by law to provide *independent* means of resolving customer complaints. The services are therefore neither consumer advocacy nor for the direct benefit of the utility companies. The kinds of complaints the services have jurisdiction over are set out in legislation. For example, the services cannot rule on pricing issues but can make sure reasonable payment plans are in place and ensure electricity supply is not cut-off without due process being followed.

A practical problem for the call-takers is to display their understanding of the caller’s problem without necessarily endorsing the caller’s stance towards it. The problems presented may not lie within the service’s jurisdiction but even with relevant complaints, organizational policy is for call-takers to be neutral towards the caller’s problems. So, the interactional context examined in this study is one where call-takers have a delicate balance to maintain. They must display an understanding of the caller’s complaint but not align with the caller’s negative stance.

Jeffersonian conventions were followed when making the transcripts (Jefferson, 2004). Particular care was taken to capture breathiness in and outside of words and turns of talk because such particles are associated can be used in displays of emotion such as laughter and crying (Hepburn, 2004). All names are pseudonyms and identifying information has been changed in the transcripts.

Listening and transcribing the calls enabled the identification of the ‘interactional project’ of calls to the dispute resolution service – this term refers to a series of activities that participants engage in, which cohere into a course of action that accomplishes the institutional business (Robinson, 2003). Progression through the activities was shaped by the exigencies of each case. However, participants clearly engaged in the following activities: problem presentation (typically delivered as a troubles-telling), taking of details for the record, diagnostic questioning about the problem, establishing an acceptable resolution, explanation of service and process and determining a plan of action. Engagement in those activities is evident in the extracts presented below.

Analysis

The analysis begins by documenting observable practices for displaying emotion – the most obvious being the actual use of emotional words to describe a psychological state. The illustrative extracts presented below have been selected as evidence of three significant analytic points which emerged from a close sequential analysis of the data. The first of these is the observation that emotional displays of anger and upset by callers are closely bound to negative evaluations that are integral to complaining and to legitimizing the complaint.

The second section shows how emotional displays are responded to by call-takers which highlights a localized sequential aspect to emotion. Overwhelmingly, call-takers could be observed to attend to the institutionally relevant aspects of callers’ turns and not to the affective stance. Where instances of affiliation with the caller’s affective stance did occur, these were largely confined to the closing of the call, once the formal business was complete. Finally, evidence of a temporal aspect of emotion is provided by following a single call where the analysis shows the caller progressively upgrading their affective stance in the face of a repeated absence of affiliation from the call-taker. The extracts from this single call additionally support a finding novel to this paper – emotion displays have a sequential aspect with respect to the whole interaction as an organizational unit.

Emotions and complaints on display

Following the use of conversation analysis in discursive psychology, displays of emotion are analyzed in this research as being integral to what is being done in the interaction. This first section focuses on the practices found for *displaying* emotion or taking an affective stance. The practices are closely bound to doing complaining and/or establishing the complaint as legitimate. They included the use of emotion words, descriptions with evaluative and intensifying aspects such as extreme case formulations and breathiness to mark affective stance within significant referents in the talk.

The first extract shows the word *mad* being used as an emotion term. In this call the complaint is about the lack of hot water for a bath. The caller has previously suggested the electricity company is controlling the power for water heating.

Extract 1 Mary1Q

140->CAL: NO it does make me ma:d be[cause] n- I mean we=

141 CAT: [ yes ]

142 CAL: =pay our power bills and

143 CAT: right

The caller describes *it* – the power company not providing daytime electricity to heat her bath water – as making her mad. The description housing the emotion word is integral to the action it is part of – making a complaint about something that is a problem. Being made mad invokes a negative assessment of the thing that has caused the emotion. The description also attends to what Edwards (2005) identified as the subjective side of complaining. The caller describes her emotional reaction not as a dispositional aspect of herself but as responsive to a thing that caused the negative feeling. It is not that the caller is an angry person; rather her negative emotional response is caused by the actions of the power company. The further explanation *I mean we pay our power bills* adds to the legitimacy of the complaint by attending to possible attributions of blame and responsibility: it is the power company and not the caller that is at fault.

In the next extract the caller uses the phrase *pissed off* and the extreme case formulations *absolutely* and *completely.* She is complaining about a large power bill; the problem has arisen because the previous three bills were based on estimated readings, which misjudged the household’s actual power usage. The call-taker has asked what would resolve the complaint for the caller.

Extract 2 Linda1C

374 CAL: the way i- the way it’s going at

375 -> the mo:ment I’m absolutely that pissed off

378 about it, .h

379 CAT: yeah

380 CAL: that (.) I would like to see the six hundred and

381 -> fifty one completely wiped¿

382 (0.6)

383 CAL: because it’s not our fa(h)ult

The phrase (*being*) *absolutely pissed off* assigns the cause of those feelings to what has happened with the power company. As in the previous extract, the emotion word constitutes the cause of the upset as a problem, which also functions to justify and amplify the complaint. The management of attribution and responsibility in this extract is explicitly mentioned – the caller explicitly says, at line 383, *because it’s not our fault.*

The caller not only describes their emotional state in the above extract but also displays their feelings in the here and now of the call. One aspect of the affective stance display is the use of the extreme case formulation *absolutely*. One function of extreme case formulations is to strengthen the facticity of a description in the face of possible doubt (Pomerantz, 1986) - a practice that (Potter, 1996) referred to as ontological gerrymandering. Here, the *absolutely* construes being pissed off as being an honest and true response, not an emotional description that could be understood, perhaps, as simply in the service of complaining or trying to get one’s own way.

A second aspect of the caller’s affective stance in the above extract also involves an extreme case formulation. The caller describes a possible resolution as having the full amount owing *completely* wiped out. That description occurs as a response to the call-taker’s question asking for a resolution proposal. The rather extreme nature of the resolution itself is construed as a response to the way the caller feels about what is going on at the moment. The severity of the problem and the intenseness of the upset, functions to justify the caller’s resolution proposal, which is formulated as tainted with negative emotion rather than reason.

An important aspect of the analysis so far is to show that emotion words can simultaneously function as assessments. They cast the cause of the emotional response as the problem and hence function to justify the complaint. The integral relationship between a reported emotion and an assessment of its cause as inferentially bound to a particular emotion word, is clearly illustrated in the next extract. A negative assessment – *crap –* is associated with being angry not just upset. The extract also shows another practice for displaying affective stance in talk – breathiness. The words *angry* and in *crap* are extreme descriptions, which are moderated by the particles of aspiration within them (Potter & Hepburn, 2010).

Extract 3 Linda3C

62 CAL:-> So I’m pretty u(h)p(h)a(h)ngry quite

63 -> frank-<I don’t need this cra(h)p at

64 the moment=I’ve ˜got a sick chi:ld˜

As in the previous extracts, this extract shows the caller’s description of their emotional state functions simultaneously construes its cause as a problem and therefore complain-able. The caller’s emotional state in this case is explicitly specified as a response to the unnecessary *crap,* referring to the trouble caused by the company’s billing practicesand being further aggravated by having a sick child.

A notable aspect of the emotion term in line 62 is its occurrence in a repair segment (Schegloff, Jefferson, & Sacks, 1977). Occurrences of repair explicitly mark what is important to the speaker at that particular moment. Here, the caller is on her way to describing her emotional state as *upset*. However, she interrupts that trajectory of her talk and upgrades her description to *angry* instead. The emotional description of angry functions to justify and legitimate the complaint as genuine more strongly than if it had merely caused her upset.

Further evidence that the caller is justifying and legitimating her complaint in Extract 3 is the intensifier *pretty* and the explicit (albeit incomplete) formulation of what she is doing as being *frank.* In a different institutional setting, such honesty-phrases were used in assessments to assert sincerity and independence (Edwards & Fasulo, 2006). Here, it also seems to function to construct the caller’s emotions as honest and true. The self-disclosure at line 64 – the caller has a sick child - is another practice implicated in impression management. The caller’s emotional response to the problem is reasonable given difficult personal circumstances which are being unnecessarily aggravated by the trouble with the power company.

The caller in extract 3 is not just describing and justifying her emotions but she is also displaying them in the here and now of the call. Affective stance is displayed with breathiness particles inserted into the emotion words (i.e. *upset* and *angry)* and in the assessment term *crap*. The placement of the breathiness in those places is a practical resource for simultaneously describing and modulating the description of strong negative emotions (Potter & Hepburn, 2010). The words also give meaning to the aspiration. The next extract also shows breathiness to mark and modulate a strong affective stance. However, in the case below it doesn’t occur in the word but rather before key words – preliminary to the description of the trouble, *thousands of dollars* and before an emotion term *shocked.* The extract below also shows another vocal practice for displaying an affective stance – volume.

Extract 4 Mary13Q

16 CAL: ar::the next bill that they se:nt .hh was

17 like (0.4) ↑THOUSANDS of dollars? for one month

18 as opposed to >one or two hundred dollars for

19 this polyhouse that I use.<

20 CAT: hmm

21 CAL: .hhh umm so mE being SHocked.and oh <theyve

22 obviously read the met- new meters wrong or whatever

An unusually high bill is the trouble being reported by the caller in extract 4. The first particle of breathiness is in line 16. Breathiness on its own has been found to indicate a readiness to speak – a practice to show one is ready to take a turn of talk (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974). However, in line 16 it is made in a turn in progress. *The next bill they sent* is not a complete turn of talk. The breathiness occurs at a grammatical point where what is to come is projectable - it is going to be something about the bill. The breathiness is possibly marking a stance on what is to come; *was like*, followed by a 0.4 second pause further functions to anticipate and mark what is to come next in the turn of talk as an important formulation.

The quantification of the amount of the bill as *thousands* and its delivery at a louder volume mark it as the problem and as eliciting the emotional response. Thousands of dollars is an outrageous cost for a month’s electricity usage, particularly in contrast to the one or two hundred dollars that the caller was expecting. The caller is hear-ably displaying an affective stance on the size of the bill in the turn of talk ending in line 19. However the valence of that stance is ambiguous. For example, being surprised is newsworthy but does not constitute a trouble that can be complained about. That possible ambiguity is resolved by the caller, who uses the emotion word *shocked* that simultaneously provides a negative assessment of the cause of the emotional response and functions to justify and legitimate the complaint.

The analysis so far has presented a brief description of practices that were found in the data for displaying emotion. It is not meant to be an exhaustive account of those practices; rather it points to the kinds of verbal and vocal resources used systematically to display emotion that has also been noted elsewhere (Sorjonen & Peräkylä, 2012). A more important analytic point is a demonstration of the integral relationship between complaining as an action and its emotional affordances. Being angry, pissed off or shocked are emotions that simultaneously assess their cause. That assessment is negative, which functions to justify complaining as a legitimate course of action and to validate the moral positioning of the caller in relation to the person or organisation being complained about. The next section of the analysis describes how emotional displays are responded to by the conciliator call-takers.

Responding to Emotion Displays

In everyday interaction the preferred response to a complaint is an endorsement of the speaker’s emotional stance. Ways of endorsing include claims of understanding and making similar assessments. Follow-up questions and minimal responses are non-affiliative and can result in a speaker pursuing an endorsement (Couper-Kuhlen, 2012). Endorsement of the caller’s stance was rare in our data. The analysis below shows some examples of how the call-takers did respond in the first available turn where an endorsement of the speaker’s affective stance is relevant. In response to caller’s telling about the problem call-takers would regularly reformulate the problem, moderating or completely removing the affective elements, for confirmation or to launch other institutionally relevant next activities. Acknowledging the affective stance of the caller occurred very rarely – though one example of that kind of case will be presented at the end of this analytic section.

Extract 5 and 6 come from the same call and were selected because they show two instances of the same practice in close succession from a single call. They are good examples of a recurrent pattern found in the calls - the call-taker reformulates the problem moderating, at least, the emotional elements of the just prior trouble-telling. The extracts show a course of action, central to the business of dispute resolution, accomplished by the reformulations – establishing a mutually agreed upon, institutionally relevant dispute that can then become the target for resolution.

Verbal resources are used to display emotion in the complaint description in extract 5, namely the adverb *eventually* and the formulation of what had happened to the appliances as a result of the power surge as *fried.*

Extract 5 Mic12I

269 CAL: .hhh they repla:ced the um (.) eventuall↑y (0.4)um

270 they replaced th:e electrical appliances which had

271 been um fr:ied? [.hhh]

272 CAT:-> [okay] replaced a:ll of them?

273 CAL: yes=

The word *eventually* is an insertion repair (Wilkinson & Weatherall, 2011). The caller has interrupted the progress of her turn to modify her description of what the company had already done to address the damage caused by an electricity surge. By inserting *eventually* into that description the caller construes damage reparation as a problem that was too long in coming. The action of complaining is further evidenced by the selection of the word *fried*, which negatively evaluates and intensifies the referent - short-circuited electrical appliances and fittings. The verbal aspects of affect in the description provide meaning to the particles of aspiration at the beginning and then end of the caller’s turn - a locally occasioned display of emotional stance caused by the reported trouble.

The next turn is the first available place where the call-taker could endorse the call’s emotion stance, but this doesn’t occur. What does happen is an okay-prefaced turn. *Okay* has many functions in talk. However, it is regularly used as a sequence closing device or is shift-implicative. It is also a token that registers acceptance of a displayed stance while avoiding other kinds of responses which have more stance aligning implications (Beach, 1993; Schegloff, 2007). So, the *okay* at the beginning of the call-takers turn at line 272 registers the information provided but does nothing to display stance alignment.

After indicating a sequence closing with *okay,* the call-taker then launches a new, albeit related action which is seeking confirmation of an institutionally relevant aspect of the information content of the turn – that the power company has already done something to try and resolve the matter. The request for confirmation is a modified description of the caller’s turn. It formulates the reparatory action simply as *replaced,* without the time modification. It also minimally refers to the electrical appliances and their fate using the indexical *them.* The call-taker accepts and confirms the call-taker’s formulation of the problem with yes.

However, extract 6, which follows almost immediately from extract 5, shows the caller continuing with the complaint by telling about their personal difficulties at the time it occurred. In the next clear turn taking space, the call-taker could show understanding or make a congruent assessment but they don’t. Instead they ask a follow-up question, which requests confirmation about a potentially legitimate complaint.

Extract 6 Mic12I

284 CAL: a:nd >it wa- just happened< at the wo:rst possible time

285 (.) we were busy mo:ving, (0.4) you know i had no time (.) on

286 my hands (.) i’ve got two small kids (.) its just >it was

287 just< you know [.hhh one of those]=

288 CAT: [ yeah okay]

289 CAL: =things which just didn’t need to happen. hhh (1.8) we had

290 tenants coming in .hhh and nothing’s

291 worked hhh .hhh

292 (4.6)

293 CAT:-> right so your tenants couldn’t move in?

294 CAL: no they w- they were disgruntled they complained and they

295 left .hhh so we had m- we’ve multiple problems hhh

296 result- it’s just not a simple oh (.) they killed our

297 appliances yeah .hhh

The continuation of the troubles telling in the above extract begins with self-disclosures about personal circumstances – being busy moving and having two small children - things that further aggravate the difficulties caused by having appliances shorting out because of power surges. Particles of aspiration within the caller’s turn of talk in lines 289-291 display a heightened emotional state.

Line 292 shows a first available slot where some kind of endorsement of the caller’s upset could occur. Instead there is a long silence. The caller could continue speaking but doesn’t. The call-taker’s takes the next turn, which begins with *right*. The token *right* is similar to *okay,* being used to indicate sequence closing and a change-of-activity. Additionally, it can receipt and understanding of a more complex progression of information, regularly of multi-unit turns (Gardner, 2007). The more involved set of events here could be that the power surge occurred exactly as the caller was moving out of the house and the tenants were moving in. The call-taker not only claims understanding of this multifaceted trajectory of events, but displays it requesting confirmation of his inference - *so the tenants couldn’t move in.*

In a different institutional context – a small claims court – (Atkinson, 1992) found arbitrators’ regularly launched questions as a strategy for displaying neutrality and for establishing the relevant facts of the case. A similar practice is being used in this call. The call-taker requests confirmation for what he formulates as an upshot of some information the caller has provided. The paraphrased information moderates the emotive aspects of the callers turn. The repeated elements of the information are selected as the aspects of the problem that are relevant to the institutional remit of legitimate disputes. In the above case, it would be a possibly legitimate thing to complain about if tenants have not moved in because the electrical appliances are dysfunctional as a result of a power surge.

Establishing and confirming a relevant complaint for resolution is an institutionally relevant action that is being done in the kinds of sequences shown in Extracts 5 and 6. Empathy, which can be operationalized interactionally as claims of understanding another’s emotional stance or making congruent negative assessments (Hepburn & Potter, 2007) – was not shown by the call-taker in the above cases.

In extracts 5 and 6 the call-taker was working to establish the institutionally relevant aspects of the complaint. In extract 7 a different activity is shown - the first possible step in the dispute resolution process. Before anything else can happen a caller must have informed the utility provider they have a complaint.

Extract 7 is more from the first interaction shown in this analysis. The caller’s complaint is the electricity for hot water is being controlled. The analytic interest here is how the call-taker responds, in the next turn to the caller’s emotion reference.

Extract 7 Mary1Q

140 CAL: NO it does make me ma:d be[cause] n- I mean we=

141 CAT: [ yes ]

142 CAL: =pay our power bills and

143 CAT: right

144 (0.4)

145 CAT: yeah well um a good (0.2) way to find out what’s

146 going on is to give them a call?

147 CAL: yeah

148 CAT: and um just ask them if they are controlling the (0.2)

149 hot water?

150 CAL: is that Oasis Mlg

151 CAT: yes

152 CAL: right. .hh

153 CAL: [I’ll] ring them now.

The call-taker’s response in lines 145-146 and 148-149 explains that contacting the company directly and asking them about the matter, is a way of finding out if they are actually controlling the power. In the above case, the caller has not contacted the company about the problem - doing so is the first step in the dispute resolution process. The caller displays their understanding that calling the company has been suggested as a next step when she says at line 153 *I’ll ring them now.*

An opportunity to respond empathetically to the caller’s reference to being mad is at line 144. The silence is where the caller could continue their turn but doesn’t. Hepburn & Potter (2007) found that call-takers’ in a child-protection helpline used ‘take your time’ receipts in response to crying to allow further talk. However, what happens here is the call-taker takes a turn of talk where she initiates an institutionally relevant next activity, which is to get agreement on a course of action to resolve the complaint.

It is noteworthy that the call-taker’s turn at line 145 has several features of typical dispreferred responses (Schegloff, 2007). It is delayed, it is *yeah-* and *well-* prefaced and it contains the perturbation *uhm.* The features of dispreference support a suggestion that the call-taker is orienting to the relevance here of an affiliating response. However, what the call- taker does is to say *a good way to find out what’s going on is to give them a call* – which is receipted by the caller as a piece of information with *yeah.* The *and*-prefacing of the next turn is a practice for displaying that what is being done is linked to what has come prior (Heritage & Sorjonen, 1994).This turn is starker in its resolution proposal advising the caller *to just ask them.*

In extract 8 the caller has tried to resolve the matter themselves. A relevant part of the complaint is the long time it is taking for the company to acknowledge a complaint is being made. The complaint and the caller’s agitation is vocally marked in the greater volume of the subject of the trouble – *ten minutes.*

Extract 8 Linda 3C

351->CAL: It took me about [TEn MInutes.]

352 CAT: [ hmm ]

353 (0.4)

354 CAT: Okay w’ll let let me call Lively

355 upli:ne

As in the previous extracts the call-taker does not affiliate with the caller in response to their trouble telling, when they could. Instead the call-taker suggests a next step in the dispute resolution process, namely that she could call the power company and instruct them to contact the caller. After being so instructed by the dispute resolution service the company has a window of opportunity to try and resolve the matter with their customer directly before the dispute resolution service becomes involved again.

The extracts in this section have shown typical instances of what the call-taker does and does not do in response to the emotion displays that were regular features of complaint descriptions. Call-takers do not endorse the caller’s affective stance towards the problem. However, there was some evidence that they are orienting to the relevance of that kind of endorsement. What does happen is that the call-takers initiate actions that progress the institutional project of dispute resolution.

A final extract in this analytic section is a deviant case. It is a rare example of a call-taker responding in a way that does a congruent assessment and also claims understanding. It occurs after a caller has disclosed that she was accosted by a meter reader.

Extract 9 Connie8Q. Accosted

41 CAL: I ha::ve uh some years=

42 >about six years ago< .h I was accosted by a meter

43 reader.<

44 (0.6)

45 CAT: o::h.

Personal disclosures were a regular feature of complaints in this data set. However, being *accosted* *by a meter reader* is a very unfortunate experience. The response token *oh* shows the disclosure is remarkable and its intonation contour (rising to falling) has a negative assessment quality something similar to what has been shown to register disappointment in a different sequential environment (Couper-Kuhlen, 2009).As a deviant case, extract 9 points to the rather extreme and extraordinary cases where the overwhelming relevance of a response of endorsing the trouble teller’s stance evidently trumps the institutional mandate of independent dispute resolution.

Affiliation at call closing

In this section a series of 4 extracts from a single 10 minute call titled ‘MS sufferer’ are presented. This case was selected to highlight the temporal or sequential order of emotional displays as they unfold in a complaint call to this dispute resolution service. It is presented as evidence in support of a central claim of this paper that emotions are shaped by the whole interaction as a unit organizing the display of emotion.

Extract 10 shows the caller describing his complaint for the first time in an extended narrative sequence. This presentation has a repeating three-part structure which mirrors the caller’s frustrating experience with the call centre (forced to wait for a long time, told their story, no result). However, instead of providing some kind of endorsement by claims of understanding or stance aligning assessments, which would be the preferred response in a conversational setting, the call-taker’s first substantive turn simply asks for confirmation that the caller is seeking a payment plan. The analysis of this extract that follows highlights the caller’s practices for displaying emotion, which get upgraded in subsequent tellings of the problem later in the same call. Information about the time of each extract is indicated in its title.

Extract 10 MS sufferer. Reason for call (1’30’’)

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| 03 | CAT: | okay so what are your concerns? |
| 04 | CAL: | ah my conce:rns are that they um ahh- nothing that  |
| 05 |   | they’ve done wrong other than provide a shocking ah |
| 06 |   | service I mean .hh I-have never and I don’t know how |
| 07 |  | genuine this: er complaint would be .hh ah I-I-I was |
| 08 |  | a senior manager in my past life ah (0.2) I suffer from  |
| 09 |   | M.S? (0.2) I struggle to: talk for a: l-longer period of |
| 10 |  | time? (0.2) [I ha]ve been on the telephone for (.) exactly= |
| 11 | CAT: |  [ºahaº] |
| 12 | CAL: | =one hour |
| 13 | CAT: | mhm |
| 14 | CAL: | and I have gotten absolutely nowhere [u:m ]and .hh the= |
| 15 | CAT: |  [okay] |
| 16 | CAL: | =assistant when I ring not the most user friendly .hh |
| 17 |  | then I ring up hh [ th]ey said no wrong department= |
| 18 | CAT: |  [.hh] |
| 19 | CAL: | =w- we’ll put you through (0.4) I better explain the  |
| 20 |  | whole story (.) they put me through (0.2) .hh nope |
| 21 |  | wrong department I explained the whole story (.) I get |
| 22 |  | some person up in india somewhere (0.2) struggling to |
| 23 |  | understand what I’m saying (0.2) I(h)’m trying to get |
| 24 |  | um some assistance with (.) the payments on my (.)  |
| 25 |  | both of the accounts they are both behind we are |
| 26 |  | struggling financially .hh a(h)nd that I (0.2) struggle  |
| 27 |  | to (.) get much work and I struggle to generate an income |
| 28 |  | with my illness (0.2) um and then um in the end he just |
| 29 |  | hung up |
| 30 | CAT: | 2.0((typing))  |
| 31 | CAL: | a[n-] |
| 32 | CAT: |  [ok]ay .hh so you- are you seeking a payment plan?  |
| 33 | CAL: | ah I am I I was on one and I defaulted due to the |
| 34 |  | fact (0.2) that (0.2) you know I get (0.4) enough |
| 35 |  | money to keep every]one]  |
| 36 | CAT: |  [mhm]  |

The caller’s negative stance towards what has happened is clearly displayed and uses practices identified earlier in this analysis. It construes the event as causing the emotional response and possibly as the basis for a genuine complaint, despite or perhaps because it is apparently disclaimed (lines 6-7 *I don’t know how genuine this complaint would be*). The interaction with the power company is described as *shocking* (line 5) – a negatively valenced affective term, boosted by a contrast with his initial response to the call-taker’s problem elicitation (*nothing that they’ve done wrong other than …*). Negative observations, intesifiers and extreme case formulations further emphasize his dissatisfaction. He says *I have never* (line 6); *gotten absolutely nowhere* (line 14); *not the most user friendly* (line 16); *some person up in India somewhere struggling to understand what I’m saying* (lines 22-23) and *in the end he just hung up* (lines 28-29). The disclosure of his health problem *I suffer from MS?* (lines 8-9), and reporting trouble with doing ordinary things like talking (line 7) and everyday finances (lines 26-29) add a personal aspect to the trouble telling. They function to support and rationalize the complaint as legitimate.

A clear opening for the call-taker to affiliate by aligning with the caller’s affective stance is line 30. That opportunity is filled instead with typing sounds, suggesting the call-taker is entering something into the computer as part of the legitimate business of record keeping. The *okay* prefaced turn indicated a completion of that action and a readiness to move to a next thing, which is relevant institutional business, namely seeking confirmation for a possible resolution. At line 32, the repair from *so you-* to *are you* in the remedy proposal is notable in terms of question design. The *so-you* formulation presupposes the speaker already knows the answer. The repair solution adjusts the epistemic gradient (see Heritage & Raymond, 2012) in order for the call-taker to display less epistemic access to the answer. The caller confirms that he is seeking a payment plan and in the turns following extract 10, not shown here, a discussion of the details takes place.

The next extract comes after further discussion about payment plans. Here further troubles-telling was occasioned by the call-taker’s request for confirmation that the caller has been in contact with the company about the payment plan. The analysis points to the recycling and upgrading of elements from the previous telling shown in the above extract.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Extract 11 MS sufferer. More Reason for the Call (4’56’’) |  |  |
| 37 | CAL: | just repeating myself I’ve never in my li:fe I mean I had |
| 38 |  | a hundred and eighty staff when I was healthy (0.5) and  |
| 39 |  | everyone was just professional as and .hh here’s ah |
| 40 |  | people wh(h)o are the rudest er- (.) whatever .h (0.2)  |
| 41 |  | and then struggle like to communicate with people as if |
| 42 |  | I’m ringing someone on mars |
| 43 | CAT: | 8.0((typing)) |
| 44 | CAL: | ( ) |
| 45 | CAT: | ka:y .hh so what are you seeking as a resolution to this? |

The caller’s telling (lines 37-42) in the above extract is formulated as a repetition *just repeating myself* but actually upgrades elements of the previous version, which is evidence that, for the caller, there has been an inadequate response to this aspect of his trouble (Couper-Kuhlen, 2012). At line 37 the caller states *I’ve never in my life*, which is an expanded version of *I have never* in Extract 10 (line 6). In lines 41-43 the caller complains the utility company people were rude and struggled to communicate as *if I’m ringing someone on mars*, which is an upgraded version of lines 22-23 of the previous extract when the company person was *up in India somewhere*.

The caller’s affective stance towards his experience is closely bound up with the action of complaining, as evidenced in aspects of its delivery, which are further examples of practices identified earlier in this analysis. There is a hearable particle of aspiration within the word *who*, which marks it as emotionally significant. Indeed, *who* refers to the people who are simultaneously the cause and the subject of the caller’s complaint. His negative assessment of the service they have provided and his seemingly unspeakable outrage is displayed by,the incompleteness and then generalized description of the service providers – *people who are the rudest er whatever (*Line 40)*.*This extreme case formulation is also the second part of a contrast proposal first introduced in Extract 10 (*I was a senior manager in my past life,,* lines 7-8) now expanded to the claim *I had 180 staff …everyone was just professional* (line40).

The completion of the caller’s turn of talk is the first clear opportunity in this sequence for some kind of endorsement of stance by the call-taker. However, that slot is taken by 8 seconds of typing – possibly recording details of the complaint. The caller shows his understanding of the legitimacy of what the call-taker is doing by not speaking, thereby not interrupting the activity.

The call taker’s first turn of talk after the intensified complaint about the electricity company’s call-center telephone manner begins with the shift-implicative *okay,*  indicating sequence closing. The new action launched is a *so-*prefaced question that asks the caller for a resolution proposal. The *so*-prefacing positions the question as an upshot of what has come before, and the question is clearly congruent with the institutional business – asking what would resolve the complaint for the caller. The call-taker’s turn does not however display stance alignment, which would be a relevant response to this upgraded formulation of the trouble.

The previous two extracts show how the caller’s emotional stance to the trouble is repeatedly recycled and each time upgraded in the absence of any endorsement of that stance from the call-taker. They also show the call-taker launching institutionally relevant action, without any kind of endorsement of the caller’s stance. The final extract below shows how the call ends. Analytically, the important feature is that the call-taker finally does affiliate with the caller during the closing sequence of this call.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Extract 12 MS sufferer. Closing (9’04)’’) |  |  |
| 46 | CAT: | .hh and the gas reference number i:s p (0.8) two double |
| 47 |  | zero five (0.6) .hh five two (0.6) eight five  |
| 48 | CAL: | hang on I just have to collapse h .HH alright hh thank you |
| 49 |  | very much I’ll wait for the- |
| 50 |  | (0.4) |
| 51 | CAT: | okay (0.2) are you alright? |
| 52 | CAL: | ah yeah I’m alright s’jus that I’ve been talking for |
| 53 |  | long and on the phone and it’s warmed up and I(hh)- go |
| 54 |  | and have a lie down .hh |
| 55 | CAT: | okay |
| 56 | CAL: | it’s not easy having multiple sclero[sis] I’ve got two= |
| 57 | CAT: |  [no:] |
| 58 | CAL: | =degrees behind me and (.) I was a high flyer and then |
| 59 |  | hit a big brick wall Ha .hh |
| 60 | CAT: | oohh: |
| 61 | CAL: | just life .hh alright then? |
| 62 | CAT: | okay .hh alright um as I said if you need any further  |
| 63 |  | assistance give us a call back |
| 64 | CAL: | ºI willº thank you very much for your time and help |
| 65 | CAT: | your welcome thank you for your call |

The beginning of the above extract shows the caller delaying his receipt of the reference number and confirming what he will do next, which is to wait for the energy company to contact him. The delay is reportedly to *collapse* (line 48), an extreme case formulation of the caller’s current physical state, which occasions the call-taker to initiate a personal state enquiry sequence *are you alright?* (line 51). This is an interesting mirroring by the caller of his complaint about the length of time he, as someone with a disabling condition, has been kept on the phone by the energy company, but this time by inference directed at the call-taker. The caller’s response includes a reformulation of his health problem that is expanded and upgraded from that given earlier in the call – compare *it’s not easy having multiple sclerosis*, line 56 with *I suffer M.S.?* extract 10, line 9. This is further evidence of the caller’s orientation to the call-taker’s response as inadequate in some way.

In a limited display of affiliation, the call-taker agrees with the caller’s trouble by affirming it *no* (line 57). That congruent assessment is in overlap with the caller’s description of the end to a successful career brought on by his illness. The *oohh:* at line 60 is clearly and hearably an empathetic response to that further description, with the call-taker now endorsing the caller’s emotional stance. Here, the parties are aligned for the first time in the call as troubles-teller and troubles-recipient respectively – an alignment that Jefferson (1988) suggested was basic for progression to closure. Interestingly it is the caller who then initiates the move to call closure, with the shift-implicative *alright then?* (line 61) and the idiomatic expression *just life* (see Drew & Holt, 1998). The call-taker then progresses into call closure by finalising arrangements.

Conclusion

Taking a discursive psychology approach to emotion and using conversation analysis the present study showed affective stance displays and their receipts are systematically organized, have a temporal aspect and are closely bound to action within the particular interactional setting examined – an independent complaint resolution service. The analysis identified the kinds of verbal and vocal resources involved in describing and displaying affect including emotion words, intense and extreme descriptions, breathiness and volume. Those resources are deployed by callers to show their concerns, which must then be managed by the call-taker. Overwhelmingly, call-takers responded to the institutionally relevant aspect of callers’ turns of talk and not the affective stance displayed. That practice could result in callers’ intensifying their affective stance. Where affiliation or affective stance alignment did occur was at call-closing after the relevant institutional business was completed.

Conversation analysis provides a rigorous qualitative methodological approach for analyzing psychological topics and concerns as observable practices in social interaction. This study in discursive psychology using conversation analysis further develops a social psychology of emotion by investigating its interactive elements, which Parkinson (2011) acknowledged was important but also noted had eluded those working within a more social cognition tradition of research. It also furthers the general intellectual project of conversation analysis and other interactional research employing its methodology because of the distinctive focus on psychological issues rather than sociological or linguistic matters. The present research adds to a cumulative body of work in discursive psychology on institutional settings that advances knowledge by providing compelling demonstrations of how psychological subjects – emotion, cognition, intersubjectivity and so on - can be understood as resources and practices orchestrated to produce, coordinate and accomplish the institution and its interactional business.

More specifically, one contribution this work makes to research on emotion is to highlight the integral relationship between descriptions negative emotions (e.g., anger, upset and outrage) and the activity of complaining, whereby the cause of the negative emotion was also the subject of the complaint. Another is to show that emotion can have a sequential organization with respect to the overall interaction, as a unit of analysis. Previous conversation analytic work has examined sequentiality of emotions in terms of the more local sequence organization of the adjacency pair (Couper-Kuhlen, 2009; Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 2006). In the case of these complaint calls, affiliation or what can be understood as empathy was typically confined to the end of the call. This research clearly demonstrates that the expression and management of emotion is a collaborative quintessentially social process and one that is temporally ordered. Expressions of emotional stance make relevant some kind of congruent endorsement from a next speaker. As we have seen, in the absence of such endorsement information and narratives can be recycled and expanded repeatedly, along with intensification of emotionality as callers seek reassurance that the grounds for their complaint have been fully understood. This potentially disrupts the institutional project of the call – a finding that raises questions about how best to respond to emotions in ‘neutral’ institutional contexts.

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